

# Reuse organisations as infrastructure for inclusive circular cities: Conceptualising the contributions and agency of community and charitable reuse organisations

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## Abstract

Community and charitable reuse organisations provide significant social infrastructure that facilitates the redistribution of discarded items to new owners, but are often overlooked in circular cities initiatives. Drawing on a survey of 34 reuse organisations from across Australia and recorded interviews and site visits to 10 of these between 2021 and 2023, we characterise the processes, practices and types of organisations across the sector. We then examine three spatially distinct domains of social interaction involved, and show how diverse economies of materials reuse are enacted through various forms of labour, and relationships between workers, donors and recipients of goods, that are meaningful in different ways to those involved. This relational analysis provides a conceptual framework for understanding how environmental, social and economic aspects of the diverse economy of reuse are entwined. The reuse sector constitutes a postcapitalist infrastructure insofar as it involves non-capitalist organisations, non-market exchange and a mix of paid and unpaid labour that serves to recirculate used goods. Sector organisations operate in a ‘grey zone’ of infrastructure politics, where they can both influence and be influenced by the governments or businesses that they interact with, and rely on increasing production and consumption of goods, even as their activities extend product use life. City governments should recognise the role of reuse organisations in aligning circular city agendas with broader goals of community development and social inclusion.

## Keywords

circular economy, diverse economies, not-for-profit, postcapitalist, social benefits, social infrastructure

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## 摘要

社区与慈善再利用组织提供了重要的社会基础设施，有助于将废弃物重新分配给新所有者，但在循环城市倡议中它们却常常被忽视。通过对澳大利亚各地 34 个再利用组织开展的调查，以及在 2021 年至 2023 年间对其中 10 个组织开展的录音访谈和实地考察，我们描述了该领域内各组织的运作流程、实践模式与类型特征。随后，我们考察了三个空间上相互独立的社会互动场域，并揭示多样化的物资再利用经济如何通过各种形式的劳动以及工作者、捐赠者与受赠者之间的关系来实现。这些关系对相关主体而言具有不同层面的重要意义。这种关系分析为理解多元再利用经济中环境、社会与经济维度如何相互交织提供了概念框架。从某种意义上说，再利用行业构成了一种后资本主义基础设施，因为它涉及非资本主义组织、非市场交换，以及有偿与无偿劳动并存的模式，从而实现二手物品再循环。该领域内的组织在基础设施政治的“灰色地带”运作，在该范围内，它们既可以影响与其互动的政府或企业，也会受其影响，并且即便其活动延长了产品使用寿命，它们却仍依赖于商品生产与消费的不断增长。市政府应认识到，再利用组织在使循环城市议程与更广泛的社区发展和社会包容目标保持一致方面所发挥的作用。

## 关键词

循环经济、多元经济、非营利、后资本主义、社会福利、社会基础设施

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## Introduction

Reuse has long been at the core of circular economy discourse and policy. Reuse, which we define as the transfer of products or materials from one owner to another, promotes materials efficiency through longer product life spans. It reduces the costs of disposal and the ecological consequences of new production from virgin materials. In principle, reuse is a critical dimension of circular urban resource management that, as Williams (2019) argues, is important for addressing the consumption of finite resources globally. Reuse differs from materials recycling in that the product is not dismantled into component materials and retains its integrity as a product, although it may be repaired or upcycled into a refurbished product with the same or a different function (Lane et al., 2024a). Cities, as key nodes for consumption more generally, are important sites for reuse. While reuse of products and materials occurs in many urban industrial contexts, ranging from the reuse of containers in households to commercial online trading platforms such as eBay and large industry sectors such as the

used car market, this study focuses on community and charitable reuse organisations and their potential to contribute to inclusive circular cities. Not-for-profit, by definition, these organisations facilitate reuse by redistributing and reselling discarded and donated items to new owners, and can support livelihoods for employees, yet are embedded within a growth-orientated materials economy. Our research aims to develop insights into the neglected issues of diversity, inclusion and social infrastructure in the circular economy.

Urban studies literature has rarely examined the charitable reuse sector that revolves around the collection and resale/redistribution of used consumer goods, or considered how it may contribute to circular city agendas. Rather, circular city research has predominantly focussed on the conflicts and politics surrounding the built form or urban policies promoting resource management (Bolger and Doyon, 2019; Kjærås, 2024; Luckin and Sharp, 2004; Williams, 2019). Reuse and its urban planning context are also neglected in corporate-focussed approaches to the circular economy. The RESOLVE framework, an influential

initiative developed by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation to guide business towards more circular practices, lacks recognition of the diversity of actors and organisations with different motivations across different sectors, including public and community sectors, in a complex urban ecosystem (Williams, 2019). It fails to recognise the importance of the social and material infrastructure that facilitates circular economy strategies and processes, including reuse, in urban environments (Williams, 2019). Alongside their role in material flows, cities are also spaces of political contestation, social change and innovation (Calisto Friant et al., 2023; Savini et al., 2022). Calisto Friant et al. (2023) argue that these features can foster experimentation with policies and approaches to the circular economy that are more radical and innovative than what is possible at other governance levels.

Emerging research on infrastructure for circular cities offers a foundation for critical analysis of both mainstream and alternative urban institutions and infrastructures, including the reuse sector (Bahers and Rutherford, 2025; Deutz et al., 2024; Lekan et al., 2021; Schmid, 2025). While infrastructure traditionally refers to the built environment of cities, critical urban studies scholars such as Star and Ruhleder (1996) and Bowker et al. (2019) extend its use to refer to socio-technical phenomena such as gig economy platforms, ‘that are joined up to form a web’ (Bowker et al., 2019: 6). Bowker et al.’s (2019) study of knowledge infrastructure shows how it engages processes of valuing, tracing and governing, which constitute new regimes of valuation and orders of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). In this study of the contribution of not-for-profit reuse organisations, we employ the term ‘social infrastructure’ to foreground the social relations involved in their activities, which are enabled by used goods and materials and by dedicated facilities, logistic

equipment and governance arrangements. In the wider urban planning context, social infrastructure has been used to refer to an array of spaces and institutions from neighbourhood parks to hospitals (Latham and Layton, 2019, 2022). In that context, an overarching concern is inequitable access; in other words, calling attention to resources that have been inadequately commoned (Davern et al., 2017; Enneking et al., 2025; Wear, 2016). Brandtner et al. (2023) highlight the place-based character of the urban commons and how it emerges through social interactions enabled by physical infrastructure. They argue that the relational dimension of an urban commons makes it ‘a potential site of partnership and collaboration across interests and sectors’ (Brandtner et al., 2023: 918). The concept of place-based urban commons also has some relevance to the activities of not-for-profit reuse organisations and, potentially, to a broader agenda of inclusive circular cities.

