

# GIVING NEW LIFE TO COOP PACKAGING

May 23, 2023



*By Juliet Kleber*

The Coop has instituted robust recycling, food donation and compost programs to minimize waste. But some members are finding even more novel ways to repurpose the Coop's discarded packaging and other refuse.

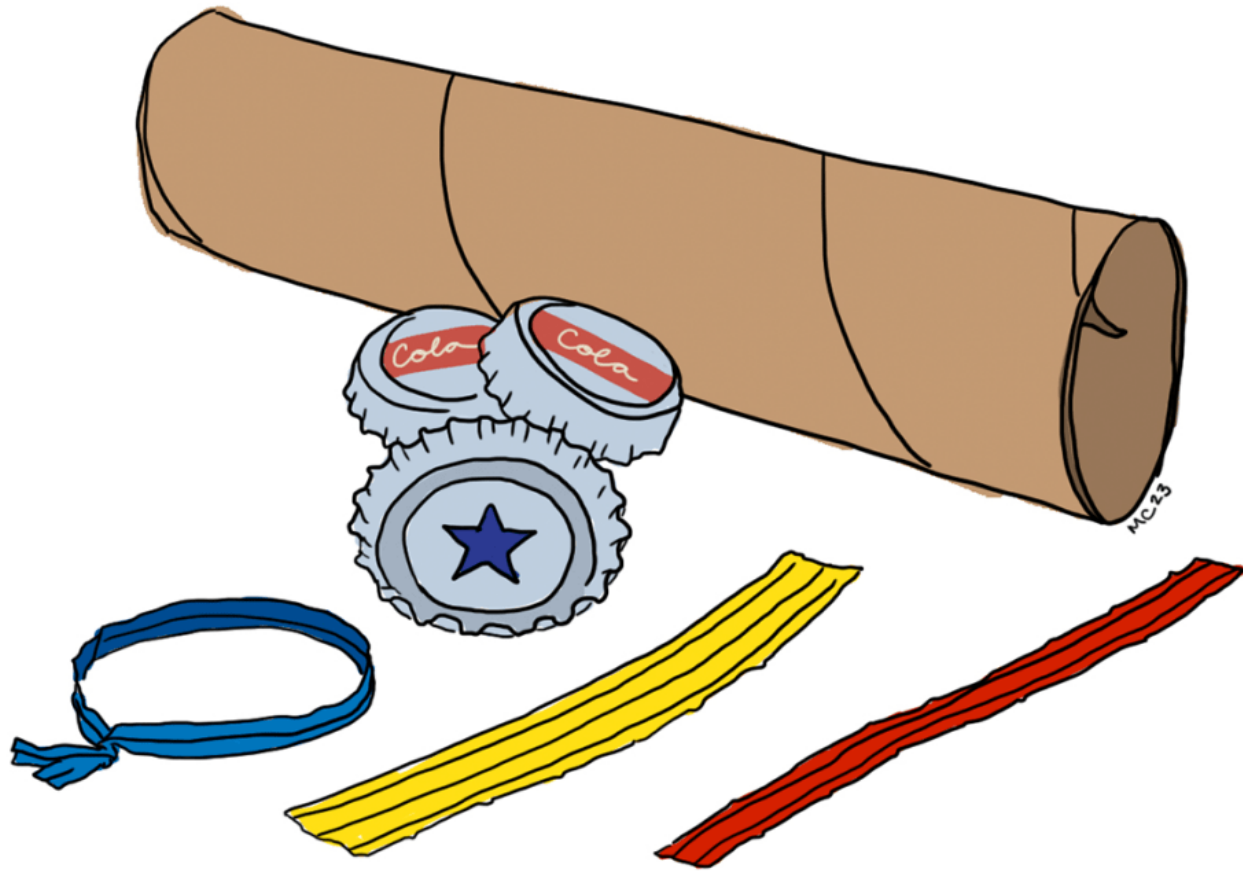


ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

Wendy Gelsanliter, a Coop member since 2005, is one of them. Gelsanliter is the Materials Center Educator & Coordinator at Teaching Beyond the Square, a local education non-profit. Located on 16th Street just outside of Union Square, the Materials Center houses a collection of found objects donated by New York City residents and businesses, including the Coop. These are items that would typically be discarded after a single use: commonplace objects like coffee machine pods, metal and plastic bottle caps and paper towel tubes, as well as more specialized materials, such as discarded samples from architecture and design firms that make recurring donations. But the discarded items are not just collected—they become “clean, resorted, curated, beautiful trash,” Gelsanliter explained in an interview with the *Gazette*. “People walk in and say, ‘Oh my god—I want to live here!’ ”



