

R.U.S.KO: THE SELF-REPAIR CAFE

R.U.S.KO is the acronym of **Riparo Uso Scambio Comunitario** (Repair, Use, Exchange, Community), a volunteer association that promotes best practices in the circular economy through events and workshops focused on repair, recycling, and reuse. It is the only **Repair Café** in Bologna, hosting informal gatherings where volunteers of all ages breathe new life into objects destined for the landfill.

Never throw anything away! is their motto.

In a world where replacing a faulty object is often more convenient than trying to repair it, Repair Cafés offer a counter-cultural response. Their mission is to create community spaces where people can bring damaged items and learn how to fix them alongside expert volunteers. The philosophy of Repair Cafés is to attempt to repair everything, saving money and respecting the environment. No special skills are required—just a bit of patience and a dash of creativity!

THE REPAIR CAFÉ MODEL

The first Repair Café was the brainchild of Martine Postma, a Dutch journalist who, after the birth of her second child, realized how many items were discarded despite still being potentially useful. On October 18, 2009, Martine organized a special event at the **Fijnhout Theatre** in Amsterdam's west side, where people shared skills to repair objects and give them new life. The initiative was an immediate success, attracting government support in the Netherlands.

By March 2, 2010, as these events multiplied, Martine established the **Repair Café Foundation**, which provides professional support to volunteers who want to start a Repair Café both domestically and internationally. From the Netherlands, the concept quickly spread worldwide, resulting in the creation of over 1,500 Repair Cafés globally. Countries with the highest number of these "reuse workshops" include the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, and India. In Italy, such initiatives are still rare but gradually growing. The first Italian Repair Café, called "Aggiustatutto," opened in Rome in 2015, followed by others in Perugia, Venice, Reggio Emilia, and Milan. Currently, the only Repair Café in Bologna's metropolitan area is **R.U.S.KO**¹

THE STORY OF R.U.S.KO.

The idea behind R.U.S.KO. emerged, as Marcello, one of the volunteers explains, "a bit as a joke, but also with the ambition to make a difference." One evening in 2017, over pizza and beer, three friends—Marco, Raffaele, and Gianluca—began discussing what they could do to improve a consumerist society. Marco, the founder, an electrical engineer skilled in repair,

¹ M.Battaglia, B. Di Berbard, L. Brandt & others; *Repair Café: Rusko il caso bolognese*, Report: consumi, sostenibilità e innovazione, University of Bologna 2024.

proposed adapting in their local community the Repair Café model, which combines two key values: social participation and waste reduction. This approach achieves a dual goal: promoting conscious consumption and preserving traditional craftsmanship, which was once widespread in the area but is now gradually disappearing. This is how R.U.S.KO. was founded—a name that merges the association's values and which in Bolognese dialect, means "trash." The founders deliberately played on this duality: something considered useless can gain new life and have social and ecological value. This name has obtained great success in Bologna.

For the first two years, the association held two itinerary events per month, often hosted by local organizations. Since 2019, it has been based at the **Casa di Quartiere 2 Agosto 1980**, located at Via Filippo Turati 98 in Bologna. The event now occurs monthly on the last Thursday of the month. Having a fixed location not only simplifies logistics, but also it increases visibility and fosters a sense of community. It has become a space for people to connect and establish relationships within their neighborhood.



Pictures taken during the event held on 28/11/24;

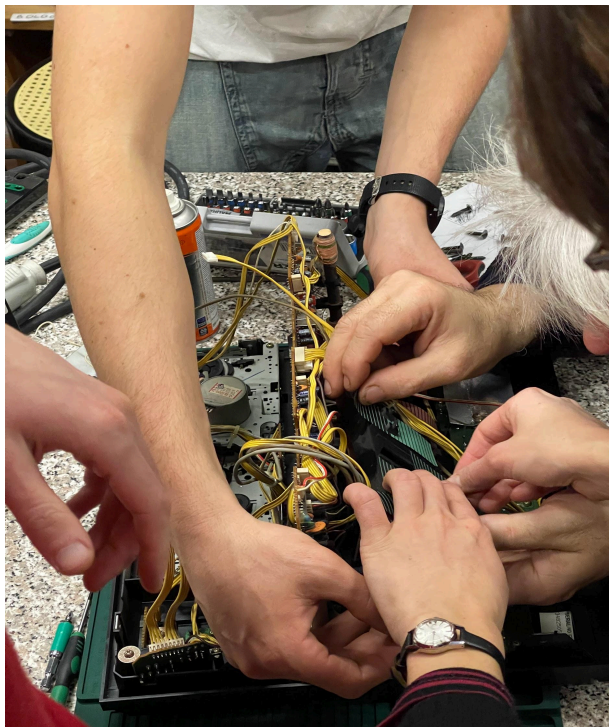
"Being the only initiative in the area, the original idea of a neighborhood hub has faded a bit, but some regulars still return, even just to help out or join the aperitif," says Marcello, a volunteer repairer.