By building understanding of the specific forms of social infrastructure that are developed and supported by the not-for-profit reuse sector, we seek to address broader critiques of the missing social dimension in prevailing technocratic approaches to the circular economy in policy and practice (Calisto Friant et al., 2023, 2024; Corvellec et al., 2020; Moreau et al., 2017). This critique is echoed in related scholarship on degrowth that also highlights the limits of market-led approaches for driving substantive change in growth-orientated production and consumption systems (Kaika et al., 2023; Savini, 2023; Schmid, 2025). Existing research on social enterprises and community organisations engaged with activities such as reuse and repair has highlighted benefits such as providing access to employment and training (Williams, 2021), building social relations and practising non-consumerist forms of citizenship (Bradley and Persson, 2022), promoting wellbeing and urban

resilience (Petrescu et al., 2021) and constructing alternative circular narratives and local economic development trajectories (Lekan et al., 2021). This suggests that the not-for-profit reuse sector may play a key role in linking the environmental rationale for moving to a more circular economy with an agenda of social inclusion. These not-for-profit reuse actors operate within a different value frame and organisational logic than business as usual. Our premise is that we need a different conceptual framework to appreciate their potential contribution to realising the circular city.

The diverse economies conceptual approach (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020) offers an appropriate framing in which to situate the reuse sector and account for its overall impacts. Gibson-Graham (2006) developed the diverse economies framework as part of a politics of language – understanding the crucial role that language plays in shaping possibilities, subjectivities and spaces of collective action. The framework sits alongside other related concepts such as social and solidarity, wellbeing, degrowth and doughnut economies – all of which aim to articulate an economy that operates beyond business as usual. Compared to conventional economic analyses or impact assessments, it allows for a fuller accounting of ‘who’ is involved in reuse; the capitalist and non-capitalist actors involved in enabling more ethical responses to the challenges of waste (Hobson and Lynch, 2016; Morrow and Davies, 2022; Santala and McGuirk, 2022). This broadened understanding of economic practices provides insights into the organisation of economic activity in ways that give practical expression to social and ecological commitments. It serves to identify substantively different forms of economic organisation, types of labour, kinds of transactions and ways of managing property or investing in a common future (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, 2019; McKinnon, 2022; Mellick Lopes

and Gill, 2023). Building on this trajectory, our research aims to communicate the reuse sector’s intrinsic diversity as a means of accounting for its benefits (social, ecological and economic), how reuse organisations connect with one another and their relation to mainstream economic practices. In our view, specifying the diversity of the reuse sector, its impact and interconnections, can help us to push circular economies to be more effective, inclusive and beneficial. Infrastructure politics arises in the convergence of diverse actors, practices, processes and interdependencies ‘that underlie the production of urban space and diverse urban conditions’ (Télliez Contreras, 2025: 44). The idea of a circular city can drive intentional efforts to recombine infrastructure components by activating new actors, artefacts and spaces, which may result in unanticipated outcomes and new forms of agency (Meilinger and Monstadt, 2025). Significant tensions have been identified between approaches that support circular cities as forms of neoliberal urbanism based on materials efficiency versus those that support more fundamental socio-ecological transitions that reduce material use (Bahers and Rutherford, 2025; Bassens et al., 2020; Calisto Friant et al., 2023). Further issues relate to questions of place and scale of both mainstream and alternative non-market or community-led forms of circular infrastructure (Deutz et al., 2024; Kębłowski et al., 2020), as cities are nodes in wider networks of resource flows while local infrastructure services their resident place-based communities. This tension was highlighted by Bahers and Rutherford (2025) in a study that contrasted localised community-focussed circular initiatives with large-scale corporate-managed waste-to-energy facilities in the cities of Nantes and Gothenburg.

Despite the high priority placed on the principle of reuse within the circular economy rhetoric (Reike et al., 2022), the contributions of charitable and community

organisations to the circular city agenda and the conditions that enable and support their activities are poorly understood (Calisto Friant et al., 2023; Deutz et al., 2024). To address this gap, we develop a typology of community and charitable reuse organisations that foregrounds the distinctive features that make them important actors in the circular economy. Our article has three main aims: (1) to characterise the processes, practices and types of organisations across the sector, (2) to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the environmental, social and economic benefits of their activities and (3) to understand how the sector is positioned in relation to government and corporate-led circular economy initiatives. In doing so, we show how they provide more-than-capitalist social infrastructure that combines social and environmental benefits.

In this article, we read the existing vernacular of reuse into the diverse economies framework, to characterise the different organisations in the sector, emphasising the formality and intention of different organisations and their positioning within supply chains that include private and/or public sectors. We do so with the aim of clarifying how intentions, including social and ecological values, find practical expression in their economic organisation and practices of labour. We draw on this lexicon to characterise the various benefits of these organisations in a manner that links economic and environmental and social benefits with the stages involved in processing materials and with their various domains of social interaction.

## Research design and methods

The research was undertaken in collaboration with Charitable Reuse Australia, the peak body representing the charitable and community reuse sector in Australia. Charitable Reuse Australia facilitates

networking among its member organisations that enables the movement of used products between organisations in different urban locations and between cities and regional towns. While this article focuses on the contributions of these organisations to circular cities, data gathering aimed to represent the broader network within which cities are important nodes. Charitable Reuse Australia actively promotes the sector's role in the circular economy:

Charitable Reuse Australia champions the circular economy as the foundation of a more sustainable environment and an equitable society. For over a century, charitable reuse enterprises have been at the forefront of this economic, environmental and social movement. And we believe that they are uniquely placed to elevate circular economy thinking and drive its uptake in Australia. ([www.charitablereuse.org.au](http://www.charitablereuse.org.au))

The research was supported by state government agencies involved in circular economy policy and initiatives in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland, as well as the Australian Research Council through an industry partnership grant (ARC LP190101099), and approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The analysis provided here draws on two data-gathering exercises undertaken between 2021 and 2023: (1) a survey of 34 reuse organisations from across Australia and (2) recorded interviews and observations from 10 site visits to organisations in capital cities and regional town centres in Queensland, South Australia and Victoria (see Appendices 1 and 2 for details).

### *Organisation survey*

The survey was conducted through phone or Zoom calls with 34 member organisations of Charitable Reuse Australia, representing approximately 40% of the membership. The

survey instrument was developed with input from Charitable Reuse Australia representatives from the Project Advisory Committee (Lane et al., 2024b). Survey respondents were primarily in management roles and familiar with day-to-day operations. For some larger organisations, several individuals contributed to the completion of the survey questions. The aims of the survey were:

- to gain an overview of the range and types of charitable and community sector organisations involved in reuse in Australia,
- to characterise the reuse activities undertaken by these organisations and the workforce, sites and facilities, and materials and products involved,
- to build understanding of reuse commodity chains facilitated by charitable and community sector organisations.

Survey data was analysed in order to categorise the main types of organisations in the sector, which were further broken down into organisation purpose, supply chain relations and character of the workforce. Information was also compiled on barriers and enablers, including facilities, locations and relationships with local government, business and communities.

