

Dumpster Divers Go Mainstream In Thrifty Germany

Wares Left on Street Pose
Competition for Retailers;
The 'Free Shop' in Berlin

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October 22, 2007; Page A1



Sven Brylla

BERLIN -- Why shop till you drop when your neighbors are throwing away perfectly good stuff?

Sven Brylla has been furnishing his apartments for years with discarded furniture, wood and fittings snagged off the streets of Berlin.

In his kitchen stands a fridge so old that it predates electricity. Meltwater from a metal icebox once ran between the panels of the wooden cabinet, cooling its contents. Now it's his cupboard.

His kitchen table is a gnarled old workbench. He found his favorite armchair at a garbage dump. His revolving inventory of street junk has included 20 vintage radios and half a dozen prewar bicycles made in the USSR.

In many other countries, dumpster divers like Mr. Brylla would be written off as eccentrics. In Germany, he's just a normal 36-year-old graphic printer brought up to look down on wasting money on new things when sturdy old stand-bys are there for the taking.

"Consumption is nothing good," says Mr. Brylla. "It brings evil into the world."

Germans like Mr. Brylla are the retail trade's worst nightmare. They make enough money to buy the latest wares but choose to live in a free-of-charge economy. People who don't want stuff put it on the sidewalk. People who like it take it home.

"It's the culture here in Germany," says Dora Fecske, a Frankfurt businesswoman. "Why trash something if it's still good?" She recently found a large wooden dining table in the street and carried it several blocks to her home with help from friends.

Ms. Fecske's furniture foraging is the ultimate expression of one of Germany's favorite pastimes: saving money. Even when Germans do spend it (they need to eat, after all), they aren't looking to pay full price. Flea markets pull big crowds every weekend. Used goods are so popular that Germany is eBay's biggest market outside the U.S.: Surfing the site accounts for nearly a fifth of the time Germans spend online.

Regular retail stores have a tough time. No-frills discounters such as Aldi dominate the supermarket sector. Even Wal-Mart Stores Inc. was too upscale for Germans: The U.S. giant finally gave up on the country last year, after failing to make a euro cent.

To survive, stores have to appeal to Germans' sharp eye for a discount. Electronics retailer Saturn has for years lured customers with the slogan "Stingy is Sexy."

The trend is stubborn, with deep roots in history. Germans save their money partly because war and economic disasters during the last century make them think the future will bring more rainy days.

Today, even though the German economy is growing solidly and unemployment is falling, consumer spending is in the doldrums.

Scavenging is so accepted in Berlin, it even has an address in a nice neighborhood. The "Free Shop" on busy Brunnenstrasse caters to customers -- if that's the right word -- who take what they want from the shop's selection of books, CDs, computer equipment and clothes. A number of shops like it have sprung up around Germany in recent years.

The Free Shop's wares are all hand-me-downs. It won't take any old trash, though: TVs have to work; computers must have at least an Intel Pentium II processor or its equivalent.

"This is not social work or charity," says Michelle, an earnest member of the collective that runs the store. "It's totally free of the market logic that everything has a value in exchange."

Martin Wolff and Blan Ryan, a couple who live nearby, check out what's on offer at the Free Shop periodically. They've found some real treasures, including an American recording of Grimm's Fairy Tales, read by the Hanky Pank Players.

Mr. Wolff, a video artist, and Ms. Ryan, a real-estate broker, are devotees of junk. In their apartment on Berlin's trendy Auguststrasse, an old railroad-station clock hangs from the ceiling. A 1960s hotel bar stool stands in the kitchen. Mr. Wolff's video-editing equipment sits atop a hospital trolley. A steel filing cabinet once stood to attention at the East German Academy of Arts.

"Of course we could have bought stuff," says Mr. Wolff. "But the quality wouldn't be the same, and we'd miss out on the fun of the hunt. It's also ecological, and every item has a history. I like that element," he says.

Junk furniture has long defined cool in Berlin's arty neighborhoods. Many hip bars and cafes offer seating on pensioners' moth-eaten sofas or old theater props.

But junk culture extends far beyond bohemian Berlin. Many an upstanding middle-class citizen is proud of their street harvest.

Jürgen Thamm has had an eye for good-quality trash ever since he was a boy, rummaging in the rubble of bombed-out wartime Leipzig.

The retired restaurant chef now walks his dog every day to his local recycling dump at Tegernsee, a lake in prosperous Bavaria. The dump's manager, sporting a traditional Alpine felt hat and mustache, lets Mr. Thamm and other enthusiasts examine the latest refuse. He even lays out choice pickings in advance.

Visiting the dump one day in the fall drizzle, Mr. Thamm asks the manager if he has an old coal stove. "My son needs one for his farmhouse," Mr. Thamm says. Take a number, the manager mutters.

Mr. Thamm consoles himself with a large porcelain fruit bowl, two wooden kitchen chairs and a pair of framed art posters. His hobby is painting, so the frames will come in handy.

"Oh no. Oh God," says his wife, Anni Thamm, upon seeing his haul. "The family has forbidden my father from collecting," says Alex, one of the couple's sons, who lives in Berlin. "But the problem is he keeps finding good stuff."

On the Thamms' kitchen table -- made out of door frames from a nearby 12th-century monastery that were thrown out during restoration work -- the senior Mr. Thamm shows off his most valuable find: an old Swiss watch that someone threw away because it stopped working.

Mr. Thamm had it fixed by a Munich watchmaker, who valued it at about \$2,850.

"It's a wealthy area, so you get good-quality trash," says Alex.

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