



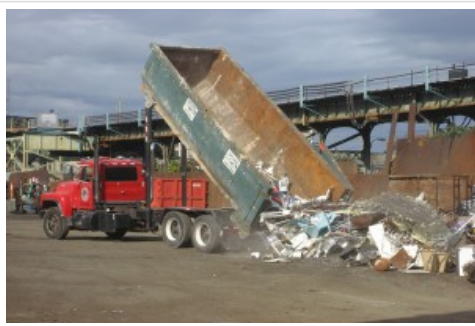
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# A Trip Through The Junkyard

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Look out the subway car window on the L line as you roll into Brownsville and you'll see towers of rusted metal. This is Gershow's Recycling Center, a scrap metal yard in the heart of the neighborhood. This is where cars go to die. But venture inside and you'll discover a place of rebirth.



A truck dumps its load on the junkyard floor.

By, Jake Pearson

"I got good news and bad news," Andy Maybaum tells me. "The good news is I'm going home now. The bad news is you're stuck with Eric."

Maybaum is ribbing Eric Kugler, the senior facility manager at Gershow Recycling, who is to show me around the salvage yard. He is also (technically) Andy's boss. The two run Gershow's Brooklyn yard—one of four metal recycling centers owned by Kevin Gershow. It is a huge facility that stretches three blocks long, sandwiched between the old Long Island Rail Road tracks and Junius Street in Brownsville.

They work hard but enjoy it. There is something primal about what they do: they smash, break, rip, destroy, and then, remake.

Indeed smashing and breaking are to the junkyard what printing and copying are to the downtown office. Gershow's Brooklyn facility is no exception. But this scrapyards is as much a place of rebirth as it is a place of destruction. The same way Native Americans were said to use every part of a killed buffalo, the guys at Gershow's use every metal part of any object that finds its way to the salvage yard floor.

Cars, for example, are not just valuable for their frames alone. "When we get a car," Kugler explains, "the gas is drained, the aluminum rims are pulled off; we take out the radiators, cut the wire. The Cadillac converters have platinum. If the tire's good, we can sell it abroad or take it to the tire machine. If the gas tank is plastic it's recyclable." Kugler goes on and on. Being resourceful is how you make money in this business, he says.

But being resourceful means constant action and constant noise. Cars are crushed into cubes, thick metal pipes are sliced in half by even bigger metal saws, and towering cranes toss old refrigerators and kitchen sinks into piles like dirty laundry. From the Sutter Avenue L line subway stop, you can see hills of rusted pipes and oxidized metal slabs.

Silence doesn't exist here, either. Metal crunches, glass breaks, engines rev, gears grind and walkie-talkies spit communications back and forth. Trucks of all sizes back in and out of the yard and a voice from the main office barks orders over the PA system.

People constantly flow through the place: workers in hard hats and neon safety vests take on their various tasks—welding and sawing, tossing pieces of metal into bins and negotiating prices with customers. Trucks and vans pull in with loads full of scrap metal that they dump on the salvage yard floor. Peddlers walk in the front entrance from the street with their arms full of wire or with bags of collected scrap, hoping to make a buck.

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"We do over 350 transactions a day," Kugler estimates. "We package by commodity, separate and sell. Organization is the key in this business to staying profitable." He should know, too. Kugler, whose father worked for US Steel, is from Pennsylvania and worked at the country's three biggest steel mills before coming to Brooklyn.

His specialty is operating the mill itself, a giant machine that smashes scrap, compacting like pieces, which later can be melted down. Unfortunately for Kugler, the mill at the Brooklyn plant—which is across the street from the salvage yard, between Pitkin and Glenmore Avenues on Junius Street—was shut off about a year ago. It wasn't economical to run it anymore, he says. "It could do about 50, 60 tons an hour," Kugler explains. Gershow's main mill in Medford, Long Island, can process about four times that amount. It makes more sense to ship to Medford.

Kugler is something of an economic barometer. The facility employs 20 people and, according to Kugler, while they don't lay people off, "we do reduce hours" when necessary. The plant is directly—and immediately—affected by the fluctuations of the market. When the prices of copper and aluminum go down, Kugler and the rest know that the economy as a whole is headed downward too.

This summer, for example, the plant enjoyed high prices for most metals and the plant saw an influx of cars to be processed as a result. But, Kugler says, "in the past six weeks, everything fell off the face of the earth. People have been kicked in the teeth."

So Kugler cuts hours where he can and he's ever more meticulous in the organization of the plant. Ferrous materials (that's anything metallic like steel, iron or cast iron) cannot be mixed with nonferrous materials (that's anything non-metallic, like copper, brass or tungsten). Every grade of copper or steel must be kept together, separated from other metals or grades.

Salvageyard work is hard work to be sure—it requires long hours and exhausting manual labor. Safety concerns are paramount, especially when dissecting 215 ton Cat cranes. But Kugler and the rest enjoy what they do and the constant joking and poking fun lightens the workload.

Dexter Trumpet has been working at Gershow's for seven years and grew up playing in the tracks behind the salvageyard. "We do all kinds of metal, water heaters, fence posts, whatever," he says. Trumpet didn't know then, as a little boy watching the cranes from the tracks and causing mischief, that he would one day work on the other side of the fence. But now he gets paid to do what is so entertaining to every young boy: he breaks, rips, destroys, and then, remakes.

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