### *Interviews and site visits*

To generate qualitative insights into the benefits generated by reuse organisations, and the barriers and enablers for their activities, 10 organisations were selected for in-depth qualitative research consisting of site visits and face-to-face recorded interviews (see Appendix 1). Three organisations were selected in Queensland, three in South Australia and four in Victoria. The selection intentionally spanned inner urban, outer urban and regional town locations and reflected both the diversity and geographical reach of organisations within the sector. Forty-three interviews were conducted

in total that captured perspectives from executive management and operational workers (including paid staff-supported workers and volunteers). All interviews were undertaken on site. The aims of the interviews and site visits were:

- to gain an understanding and begin measuring the type and quantity of reuse goods moving through reuse organisations,
- to build understanding and begin measuring the types and amounts of work involved in helping reuse goods move from donation to re-sale,
- to generate insights on the social, environmental and economic benefits generated by reuse organisations.

The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed using thematic coding (with NVivo 14 software) in order to capture key themes that emerged across the organisations, and themes relating to specific types of organisations. Some of these themes then informed further analysis of the survey data.

### **Characterising three main types of reuse organisations**

In Australia, while traditional charities are still the largest and most visible, they are increasingly complemented by new kinds of social enterprises with differing social and environmental purposes and materials focus. Activities such as employment training, community engagement and public education, as well as the development of networks and partnerships with local governments, businesses and community organisations, highlight the sector's transformative potential that goes well beyond serving as parallel infrastructure that merely diverts waste from landfill. Although membership of Charitable Reuse Australia is limited to not-for-profit organisations, it maintains a partnership programme that encompasses the wide range

of corporations and social enterprises that engage with the sector but are ineligible for membership.

While all organisations surveyed are charities or social enterprises that identify as not-for-profit, they differ in governance structure, employment profile, activities undertaken and in the size, number and geographical distribution of facilities. Based on the analysis of survey responses, we developed a typology of reuse organisations that include: (1) Charitable Reuse Retailers, (2) Waste to Wages Enterprises and (3) Community Reuse Intermediaries, summarised in Figure 1. Charitable Reuse Retailers form the largest group within the organisations sampled (44%) and Community Reuse Intermediaries form the smallest (21%). The three types of organisations are indicative of both the diversity and dynamism in the sector. Social benefits form a key purpose for all three types of organisation (Figure 1).

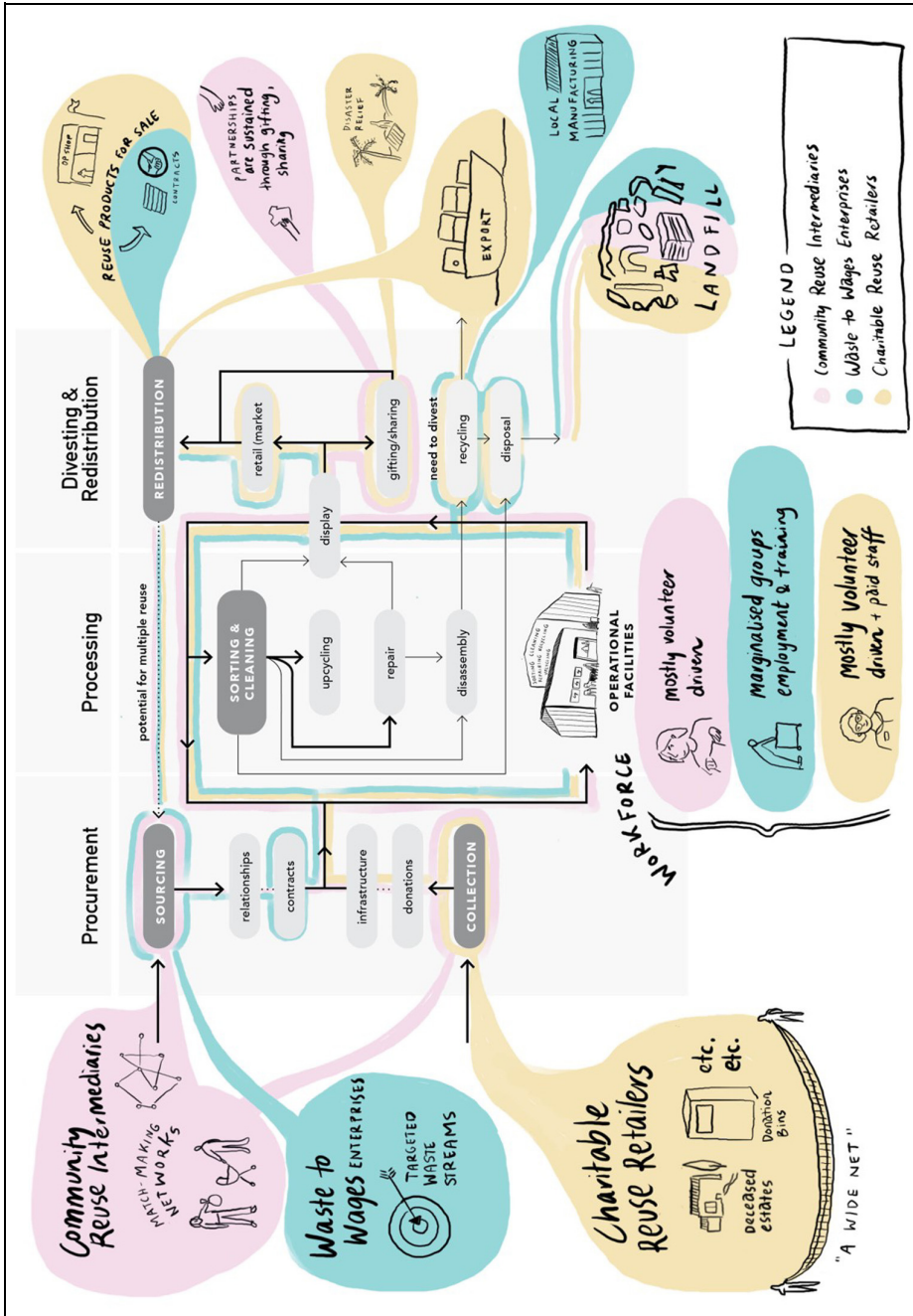
*Charitable Reuse Retailers* are retail outlets or ‘op shops’ that sell second-hand household goods acquired through collection of materials donated by households and businesses within a regional catchment. Significant emphasis is placed on generating funds for the parent organisations. Revenues from sales are returned to a parent organisation with social objectives, mainly churches or disability support organisations, and used to fund programmes supporting a wide range of disadvantaged groups. Examples include Salvos South Australia, Link Vision Queensland, St Vincent De Paul and Uniting Vic Tas (see Appendix 1). *Waste to Wages Enterprises* are social enterprises focussed on the development of employment training opportunities in the reuse sector. They combine environmental objectives of materials reuse and recycling with social objectives of providing supportive forms of employment and training for disadvantaged workers, and some have contractual arrangements with

local government and waste management companies. *Community Reuse Intermediaries* broker the redistribution of surplus materials from specific industry sectors to people in need. Community Reuse Intermediaries list environmental benefits as their most significant purpose. They form a small but growing part of the community and charitable reuse sector in Australia and are indicative of an evolving larger scale phenomenon facilitated by online networking tools.

In the remainder of this section, we unpack and compare the characteristics and practices of the three different organisation types in terms of (1) materials, supply chains, partnerships and collaborations, (2) workforce, (3) main activities that time is invested in and (4) their self-identified motivations and social benefits and our own observations of broader benefits. Table 1 contrasts the three organisation types in relation to each of these characteristics and we discuss the differences below, drawing on examples.