The center is open to the public by appointment—visitors can buy materials for \$2 a pound to repurpose for their own projects. But the materials are primarily used as a medium for creative play at the center’s Materials Trailer and in its Materialized Classroom program, which visits schools across the tri-state area in order to give children an opportunity to play, create, and experiment with the objects.

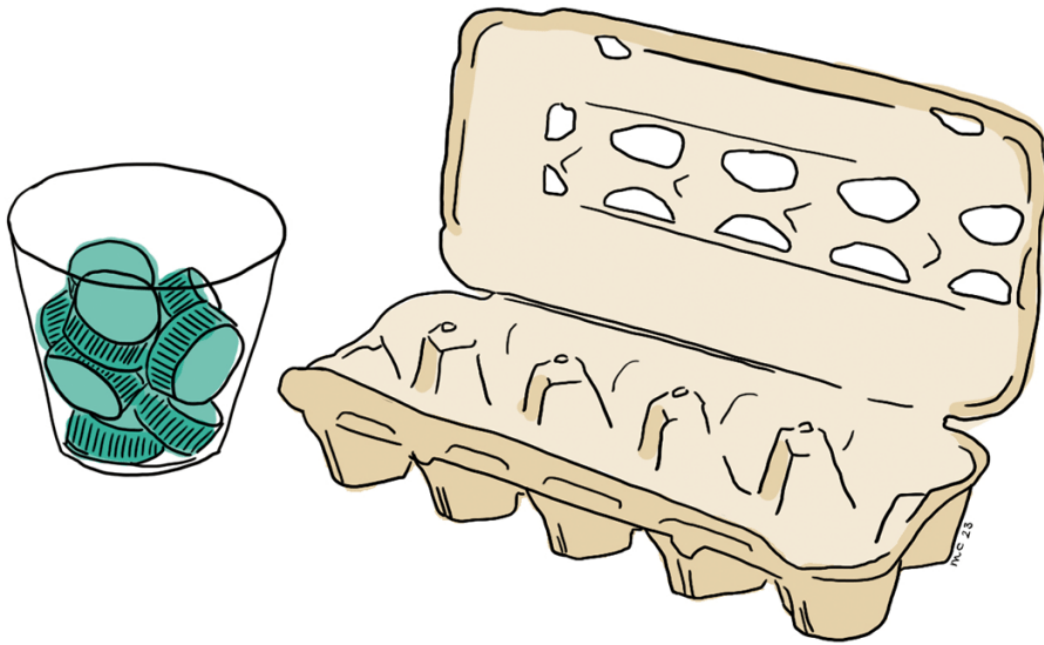


ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

Children from pre-K to 6th grade engage in open-ended exploration with these found objects, sometimes using them as building materials: “A pre-K student might use objects and say, ‘It’s a playground’ or ‘It’s a ship,’ ” Gelsanliter said. But they might also just enjoy pouring bottle caps from one container to another, or shaking a jar full of buttons to hear the sound it makes.



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

“It’s not about the product; it’s about the process. When the grownups get involved, they’re the ones intent on saying ‘What did you make?’ But when they step away the children are so interested in discovering what these materials can do. They’re silent—totally engaged in exploring.”



