


M A D E IN A M E R I C A

COMPANIES CREATING GOODS—AND JOBS—ACROSS THE U.S.A.



SOCIAL FABRIC

PEOPLE FOR URBAN PROGRESS HAS SPENT A DECADE
TURNING INDIANAPOLIS TRASH INTO BEAUTIFUL
GOODS AND PUBLIC WORKS. NOW THEY'RE ON
A MISSION TO UPCYCLE EVERY CITY IN AMERICA

BY MARISSA CONRAD • PHOTOGRAPHY BY LYNDON FRENCH



From left: Jessica Bricker holds the vinyl banners she uses to make bags; PUP founder Michael Bricker.

In late 2008, shortly after earning a master's in architecture, Michael Bricker acquired a piece of an Indianapolis landmark: most of the demolished RCA (née Hoosier) Dome's roof, 13 acres of coarse white material that, for 24 seasons, had shielded Indianapolis Colts fans from game-day rain, sleet, and snow.

"I remember driving by and wondering what that material was, and what the plan was for it," says the Indianapolis native. He found out there wasn't one. The roof, a Teflon-coated woven fiberglass similar to what space suits are made of, was headed for a landfill, where it would take thousands of years, at best, to decompose. Bricker, who had studied sustainable design, became fixated on salvaging it. "I just thought, Well, this is the right thing to do," he says. "This is a resource that someone should have planned for." He was 26 at the time, with long hair and wide-eyed ambition. He and a friend, fellow Indianapolis resident Maryanne O'Malley, wrote a proposal on what they might do with the fabric and, ultimately, convinced the demolition company to hand it over. Soon, the two were using it to build bright yellow shade structures, one at an urban farm downtown and another near the Children's Museum of Indianapolis.

These days, Bricker spends most of his time in west Indianapolis, in the former mess hall of Central State, an abandoned psychiatric hospital, running the organization born of all that material. People for Urban Progress, or PUP, is a spritely army of 12 that's bettering Indianapolis through trash—or what other people see as trash, anyway. In the sun-drenched building, recently converted into a warehouse-workroom, the team is surrounded by what's left of the dome and everything else Bricker has accrued since then: hundreds of seats from Bush Stadium, home to Minor League Baseball team the Indianapolis Indians through 1996; thousands of vinyl banners advertising tech summits and auto shows; a collection of decommissioned city parking meters destined for a public art project that Bricker hasn't quite figured out yet. Some of these objects he has requested; more recently, people involved in demolitions have been asking if he wants anything they're intending to junk. (O'Malley, PUP's cofounder, left the organization in 2010.)

At the time Bricker cofounded PUP, Indianapolis was experiencing an influx of young residents. The number of 25- to 34-year-olds with a four-year college degree living in Indy's city center nearly doubled between 2000 and 2010,

according to think tank City Observatory. With them came change: cold-pressed juice cafés and dark cocktail bars lining Massachusetts Avenue, one of the city's main arteries; new public art, like the beloved boogying LED woman known as "Ann Dancing," installed by a former trustee of the Tate in London; plans for a shipping container hotel, evidence of a growing eagerness to upcycle. That, plus the number of buildings being gutted for new construction, played a role in PUP's evolution. "Our niche, strangely, has become working with these huge stadiums, or an old city hall, or some other big, old building that's coming down," Bricker says.

When developers began the conversion of Bush in 2012 (the old ticket booth is now part of a loft apartment), a group of citizens concerned about how much waste the project might generate approached Bricker. On the suggestion of an intern, PUP installed the burnt orange and sunny yellow seats at more than 50 bus stops that didn't have benches. Last year, when a parking garage complex on Indiana University's campus needed new cladding, university officials reached out to PUP, who used redwood strips from the stadium to make benches, tables, and lounge chairs for the campus quad.

To make money, PUP also sold some of the stadium seats to longtime



CLOCKWISE,
FROM TOP LEFT:
Bags for Amtrak
preserve the
seats' original
seams; Bush
Stadium seats
at PUP HQ; a
stitcher works
with Amtrak
leather; swatches
from convention
banners.



Indians fans. Meanwhile, director of design and fabrication Jessica Bricker (Michael's twin sister) transformed the sturdy, practical dome material into a line of stylish wallets, totes, and messenger bags, with straps made from seatbelts that she cut out of cars in the local junkyard. Indianapolis is one of the country's top convention sites, generating thousands of vinyl banners that are hung for three or four days, then trashed. PUP employees now cut and sew these onto the bags and totes to add color. When the Super Bowl came to Indianapolis in 2012, the NFL's director of sustainability called Bricker to ask if he'd take all the banners from the game, estimating there would be enough to fill nine pallet boxes with a capacity of 1,000 pounds each. After the game, 49 boxes showed up. The PUP team made some of them into shower curtains, which were snapped up by football fans.

"PUP ISN'T A CATALYST FOR GROWTH. THEY'RE ONE STEP AHEAD OF IT."

"We're onto something that relates to the future of cities," Bricker says. "We're addressing the problem of waste. And we're doing it in a way that can create jobs." Right now, PUP employs four stitchers; they dream of expanding to 10. In another city, "those jobs could be in woodworking or working with sheet metal," says Andrea Cowley, PUP's executive director. "It's just going to depend on the interests, and needs, of that city." She and Bricker would love to see a PUP, or PUP-style organization, in every city in America: "There just needs to be more people having conversations that consider how to remake waste."

In some ways, PUP is a passive pioneer. Indianapolis would be changing with or without them. "PUP hasn't been a catalyst for the city's growth—I don't think they would even want to be called that," says Michael Kaufmann, a 14-year Indianapolis resident who serves on several city boards that have collaborated with PUP, including the Parks Foundation. Rather, "they're one step ahead of it. They see the change that's coming and they try to



TOP: A rest stop along the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, outfitted with salvaged Bush stadium seats
LEFT: The new Conductor Weekender bag launches in February.

slow everyone down and say, How can we do this in a way that's sustainable and beautiful?"

Bricker and his team are talking to city reps in Atlanta about the possibility of introducing PUP branches there. Meanwhile, his team is making their first big effort to introduce their products to a national audience. On the cutting-room floor at the warehouse in Indianapolis, two employees measure and slice old leather Amtrak seats from high-speed *Acela* train cars that service the Northeast Corridor, from Boston to Washington, D.C. PUP's design team has retooled the iconic leather into backpacks (\$385), totes (\$185), and weekender bags (\$435), for sale on the PUP website, part of Amtrak's initiative

to recycle 20 percent of its waste by 2020. PUP will continue making the merchandise until all 6,080 of the old seats have been reborn.

Next up, they're tackling a hefty project just steps from their warehouse headquarters: converting the former hospital grounds around them, which have become an artists' campus of sorts with a T-shirt design studio and a brewery, into a park, where they hope to incorporate upcycled structures. But 10 years after they started, they're also still busy on their first initiative. After all, 13 acres of dome fabric goes a long way. "If sales continue the way they're going, we'll run out in ... maybe three years?" Bricker predicts. "That will be an amazing day." 📍