Three main stages are involved in facilitating the reuse supply chain – procurement; processing; and divesting and redistribution – as shown in Figure 1. Operational facilities are central to all these activities, as the physical location where used products and materials are received, manually processed and redistributed. The procurement and divesting/redistributing stages have the greatest interfaces with local communities, businesses and governments. The divesting/redistributing stage can have a much wider geographical reach and can involve international organisations and shipments. The processing stage is the most labour- and space-intensive and includes practices of sorting, cleaning, repair and storing. Most employees and volunteers are engaged in this work, which is undertaken at the operational facility.

The retail facilities of Charitable Reuse Retailers provide key collection points for donations and are also important sites for sorting, cleaning and storage activities.



**Figure 1.** Material flows facilitated by the three main types of organisation in the sector, showing materials focus, activities and workforce. (Prepared by Kirsten Moegerlein).

**Table 1.** Contrasting the three organisation types in terms of supply chains, workforce, main activities and social benefits.

	Charitable Reuse Retailers	Waste to Wages Enterprises	Community Reuse Intermediaries
<i>Materials, supply chains, partnerships and collaborations</i>	<p>Materials include clothing, homewares, household electronic goods and books and other media.</p> <p>Procure donations from individuals and businesses at retail facilities, labelled collection bins or door-to-door collection drives.</p> <p>Many reciprocal arrangements with other reuse organisations for transferring materials to organisations best placed to sell or donate them.</p> <p>Large volunteer workforce and part-time paid workforce.</p> <p>Some engage with Australian Government schemes for funds to employ priority jobseekers (e.g. Centrelink Volunteers, Work for the Dole, Community Service Orders).</p> <p>Some fund employment services run by the same charity organisation that serve to connect job seekers with employment provided by partner organisations.</p>	<p>Materials and supply chains influenced by contracts with local governments and businesses for waste management services.</p> <p>Some partner with waste management companies for materials recycling from construction waste.</p> <p>Some focus on novel partnerships for product repair and upcycling.</p>	<p>Materials donated by commercial retailers and local manufacturers, and may be quite specific in line with the organisation's focus and distribution networks.</p> <p>Partnerships with local governments, businesses, community organisations and providers of social services.</p>
<i>Workforce</i>	<p>Sorting.</p> <p>Cleaning and storage.</p> <p>Retail and organising retail display.</p>	<p>Flexible and part-time employment for targeted recruits who may be unable to work full time.</p> <p>Employees paid award wages and supported through forms of job-readiness training and qualifications for machinery operation.</p> <p>Usually recruit through intermediary employment service organisations.</p>	<p>Skeleton workforce of two or three paid staff and a handful of volunteers at any one time.</p>
<i>Main activities</i>	<p>Sorting.</p> <p>Redistribution.</p> <p>Less cleaning and repair required for donations of unsold goods from retailers.</p> <p>Some organisations do not engage in retail at all, only gifting.</p>	<p>Activities vary depending on arrangements for the supply of materials from local government contractors or businesses.</p> <p>Likely to engage in repair and upcycling of items in line with an explicit environmental ethic.</p> <p>Less focus on retail, with fewer dedicated retail facilities.</p>	<p>Sorting.</p> <p>Redistribution.</p> <p>Less cleaning and repair required for donations of unsold goods from retailers.</p> <p>Some organisations do not engage in retail at all, only gifting.</p>

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

	Charitable Reuse Retailers	Waste to Wages Enterprises	Community Reuse Intermediaries
<i>Social benefits</i>	<p>Provide forms of support to vulnerable groups across the population, including people living with disabilities and in situations of long-term unemployment (Figure 2).</p> <p>Additional social benefits linked to the interactions between paid and volunteer staff working in their facilities, and between staff and clients in retail stores.</p>	<p>Provide employment and training for disadvantaged groups.</p> <p>Additional social benefits linked to interactions between staff and local businesses and community organisations for eliciting donations and engaging in education and advocacy initiatives.</p> <p>Champion environmental ethics and some deliver community educational programmes promoting the environmental benefits of reuse and the circular economy.</p>	<p>Provide goods to vulnerable groups.</p> <p>Social and environmental advocacy.</p> <p>Broker networks with donor organisations and organisations providing social services that can be understood as a social benefit that operates at a larger geographical scale.</p>

These are mainly located within retail precincts of cities and towns across Australia. While individual stores may have a strong local identity, donated materials are exchanged between them through a large geographically distributed network. For example, the RSPCA donates materials it cannot process to Rotary and Save the Children and, in return, receives donations of blankets for RSPCA shelters from other Charitable Reuse Retailers. There are also collaborations with commercial businesses. For example, Salvos Stores negotiate partnership arrangements with clothing retailers for surplus stock and with Australia Post for transporting materials. The St Vincent de Paul Society has relationships with manufacturers that provide them with unsold goods, as well as with Waste to Wages Enterprises such as Endeavour Foundation for passing on some types of materials they cannot sell in their own stores. Contracts with overseas buyers are important for clothing that cannot be sold in Australia.

Although Charitable Reuse Retailers account for the largest portion of the workforce in the not-for-profit reuse sector, Work to Wages Enterprises stand out for their focus on employment training, for example through qualifications in machinery operation or programmes addressing the needs of individual employees. While Work to Wages Enterprises may have retail outlets, they are more strongly focussed on the processing of materials by employees that they train and support. This work is undertaken in operational facilities, sometimes located near landfill sites, and local government waste management contracts may specify the sorting and disassembly of products from municipal, industrial and building and construction waste for materials recycling as well as reuse. Some organisations specifically focus on repair and upcycling of products. For example, Substation 33 upcycles used computers and electronics and develops novel

partnerships for sale and donation of upcycled products (Healy et al., 2026).

The main activity sites for Community Reuse Intermediaries are warehouses where donations of specific products from commercial retailers and manufacturers are received and dispatched to distributors or end users. Thread Together only collects unsold new clothing from retailers, and St Kilda Mums only collects baby clothing and equipment that is subsequently gifted to new mothers through the maternal and child health nurse network (Healy et al., 2026). They include organisations such as Reverse Garbage Brisbane that sources offcuts of various materials from manufacturers that can be resold to community groups, students and artists for creative repurposing.

Sorting is the most time-intensive activity undertaken by all three organisation types. It is undertaken in dedicated spaces within operational facilities to determine which products can be resold or repaired and which diverted to materials recycling or disposal. Organisations involved in retail must clean and store items before they can be sold. Some Community Reuse Intermediaries do not engage in retail at all, only gifting. The time-intensive character of repair work is the reason why this work is mainly undertaken by volunteers.