Gelsanliter is always looking for interesting materials and the Coop has become a great source. It started with can carriers. “I saw someone shelving beer and throwing the can holders into a box,” she explained. “He saw how excited I was... but wanted to know what I was going to do with them, so I explained.” That person put Gelsanliter in touch with the Coop’s beer buyer, Kusi Merello, who now puts the can carriers aside for her. In 2022, Gelsanliter collected approximately 65 pounds of plastic can carriers from the Coop. By May of 2023, she has already collected 20 pounds of plastic—and has just begun collecting other supplies like cardboard, twist-ties, and the plastic tubes inside rolls of register tape when she shops.

Whether students are art-making, experimenting, engineering or just appreciating sounds, colors and textures, the program requires that they follow only two rules:

1. Be kind to others.
2. Be kind to the materials.



Children do not use tape or glue to make permanent objects and all materials are collected at the end of their work to be reused again in the next classroom. Not using adhesives forces problem-solving, Gelsanliter says, but it also allows the life-cycle of these materials to be extended as much as possible. Twist-ties typically last several months, sometimes up to a year if they arrive to the Materials Center in good condition. And children are taught how to use the materials conscientiously. “We teach children not to break the cardboard. And there’s great care in the cleanup process; we teach the children that if you use a twist tie and twist it around, please make it straight and put it back in the jar.”



PHOTO BY WENDY GELSANLITER

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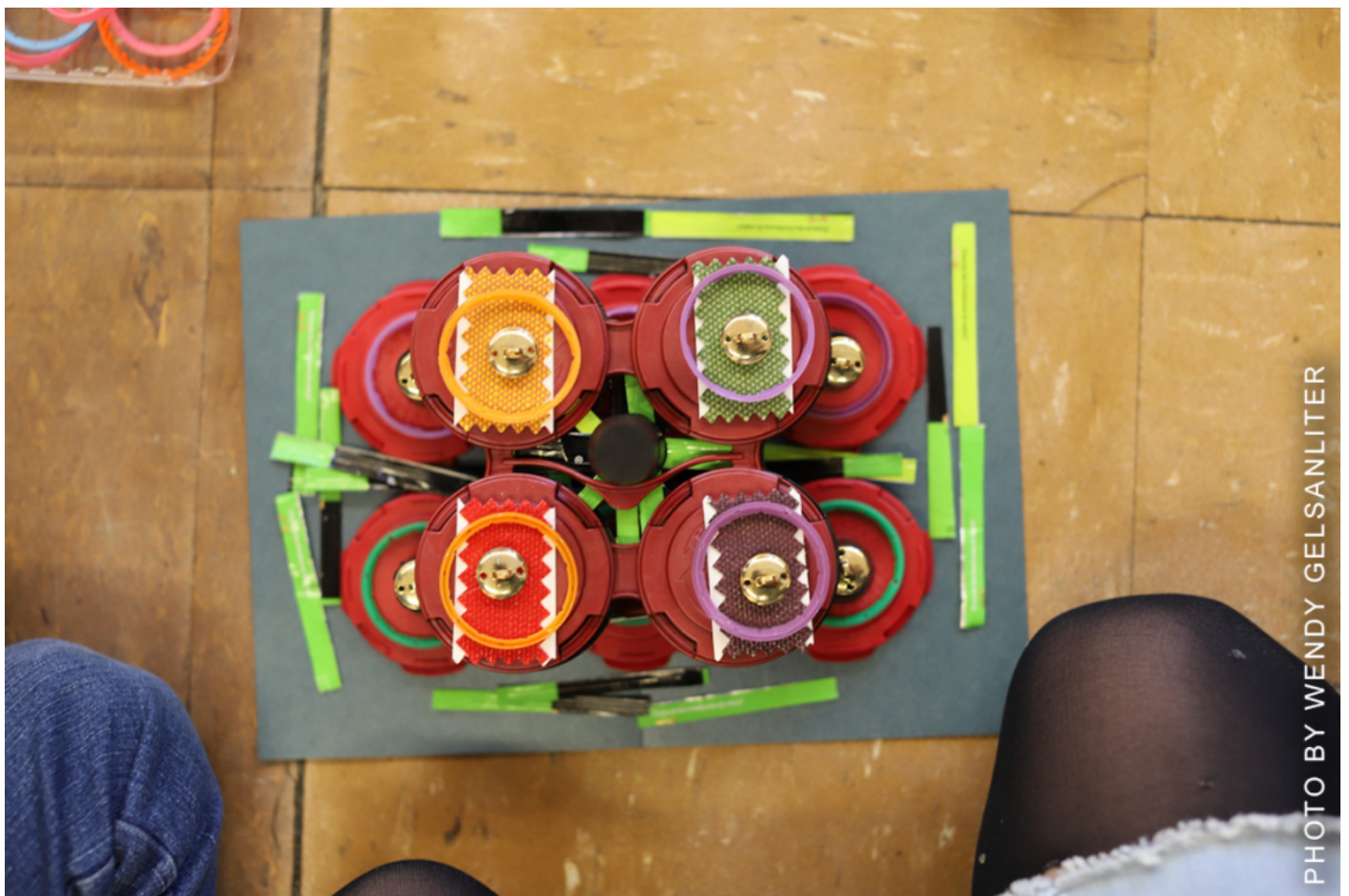
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Coop staff and member-workers have been interested in and supportive of Gelsanliter's collection. "I walk around [the Coop] so excited. And people are interested when they see me taking things—I saw a color of can carrier that I needed and asked the member stocking if I could have it. He was curious what I was going to do with it, so I showed him some of the pictures on my phone. What the kids can make with these things is amazing."