These events are moments of social gathering and learning. While waiting for their turn or after the repair, participants can chat with others and enjoy delicious *crescentine*, a dish of the Bolognese tradition and other treats provided by the house. Collaborations with other associations are not excluded, but the R.U.S.KO's broader goal is to raise awareness among

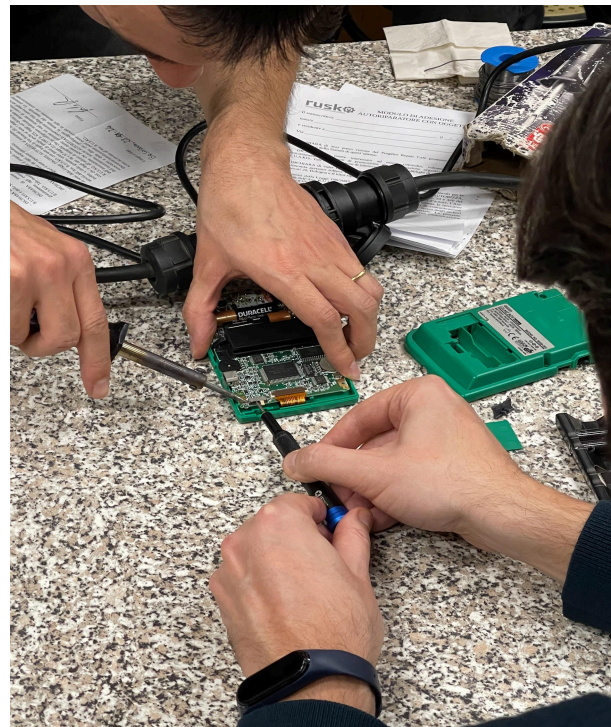
a wider audience, especially by introducing their philosophy into schools or to people less familiar with environmental issues.

HOW IT WORKS

The Repair Café format in Bologna is very informal. Most attendees learn about it through word of mouth or the association's social media pages, primarily Facebook. For regulars, a newsletter is available, reminding them of the event's time and location a few days beforehand. Participants simply need to bring their malfunctioning item, with the only requirement being their active participation in the repair. Newcomers are introduced to the association's values and the event's operation during an initial welcome session. Depending on the type of product, participants sit alongside a volunteer, analyze the problem, and work together to solve it. Indeed, one of the most important aspects is the direct involvement of participants in the repair process, transferring basic maintenance skills.



(Picture iii): Internal components of a turnover;



(Picture iv): Game Boy motherboard;

The goal is to help people leave with a new mindset: realizing they can open and fix objects themselves. Patience and effort are key, but repair is often less daunting than it seems. *"We want to encourage people to take initiative and realize that repair isn't as difficult as they think,"* says Marcello.

At the repair table, skilled professionals or passionate hobbyists explain each step—diagnosing the issue, disassembling the device, and replacing or repairing broken parts.



(Picture v): The repair table;

"Sometimes, an object can't be repaired, but we might discover a way to repurpose it instead. Often, patience and creativity are essential. The most satisfying repairs are those that require adapting parts to find alternative solutions," adds Marcello.

The association often receives inquiries via social media. These questions help them prepare in advance and ensure they have the necessary tools to tackle the problem. Occasionally, they provide remote guidance, walking individuals through the repair process step-by-step when feasible.

WHAT ITEMS ARE ACCEPTED?

Most repairs involve small appliances, primarily electrical components, though mechanical fixes are also common. Items such as blenders, hairdryers, umbrellas, bicycles, toys, and cameras are frequently brought in.

"You can bring anything, and together we'll try to find a solution. Once, someone brought a porcelain dessert tray," recalls Marcello.



(Picture vi and vii: reparation of a tarnover)

These photos capture the repair of the tarover that belonged to a boy's grandfather. With Alessandro's help, they opened everything up and cleaned all the components, concluding that the wear only required a thorough cleaning of the electronic parts. After almost two hours, all that's missing is a new stylus, and the turntable will be ready to be used again.

Before each repair participants are asked to fill in a module which serves to keep track of all the items brought in. One of Marcello's future goals is to compile statistics on the association's activities and the environmental impact of repaired items. He meticulously transfers the collected data into an Excel file for easier reference. The first page of the form collects participants' personal information, while the back includes a section for describing the object, technical notes about the repair process, and the materials used. At the bottom, the repairer's name and the answer to the question "Repaired? Yes, No, Why?" are recorded. Common reasons for unsuccessful repairs include the object's irreparability or a lack of necessary tools.

This system helps track repair history and calculate the success rate, which currently stands at around 50%. This means half of the items are saved from the landfill. Some items brought in aren't actually broken but have been incorrectly tested. For instance, once a woman brought in a hairdryer that only blew cold air. She thought the heating coil was broken, but upon closer inspection, a button on the handle to deactivate the resistance was stuck. This overlooked detail, ignored even by a professional repair center, could have led her to unnecessarily buy a new appliance.



R.U.S.K.O. exemplifies how small, grassroots initiatives can have a meaningful impact on fostering a culture of repair, reducing waste, and promoting sustainable living. By combining technical skills with community spirit, this Repair Café in Bologna not only saves items from landfills but also empowers individuals to see repair as an accessible and valuable skill. The association's success lies in its inclusive, hands-on approach, where people learn by doing, share knowledge, and build relationships. Whether it's a simple fix or a creative solution to a complex problem, every repair tells a story. R.U.S.K.O. is more than just a workshop—it's a movement challenging the throwaway culture, one repair at a time.

CREDITS:

A special thanks to Marcello for his kindness and for dedicating his time to this interview, explaining with passion the values and activities of RUSKO. A heartfelt thank you to the participants who shared their stories, and to all the volunteers, including Alessandro, Andrea, Lorenzo and many others, who dedicate their time, passion, and expertise to this project.