In terms of social benefits, organisations across all three types have mission statements that clearly identify the aim of providing forms of support to vulnerable groups across the population, as shown in Figure 2. However, the research identified additional social benefits linked to the interactions between paid and volunteer staff of Charitable Reuse Retailers within their operational facilities, and between staff and clients in their retail stores. For Work to Wages Enterprises, additional social benefits arise from interactions between staff and local businesses or community organisations for eliciting donations and engaging in education and advocacy initiatives. Community

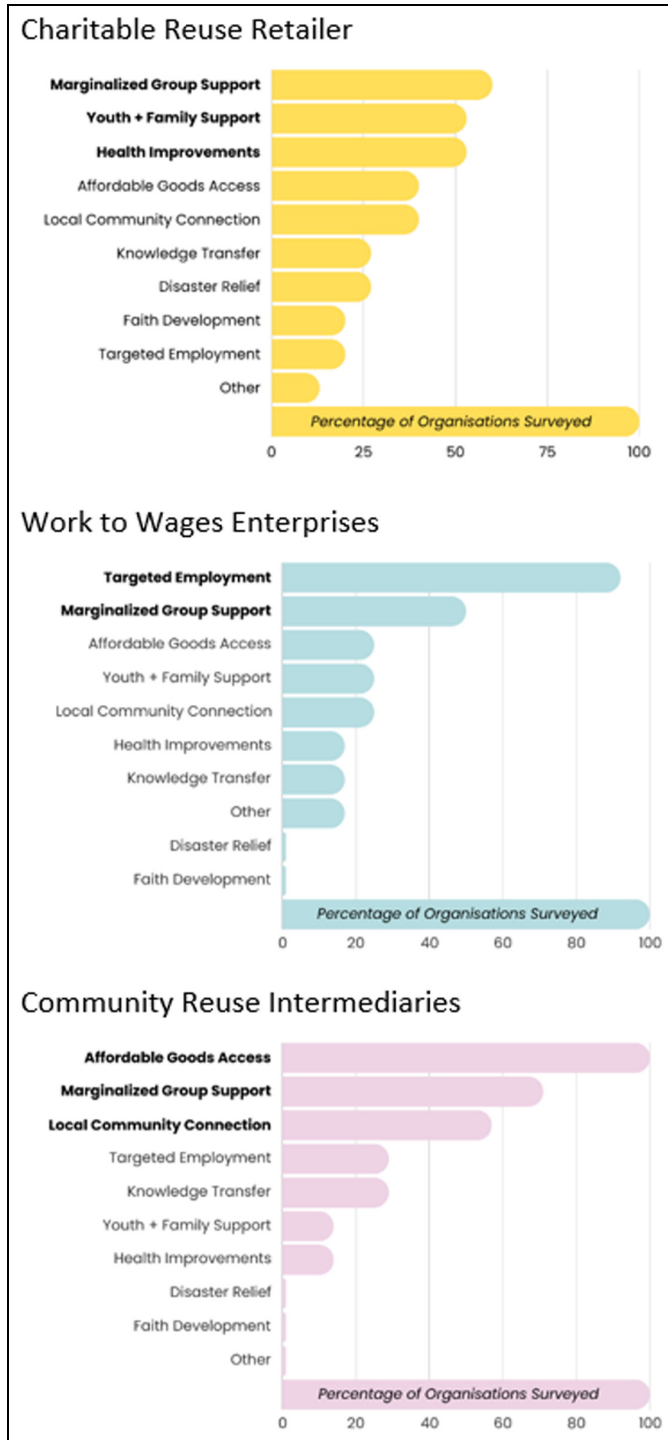
Reuse Intermediaries generate additional social benefits through their role in brokering significant networks with donor organisations and organisations providing social services that operate at a larger geographical scale. Some actively engage in public education and advocacy around the circular economy, for example the Bower Reuse and Repair Centre in Sydney.

The typology developed here draws on a diverse economies language that is already in use in the Australian reuse sector to describe activities that facilitate reuse. All three different types of organisations are more than capitalist in that they are motivated by social and environmental logics, sometimes in conjunction with more conventional goals of capital accumulation. Surplus is reinvested in line with social and environmental goals, and gifts of used goods, voluntary labour and collaborative partnerships play a critical role, alongside commercial transactions and waged labour, in enabling the circulation of used goods.

Having characterised the three different types of organisations in the reuse sector, we now address the second and third aims of the article, ‘to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the environmental, social and economic benefits of their activities’ and ‘to understand how the sector is positioned in relation to government and corporate-led circular economy initiatives’. We draw on the concept of social infrastructure to locate these benefits in relation to material flows, place-based communities and the rhetoric of circular cities.

### **Conceptualising the benefits of reuse through social infrastructure and diverse economies**

Reuse organisations and their facilities form nodes for social interactions involving used



**Figure 2.** Contrasting social benefits as reported by the different organisation types. (Prepared by Corey Ferguson).

goods, which take place in specific places and in specific facilities and can involve extensive logistics networks. The social infrastructure they provide has both enduring and dynamic elements connecting localised practices of donation, sorting and repair with a broader set of organisational actors with wider geographical reach. This social infrastructure is enabled by the material properties of the various products and materials collected or donated, the facilities where they are processed by employees and volunteers and the logistics involved in their collection and redistribution to new users. For some organisations, it extends to additional sites where education and advocacy programmes are conducted. The following discussion draws on the analysis of interviews and site visits and is organised around three spatially distinct domains of social interaction: (1) direct face-to-face interactions, (2) interactions with local place-based communities and organisations and (3) interactions with organisational donors and organisations brokering donations. These domains are variously located within the procurement, processing and divesting and redistribution stages of their operations. For each domain, we provide examples of social interactions involving materials that demonstrate the interconnections between social, environmental and economic values and, in some cases, highlight tensions between them.

We then draw on the lexicon of diverse economies, and perspectives on infrastructure politics (Télez Contreras, 2025), to reflect on the potential of the reuse sector to advance inclusive circular cities. We note Télez Contreras' injunction to think beyond the binary opposition between hegemonic infrastructures that work to reproduce the social order and subaltern ones that oppose this ordering. With diverse economies, we push our understanding of reuse infrastructure beyond other familiar binaries that constrain our understanding of its potential:

public versus private, formal versus informal and even capitalist versus non-capitalist. In what follows, we wish to explore how infrastructures of reuse 'open potential for the new organisations of life' in the 'lifeworld of the structure', as Berlant (2016: 393) once put it. In what follows, we show how reuse infrastructure, as a type of social infrastructure, generates these new potentialities for life by reconfiguring the social relations of exchange: between individuals, between organisations in the sector and local government, as well as internationally. In each domain of social interaction, we highlight specific forms of agency arising from the affordances of the materials themselves, of the facilities where they are processed and of the governance arrangements in place.

### *Direct face-to-face interactions*

Direct face-to-face interactions occur in all operational and retail facilities. They include informal social interactions between paid and volunteer staff as well as more formal interactions involved in recruitment, training and mentoring activities. Social and economic benefits include recruiting, socialising and training and supporting the reuse workforce. Environmental benefits arise from their skills and labour in identifying reuse potential and preparing items for reuse. Working conditions, payment structures, training and pathway creation are largely determined by each organisation and by broader institutional dynamics, particularly government policy (Lane and Gumley, 2018).