"I save everything I ever use—I wash and keep every bottle cap," Gelsanliter said. "Before you throw something away, look at it carefully and ask, 'If I had a whole bowl of these—could I do something with it?' If the answer is yes, don't throw it away. 'If I clean all these apple sauce pouches and put them in a jar it will it look good?' If so, then keep it. Once you start looking at things in a different way, you can't stop seeing it. Your whole life changes."



Receiving Coordinator Jerome Petitgand and his seven-year-old son, Luc, have also seen creative potential in the Coop's refuse, though they've taken a somewhat more

concrete approach. For the past six months, they have been building a detailed model of a medieval castle and village using packaging materials from the Coop—primarily the cardboard boxes that the Coop’s bananas are received and sold in. In an interview, Jerome and Luc told the *Gazette* that the inspiration for the project came from reading the 1977 book *Castle* by David Macaulay, which chronicles the construction of a fictional castle in written and illustrated detail. Jerome explained that their construction project began with the central keep and village but expanded over time: “Luc realized we needed land to subsidize and feed the people.”



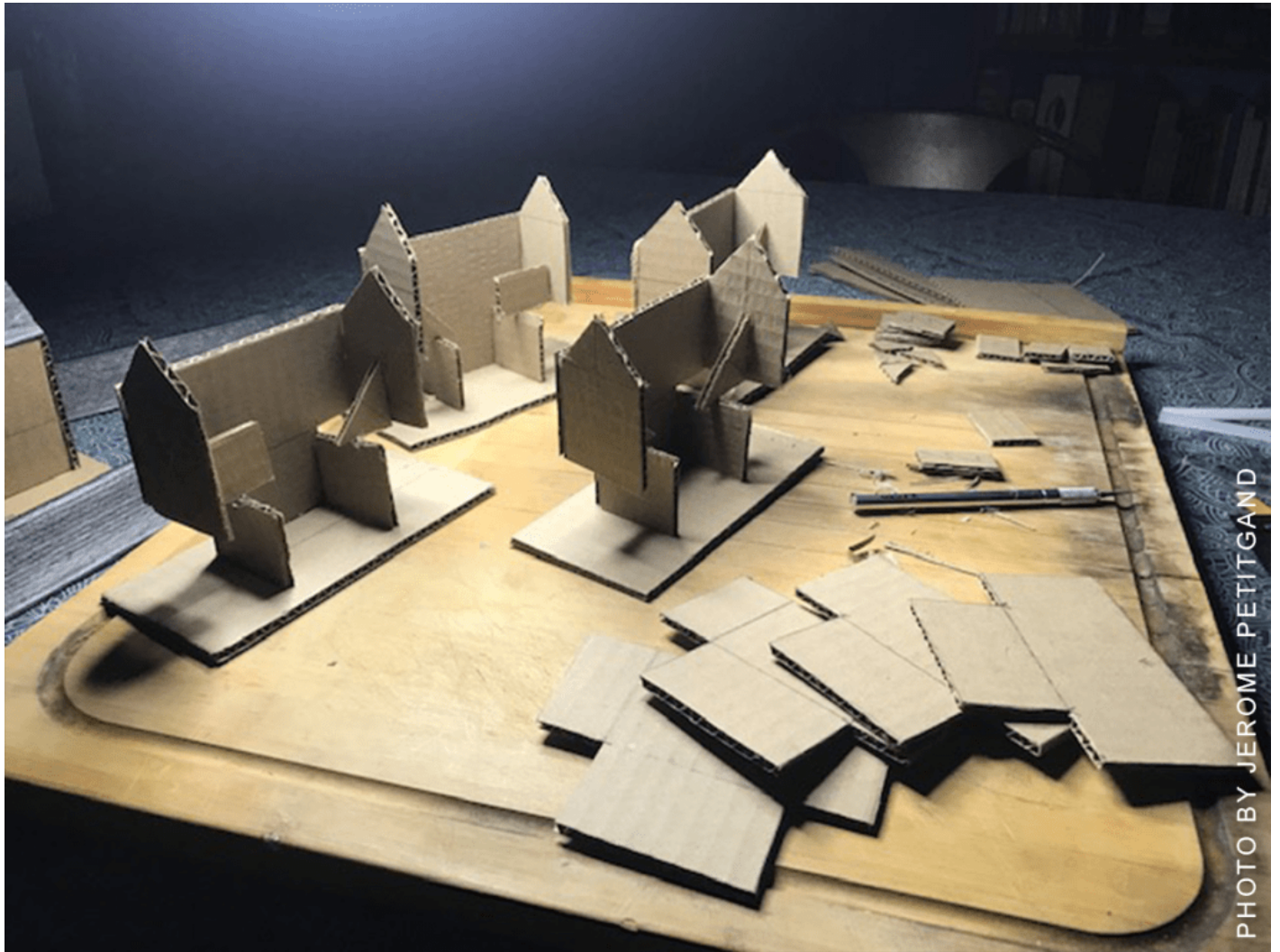


PHOTO BY JEROME PETITGAND

At present, their settlement features the castle, bridges and archways, and multi-story houses, all surrounded by a guard wall featuring watchtowers, a gatehouse, and siege equipment for the toy soldiers attempting to scale it. While Luc did draw some detailed maps and plans, the buildings are modular and rearrangeable.



The buildings are mostly made of flat cardboard cut from banana boxes—they make up both the structure of the buildings and their details. Tiny strips of cardboard are glued onto the facades to replicate the half-timber work of their Tudor-style houses. The towers and turrets of the castle and wall are made with the tubes that hold the Coop’s rolls of produce bags. The roofs are made from the edge protectors used to stabilize boxes (again, mostly banana boxes) when they’re stacked onto pallets. They’re typically about four feet long, but Petitgand and Luc have found that they make perfect slate-like roofs when cut to size.



“I built things like this when I was a boy, even though everything was plastic and beautiful and you could just buy it,” Petitgand told the *Gazette*. “We decided to make it ourselves from scratch instead.” He’s found that he and Luc share that affinity for building. The two have spent many cold winter afternoons and rainy Sundays working on their project, often for four or five hours at a time. And aside from glue guns, hot glue, and tools like box-cutters and X-Acto knives, their village has been made entirely from free, discarded materials.



Now that summer is approaching and the weather allows Luc more opportunity to play outside, the village is often packed away in the seven banana boxes that hold all of its composite parts when it's not being worked on. But the project is far from over. Luc and Petitgand are already planning its next expansion: viking boats and river, all made from Coop cardboard.

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