

# TRASH IS TREASURE

By Sue Jackson

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On a grey morning last winter I hit the jackpot. Walking past a neighbouring house, I noticed a cardboard box leaning up against the front fence with a 'Free' sign attached.

Looking around carefully to make sure no one was watching, I bent down to inspect its contents, and found a hardly used Tupperware container, the perfect size for my signature biscuits and muffins. I tucked it under my arm and continued on my way with a smile on my face, never realising that I'd just become a statistic.

At the 'Waste Not Want Not' Sustainable Cities forum at Melbourne University in September, Dr Ruth Lane of RMIT explained how a massive forty per cent of Melbourne householders do exactly what I had done.

Those surveyed admitted to regularly scavenging hard rubbish, especially non car owners, who presumably have more opportunities for fossicking. Dr Lane described this as a win/win situation because increasing numbers of people are also keen to dispose of things thoughtfully that they no longer want.

Freecycle ([freecycle@yahoo.com.au](mailto:freecycle@yahoo.com.au)) is just one example of citizens doing exactly that. With this Australia-wide online service no money changes hands. Any interested party can choose from an astonishing array of items - pianos, toys, jars, fridges, top soil, trees, sofas, desks. All you need is the capacity to collect the goods from their owners.

I was delighted to learn of the existence of this site, especially when I read that sixty per cent of purchased items end up at the tip within a mere six months of acquisition. Although there is one place where ending up at the tip may not be the end of the story.

In Hobart, a specialised Tip Shop has been operating for quite some time. Under the banner 'One Man's Trash is Another Man's Treasure', a staff of more than twenty sort mountains of items into 're-usable junk', which is sold on site and 'collectables', which are transported to a more upmarket outlet in the inner city.

The tiny town of Marnoo near Horsham is taking this canniness one step further. It recently won a Keep Australia Beautiful award for its enthusiasm in preventing waste ever getting as far as the tip. The recycled junk has richly lined the municipal coffers, with \$4000 annually now earmarked for upkeep of the Memorial park.

It's amazing to think that a hamlet with a population of eighty can raise such a sum. If big cities like Melbourne were to become equally committed imagine all the solar panels and water tanks we could finance. Mr 'Chips' Fearon, the initiator of Marnoo's scheme, was praised at the forum for this wonderful initiative.

As too was Amelia De Bie, op shopper extraordinaire and founder of Melbourne's first collaborative op shopping blog (melb-opshopping.blogspot.com). With the catchcry 'I op therefore I am', de Bie made a strong case for a 'new world of sustainable consumption'.

Op shopping, of course, has a long and rich tradition. And there are some excellent books written about it - Sue Dodd and Enza Gandolfo's 'Inventory: on op shops' (in Melbourne's western suburbs) is a real find.

Op shopping is now not only socially acceptable, but positively mainstream. I realised that when I noticed 'An Op Shop Tour of Melbourne' advertised at this year's Fringe Festival. Its twin in Adelaide had apparently been a sellout. In keeping with the sharing ethos of op shopping, participants were encouraged to bring unwanted goods to leave behind at shops en route.

There is one area of waste collection that may involve a stream, but is certainly not yet mainstream. I'm referring to urine harvesting.

Jonathan Crocket, an expert on urine separating and dry toilets, pointed out that while billions of people across the globe have no access to any kinds of safe and hygienic toilets, in Australia we are blessed. So there is no reason why we couldn't become world leaders in harvesting clean urine. And there are some people already responding to the challenge.

In Federation Square, some of the urinals are dry and feature a notice congratulating users on having just saved four litres of water. Disconcerting as, I'm told, it is to read a congratulatory sign while engaged in a fairly personal activity, this is a great initiative. If dry public urinals like these had big composting chambers underneath and were widely introduced, large-scale urine harvesting would be easy.

I had no idea that urine had such high nutrient value, until I remembered my grandmother urging all visiting male relatives to 'water' the lemon tree in the back yard. Clearly urine's unique qualities would have been no surprise to my nan.

But getting back to rubbish tips – According to Darlene Gaylor, whose presentation was aptly entitled ‘Bringing Waste to a Grinding Halt’, almost half of land fill comprises building waste.

Her company transforms residential construction waste into its useful components on site, thus reducing the huge environmental cost of transporting it to land fill. Wood is chipped; gypsum, much prized by gardeners, is retrieved from plaster board; and rocks are crushed - all without leaving home.

The other major element of Australian landfill, it was no surprise to hear, is food. Food rescue organisations do a great job world-wide, by feeding people who would otherwise go hungry, while simultaneously reducing potential methane emissions from food waste.

I particularly like the sound of Second Bite, founded in Victoria, which specialises in rescuing fresh food, so people get to choose how to prepare it themselves.

Freeganism, which involves food rescue by individuals rather than organisations, was not mentioned at the forum. Perhaps it is too controversial a topic. Consulting the freeganism web-sites, you certainly need to duck to avoid the crossfire between its devotees and opponents.

One definition suggests a freegan is someone who ‘abstains from contributing to the economy and salvages society’s wasted food and resources rather than purchase more themselves. It often pertains to a vegan who only makes exceptions when dealing with otherwise wasted items.’

Dumpster diving is one of the main activities associated with freeganism. But it’s not easy to establish just how wide-spread diving actually is, because

divers usually come out at night and don't necessarily advertise their whereabouts.

Freegans may have their critics, but there is no doubt that there is a criminal amount of food wasted in the Western world.

The format of the 'Sustainable Cities Round Table' was rapid-fire. Talk about speed dating; it required speed talking. Each speaker was restricted to a mere three minutes before being gently but firmly directed off-stage by haunting sitar music.

My head spun as I heard about worm farms, revamped fridges, plastic eating and other amazing machines - all at speed. I ended up overwhelmed by the realisation of just how rich a resource rubbish can be and how creative people are becoming in its use. And of course it's one skill we are all going to have to acquire, because as speakers emphasised, in the future everything will need to be turned into something else. Undoubtedly the time will come when zero waste is de rigueur.

Junk, I learned at the forum, is not just utilitarian. The industrial designers and visual artists who were present demonstrated that waste can also be extremely beautiful.

So next time I'm lucky enough to spot hard rubbish in my neighbourhood, I won't waste time looking over my shoulder. I'll just go for it.