In organisations that accept public donations, the procurement stage involves interactions between staff and donors that require diplomatic skills in advising donors which items are acceptable and which are not. The processing stage, where most staff are engaged, involves both formal guidance and informal sharing of information about

the reuse potential of items and how to sort, clean, repair and store them (Lane et al., 2024b). Materials that cannot be processed for reuse will be further sorted for repair, materials recycling or disposal. The Salvos SA Operations Manager interviewed described a sorting process aligned with the waste hierarchy (Reike et al., 2022):

Experience knows what's rubbish and what's not. You just got to make sure that anything of quality goes through your cash register, and doesn't go off anywhere else. But when it comes to rubbish, we all pretty much know what has to go with our rubbish man who's just arrived, I can hear him beeping, or what we can do to pass those things on that week ... we can actually pass them on to somewhere else. So there's always areas you can go to, like Bunnings for E waste, a lot of E waste, and Men's Sheds for all broken stuff. ('Regina', Operations Manager Salvos SA, 2022)

For Work to Wages organisations, like Substation 33 and Outlook Environmental, staff training and skills development is central to the overarching purpose (Burke et al., 2025). Substation 33 employs a social worker, 'Tammy', to monitor and support the development of skills and confidence in individual workers. She explained her role as follows:

We try to measure their sense of how they feel it's changed them being here. So we're looking at how they feel more confident. Whether they are taking steps to improve their life by paying off debts, whether they finding it easier to cope with their life in general with their home stuff, how they feel about themselves, are they feeling like they're gaining meaning in their everyday in coming here, it's something to do. So we try and measure that by using the outcomes. ('Tammy', Social Worker, Substation 33, 2022)

Some Charitable Reuse Retailers engage young people who volunteer as a

requirement for receiving government unemployment benefits, and operations managers described a level of intergenerational skills sharing through interactions between older and younger volunteers.

In organisations with retail facilities, the divesting and redistribution stage involves face-to-face interactions between staff and clientele within the store to provide information or advice and assist people to obtain items that they require at low/minimal cost. Peter, Store Manager at Bairnsdale Recycling Enterprise (BREI), contrasted the enjoyable experience of taking time to interact with clients at the retail outlet with his prior experience working in the automotive repair industry where client interactions were minimal. 'Jane', Store Manager at Link Vision Cooparoo, described her work as rewarding from both a social and an environmental perspective. She shared how customers were driven to the shop with similar motivations to her own – one had said to her 'why would you go buy new? And, you know, less to landfill'. The spontaneity of conversations that happen at this site, mediated most times by things that people found, contributed to volunteer 'Mario's' development of social skills:

Prior to this job I was certainly not a people person. But you can't help but become one working here. 99% of the customers are absolutely sensationally great. People love chatting, love having a laugh with me...it's certainly been a blessing. ('Mario', Operations Manager, Link Vision, Deception Bay, 2022)

The knowledge and awareness of the environmental benefits of reuse is cultivated among staff working in facilities, who then share their knowledge in interactions with donors and retail clients:

I think people definitely within our teams are conscious of the whole recycling, and a lot of us don't buy new, you know, we're just

evidence for the conversation ... that's kind of who you know, who we all either were or if not become. So there's that. And I think the more you get involved in it, and the more you want to study it. ('Cindy', Operations Manager, Uniting Vic Tas, 2022)

It is not only tangible resources of materials and physical spaces that are shared but also knowledge, experience and networks between local communities, governments and businesses. These forms of sharing are integral to the training and skills development of reuse employees and volunteers. The social interactions between staff and customers in the retail spaces can prioritise the social dimension of the interaction to an extent not possible in a fully commercial enterprise. These exchange-encounters are warm rather than cool transactions, working to express affirmed shared ethical values (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). They can be understood as commoning practices, that are both supported by and facilitate the sharing of materials and spaces in ways that combine social, economic and environmental values (Brandtner et al., 2023; Williams, 2019). To return to Berlant (2016), the world the diverse social infrastructure of reuse holds together brings us face to face with the question of what we value – placing us in intimate relation with the objects that are revalued (and often repaired), with the revaluing of oneself (as a volunteer or worker), with the worth that others discover in reused items and, further, with the revaluing of relationships and places that reuse makes possible.

### *Interactions with local place-based communities and organisations*

The operational facilities of reuse organisations, especially their retail facilities, are strongly embedded in local places and in relationships with local governments,

businesses and community organisations, which may include market and non-market arrangements for the use of spaces and facilities and the contracting of services. Relationships brokered by reuse organisations span the full spectrum of economic practices identified by diverse economy theorists (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020), and serve as a fulcrum between the enactment of conventional economic values and social and environmental values.

Link Vision's localisation strategy gives licence for individual stores to operate autonomously in local reuse markets and to expand the sites of their community engagement beyond op-shops to other sites where they actively engage in self-funded education programmes:

Our whole marketing premise is 'Link Vision, your local option'. Yeah. So, we're all about communities. We don't want to be a conglomerate. We don't want to have standardised pricing, standardised packages, standardised advertising promotion, we try to have the banner 'Link Vision, your local op-shop', but all of our shops look different. ('Tyrone', Executive Manager, Link Vision, 2022)

Such relationships are drawn on and further developed when reuse organisations engage in outreach activities at local venues such as markets and libraries. These may be motivated by social and/or environmental agendas. Link Vision Executive Manager 'Tyrone' explained that the enterprise operates within two sectors – the charitable reuse sector and the disability sector. The community focus of their work influences the flexibility in their business approaches and informs place-based niche differentiation across their different stores. As he clarified:

We go into schools and teach blind and otherwise disabled kids computer keyboard skills. And that's where a lot of the funding goes ...

Our sessions are flexible, from anywhere from three minutes to a half an hour, depending on the kid, depending on the disability. ('Tyrone', Executive Manager, Link Vision, 2022)

However, tensions can arise between the need to raise funds through market activities and organisations' social and environmental agendas. For example, a Uniting Vic Tas Operations Manager described the tension between donating materials for free to worthy causes (e.g. blankets to an animal shelter) and selling them to raise funds for Uniting Vic Tas's own programmes. For this reason, they prefer to limit non-market donations to emergency relief purposes.

There is strong potential for tensions between commercial and social objectives in contracts between reuse organisations and local governments and waste management companies. Morty, Executive Manager of Outlook Environmental, described approaching contractual arrangements as 'value relations' that involve considered decisions about both the motivations and capacities of the company to engage with their social agenda. The Outlook Environmental tip shop on the outskirts of Melbourne is adjacent to a commercial and industrial waste recovery facility managed by the transnational waste management firm SUEZ, who contract Outlook Environmental to recover the recyclable materials from skip bins collected from construction sites. Outlook provides SUEZ with a monthly report that gives details on the quantities of materials diverted from landfill as well as the number of 'social procurement' hours generated, that is, the hours of paid employment for disadvantaged workers. In this way, it simultaneously quantifies the environmental and social benefits of its contracted activities in a way that informs corporate reporting: 'And in a general sense, one time one tonne of resource recovery equals an hour socially procured, based on about a 50% supported

and priority workforce' ('Morty', Executive Manager, Outlook, 2022). Negotiations were underway with the Victorian Government about the potential for Outlook Environmental to become a partner in major rail infrastructure projects across Victoria, providing both environmental and social benefits from their management of construction waste. Although local governments and waste management firms may initially view their relationship with Outlook in primarily commercial terms, their engagement with Outlook potentially broadens this perspective. Again, this reveals something to us about how reuse works by bringing seemingly dissonant actors and values into relation. Private actors like Suez or the Victorian State government may primarily be concerned with 'hitting the numbers', while at the same time generating a context in which Outlook can realise its objectives around inclusive workplaces. Extending Marx's concept of value's mutability (Marx, 1976 [1867]: ch. 1), we might see how reuse relationships allow for the mutability of economic, social or ecological values in ways that ultimately attenuate their distinctness. This attenuation, in turn, helps to produce a different sense of *place* – one marked by new relations, attachments and possibilities that emerge from reuse practices.

