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A University of Trash for All

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NEW YORK, NY May 13, 2009 —Students are counting the days 'til the end of the school year but at the Sculpture Center in Long Island City, the school year's just beginning.

This past weekend, the Sculpture Center opened the "University of Trash", and the public's invited to propose the classes on any topic: from urban architecture, to aerobics, to Marxist politics.

The University of Trash is inspired by Adventure Playgrounds, which were developed in the 1940s. They were playgrounds that were built and designed by and for children. Artist Nils Norman used that approach to build the makeshift school.

NORMAN: bringing that kind of bottom up idea of urban planning and city design and design of space and architecture.

REPORTER: To create the University of Trash, Norman and his partner Michael Cataldi worked with high school students from the alternative City-As-School, building makeshift classrooms, a library and recreating the Tompkins Square Park bandshell, which will host film screenings and present live music.

They're hoping to encourage arts groups to use sustainable practices in putting up art shows. So, they used almost entirely recycled materials. Cataldi says the bales of paper that serve as furniture are on loan from a recycling plant:

CATALDI: they have donated them to us with the intention of picking them up and then putting them back into that recycling stream.

REPORTER: The University of Trash has an array of collaborators, including the artists collective Just Seeds, the Queens Museum of Art and the Lower East Side cultural Center ABC No Rio. Nils Norman says that collaboration was one of the most challenging and political parts of the project:

NORMAN: you're always in a process of losing your self, breaking down your ideals and your aesthetic parameters that you come with.

REPORTER: And Norman says part of reason for creating the University of Trash is to show that art galleries can do a lot more than just put objects on display.

CATALDI: not producing products, not producing finished things that can then be bought or sold, it's more about process and about human engagement and its about exchanging ideas and exchanging skills.

REPORTER: In addition to meeting up at the Sculpture Center in Long Island City, classes and events at the University of Trash will be streamed online. The school year, so to speak, is open through August 3rd.