Place-based interactions between reuse organisations and local governments, businesses, schools and community organisations revolve around sharing ideas, material goods and forms of support. While sales of goods and the contracting of services are important, these activities are more-than-transactional (Quirk et al., 2024) and can serve to promote social and environmental values and broaden understanding of what can be valued as part of the local economy. This holds potential to reinforce a sense of community on which other inclusive circular-city initiatives may be built, contributing to urban resilience more broadly

(Petrescu et al., 2021). For example, Dombroski et al. (2023) described how after the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, NZ, a youth-led composting and farming initiative aligned shifts in volunteer subjectivities with expanding capacities of the social enterprise to contribute to collateral urban repair. This is interpreted as a form of ‘postcapitalist infrastructuring’ or ‘commoning’ that holds together a damaged city *as a means for* transforming it materially and socially. In the interactions between reuse organisations and municipalities described above, we discern similar reparative practices that occur in place but also beyond it.

### *Interactions with organisational donors and organisations brokering donations to recipients*

All three types of reuse organisation develop and maintain networks with other geographically dispersed organisations for soliciting donations of used goods and distributing used goods to more distant recipients. Large Charitable Retailer organisations have nation-wide or state-wide reach and filter materials donated at stores in affluent high-density urban locations to other locations where demand is higher, as explained by the store manager at Link Vision Cooparoo, an inner suburb of Brisbane:

We transfer a lot of stuff to our other stores. That’s what we do here in Cooparoo, determines I get the best. And then the other stores get the next best. And then at the end of the month, I stripped my labels and that goes to the other stores as well. (‘Sarah’, Operations Manager, Cooparoo store, Link Vision Queensland, 2022)

Networking with third parties is essential to the operations of Community Reuse Facilitators such as St Kilda Mums, but other organisation types can have similar

relationships, usually with local organisations. Waste to Wages Enterprises such as Outlook Environmental are more focussed on formal contractual arrangements than informal ones. However, there is a high level of networking across organisations in the sector that serves to move items from locations where they are in surplus to locations where there is community need. St Kilda Mums distributes donated goods from its Melbourne facility through its networks with maternity service providers across Victoria. Since the research commenced, St Kilda Mums has been rebranded as ‘Our Village’, merging with similar Mums organisations across Victoria in order to better use these networks to move materials to the localities where they are most needed.

Third-party networks can include local or distant organisations and some that are based in other countries. The Charitable Reuse Retailer Link Vision Queensland has developed international networks in the Pacific to generate markets for materials they are unable to sell in Australia. Aware of the history and ongoing risk of unsalable materials being ‘dumped’ in developing countries, Executive Manager ‘Tyrone’ emphasised that ethical considerations inform their decisions about the country focus for international sales networks:

So quality is what we sell here. And, even to be fair, if you went to, to Fiji with our major customer, I’d have to say if anything, the quality of their shops is probably better than ours. So just completely different market. Right? Yeah. So that’s, that’s the export part. In terms of the lower grade stuff. Almost everything that we sell will end up at the Solomon Islands. Okay, so we’re not, we’re not interested in Africa, don’t ever want to be a part of all of that. For good, bad or indifferent reasons. You know, the media attention hasn’t been good. We don’t want to be a part of that. (‘Tyrone’, Executive Manager, Link Vision Queensland, 2022)

This seems indicative of a larger potential for reuse networks to incorporate commoning practices that support ethical approaches to circular cities that benefit both local and distant communities through the supply of affordable used goods. However, the present business model is still aligned with increasing rates of consumption, and the transfer of used goods from more affluent to less affluent consumers may generate a rebound effect that enables increased consumption overall (Zink and Geyer, 2017). The concept of infrastructure directs our attention towards the arrangement of things that could be otherwise, a potential diversity that is immanent to the world they hold together. One Charitable Reuse leader participating in the workshop pointed out that standards requiring durability in clothing, for example, would change the practice of reuse and the potential for upcycling while reducing (degrowing) the amount of material in circulation.

Within the various supply chain interactions with donors and recipients of used goods, we again find elements of values held in common that go beyond market values for goods and contribute to a socially inclusive framing of the circular economy. A further example of the ethically motivated sharing of reuse knowledge and practices came from the Work to Wages Enterprise Substation 33, which publishes open-source designs for the affordable upcycling of used electronic products:

... actually had quite a few people around the world, as people coming in from third world countries and actually learning how to make them and then take that knowledge back so they can make the most of it. For them. That's great, but it only costs about \$60 to make. ('Alfred', Executive Manager, Substation 33, 2022)

Information about ethical practices developed by member organisations is actively

shared and promoted across the sector through the Charitable Reuse Australia peak body.

### *Politics of reuse infrastructure*

Taken together, the three domains of social interaction construct the diverse economies of materials reuse through various forms of labour, and relationships between workers, donors and recipients of goods that are meaningful in different ways to those involved. The sector is strongly characterised by face-to-face interactions between staff, donors and clients, and collaborative relationships with other organisations, and in these aspects it displays elements of an urban commons in which participants share social and environmental concerns. A scalar politics is also evident in the redistribution of materials that connects the local donors, workforces and communities (primarily in urban settings) with the needs of distant recipients.

While we described many ways in which the activities of reuse organisations combine social, environmental and economic values, there are potential tensions between these. Reuse infrastructure involves non-capitalist organisations, non-market exchanges and a mix of paid and unpaid labour that endeavours to recirculate used goods. The kind of world being held together by reuse infrastructure differs from that structured by the logic of take-make-waste, while also being entangled with it. It is significant that all three types of organisations require increasing supplies of used goods and materials to expand their operations, to raise funds from retail sales and service contracts, to provide more employment and training opportunities and to provide more goods for those in need. In this aspect, they rely on increasing production and consumption of goods, even as their activities extend product use life. Reuse organisations occupy what Téllez

Contreras (2025) terms the ‘grey zone’ of infrastructure politics, a non-binary space where social, environmental and market values coexist, and where organisations can influence and be influenced by the governments or businesses they interact with. As we have discussed in the previous section, in this greyness is the liminality that makes politics possible. The diverse social infrastructure of reuse signals both the substantive diversity of the reuse sector as well as the possibilities immanent to its reconfiguration, the way high product quality standards would transform but also shrink the sector’s activity.

We might extend this sense of the ‘grey zone’ a bit further to capture the *greyness* of infrastructural politics itself. There is no clear line between the processing of materials for reuse, their recycling and their disposal to landfill. Waste persists, evidenced in the necessary labour of riddance – the work of sorting out what cannot be reused, whether defective, expired or dangerous goods (Greenson, 2020). This labour highlights how wasting functions as a kind of infrastructure, sustained by practices that normalise disposal and make it the path of least resistance. At the same time, the opacity of this infrastructure – the greyness – obscures the uneven value attributed to different practices within the waste hierarchy. As one workshop participant noted, if benefits are measured only by tonnage diverted from landfill, the reuse sector will always appear marginal alongside the commercial recycling industry. Yet, when the broader social and environmental benefits are brought into view, the contribution of reuse is extensive, and in many respects exceeds that of materials recycling.

## Conclusion

The reuse infrastructure developed by community and charitable organisations is a

form of social infrastructure that facilitates forms of collection, processing and redistribution of used goods that would not be possible in purely commercial businesses. Collectively, these organisations contribute to diverse economies of reuse that display elements of a ‘community commons’ (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020; Petrescu et al., 2021), fostering collaboration and sharing based around materials, facilities, practices, knowledge and values. Across different spatial domains, reuse brings people face to face with the values of material in circulation, and with one another. The supportive relations it generates across the sector and with local communities may be given priority in contractual arrangements with governments and businesses. We argue that reuse infrastructure holds the potential to foster more inclusive approaches to circular cities that differ from business as usual, and that could better align with degrowth trajectories.

In most interpretations of circular cities or the circular economy, the term ‘economy’ is used uncritically. Some scholars have argued that this too readily falls into a form of green growth that fails to address the underlying issue of a growth-orientated socio-economic system based on increasing resource extraction and consumption (Bahers and Rutherford, 2025; Bassens et al., 2020; Savini, 2023). While community and charitable reuse organisations still rely on increasing rates of consumption of goods, the lexicon for reuse infrastructure we developed highlights the (re)valuing of things, people and places beyond the confines of market transactions and motivations. Tracing the relational aspects of reuse infrastructures renders them visible (Bowker et al., 2019). Both lexicon and visibility assist governing actors, such as Charitable Reuse Australia, to pro-actively engage with the potential social and environmental benefits

of a reuse economy, and, in doing so, influence broader understanding of the circular economy and the spatially distributed activities, organisations and valuing practices that support it. In enacting a more inclusive conception of the economic sphere (Gibson-Graham et al., 2019), reuse organisations suggest a trajectory towards a different kind of circular city. This reuse-future is both supported by and affects the social infrastructures that make cities resilient – workplace encounters, kinds of collaboration and even international exchanges. In the context of current and emergent circular city policy, this is a significant reframing, addressing gaps in our understanding of what reuse infrastructures are, and their role in local communities.

Further research should focus on the dynamic interface between the reuse sector and local governments and businesses. City governments should recognise that reuse infrastructure contributes not only to waste management but also to community development and resilience and forms of local economic development. The diverse character and benefits of community and charitable reuse organisations suggest an alternative circular city policy directive in which the social, environmental and economic are considered in an integrated way. For example, retaining industrial zoned land in accessible areas is important for supporting inclusive employment in circular enterprises. City governments could investigate contracting waste management services directly to Waste to Wages Enterprises (as in the case of Outlook Environmental) or procuring and promoting their waste management services, and developing social and sustainable procurement strategies that prioritise buying reused materials.


The research provides a window into the significance of place and scale and the relational character of the charitable and


community reuse sector in Australia. It highlights the wider potential for social and environmental agendas to combine in an organised yet diverse institutional context that is dynamically evolving in response to societal needs.


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## Appendix

**Table A1.** List of organisations visited and interviews conducted.

Queensland	Type	Character	Facility	Interviewees
Link Vision	CRR	Suburban and suburban/industrial: Cooparoo in inner Brisbane; Geebung in suburban Brisbane; Deception Bay in outer Brisbane	Retail stores	<i>n</i> = 10 (Executives 2, operations and workers 6, warehouse manager 1, store manager 1)
Resource Recovery Australia (RRA)	WWE	Rural centre: outer suburbs of Towoomba	Tip shop	<i>n</i> = 4 (Executives 2, operations and workers 2)
Substation 33 (SS33)	WWE	Suburban: Logan in outer Brisbane	Repurposed public asset	<i>n</i> = 6 (Executives 2, Social workers 2, Workers 2)

(continued)

**Table A1.** Continued

Victoria				
Bairnsdale Recycling Enterprise Inc. (BREI)	WWE	Rural centre: outer suburb of Bairnsdale	Tip shop	<i>n</i> = 4 (Executive 1, operations and workers 3)
Outlook Environmental	WWE	Suburban: Hampton Park in outer Melbourne	Tip shop	<i>n</i> = 3 (Executive 1, workers 2)
Uniting Vic Tas	CRR	Urban and suburban: Prahan in inner Melbourne;	Retail stores	<i>n</i> = 5 (Operations 4, executive 1)
St Kilda Mums (Our Village)	CRI	Suburban: Clayton in Melbourne	Warehouse	<i>n</i> = 3 (Operations 2, worker 1)
South Australia				
Red Nose (in partnership with Savers)	CRR	Suburban: Windsor Gardens in Adelaide	Warehouse	<i>n</i> = 2 (Executive 1, operations 1)
Salvos	CRR	Suburban: Angle Park in Adelaide	Retail store and Warehouse	<i>n</i> = 4 (Executive 1, operations 2, store worker 1)
St Vincent de Paul (SVDP/'Vinnies')	CRR	Urban and suburban: West End in inner Adelaide; Wingfield in suburban Adelaide	Office and Warehouse	<i>n</i> = 2 (Executive 1, operations 1)

**Table A2.** Organisations surveyed grouped under the three main types of reuse organisations.

Charitable Reuse Retailers (15 organisations surveyed, 44%)	Waste to Wages Enterprises (12 organisations surveyed, 35%)	Community reuse intermediaries (7 organisations surveyed, 21%)
- Link Vision	- Green Collect	- The Bower Reuse and Repair Centre
- Alinea	- Outlook Environmental	- Repair Centre Thread Together
- DrugARM	- Work Ventures	- Good 360
- RSPCA	- Resource Recovery Australia (RRA)	- REmida WA
- Cancer Wellness Support	- Endeavour	- St Kilda Mums
- City Mission	- Reverse Garbage Queensland Co-op Ltd	- Reverse Garbage (NSW)
- Lifeline Darling Downs	- Bairnsdale Recycling Enterprise Inc.	- Treasure Boxes Inc.
- South West QLD Salvation Army	- YFS (Substation 33)	
- SVDP South Australia	- WDEA Works	
- Canungra Op Shop	- Encompass	
- Red Nose SA	- Community Services	
- Brotherhood St Laurence	- Resource Work Cooperative	
- St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria	- Green Collect	
- St Vincent de Paul Society QLD		
- Uniting Vic/Tas		