

Nowadays, garbage day is actually treasure day; In spendthrift society, everything's disposable

BYLINE: Melissa Preddy

Admit it: The pile of trash on your neighbor's curb is looking pretty good these days.

In recent weeks I've seen enough cast-off -- yet still functional -- furniture, appliances, tools and decor to furnish an entire subdivision. Many of the washers, dryers, televisions and other hardware even boasted "works good" signs, and the sofas and chairs were artfully arranged to attract passers-by.

Upscale rubbish seems to be one byproduct of an economy in which credit card debt exceeds \$1 trillion, personal savings rates barely hover above zero and shopping malls outnumber high schools. We throw things out, not because they don't work, but to make room for more new stuff.

"We've moved from taking re-use for granted to the notion that getting rid of stuff is not only OK but a positive thing to do," said **Susan Strasser**, a University of Delaware professor and author of *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*. She points out that little more than 100 years ago, household refuse basically didn't exist.

People who didn't have much to begin with -- or access to many stores -- re-used every scrap and fed their leftovers to the pigs.

Nowadays, American households generate 4.44 pounds of trash per person per day, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, or about 1,620 pounds apiece each year.

"It's about the development of a culture where people use consuming, rather than producing, as their fundamental way of relating to the material world," Strasser said. "The nature of the recent economic expansion exacerbates that.

"Americans have so much stuff that the opportunity to clean out seems like an attractive thing. If your basement is full, how are you going to move more things in?"

Several communities in Metro Detroit facilitate the process by having Spring Clean Up or Garbage Amnesty weeks so residents can pitch those big eyesores like bathtubs and broken baby beds.

In Dearborn one recent night, Kerry Paisley wore canvas gloves to clear out a house she owns and rents. Her former tenant had left behind a giant heap of useful goods, including a futon, an aquarium, area rugs and yard tools.

"They don't care -- they just leave it behind," said Paisley, an Ann Arbor researcher. "I guess they just got tired of it."

She and her assembled family members didn't appreciate the job of hauling the renter's leftovers, but admitted they all had their own excess baggage back home.

"We're like 'how did we get all this stuff?'" Paisley said. "We'll get rid of 11 bags of clothes at a time and we can't believe how much we have left.

"My husband keeps saving stuff and says maybe we'll have a garage sale. But to me it's not worth it -- we don't need the money and I'd rather give it away to someone."

Maybe she should just leave it on the curb. In towns with garbage amnesty, I saw dozens of scavengers in pickup trucks and station wagons cruising for the ultimate bargain: free stuff. Sometimes they were on the spot so fast that they helped homeowners carry out the goods, or were waved into cluttered garages to forage for more.

It's a seductive pastime. In Dearborn, two enterprising oldsters even wrestled a 600-pound band saw into their truck. Typical of trash-pickers I stopped, they declined to chat or give their names. (Would you?) Closer to home, I had barely set a box of stuff streetside -- including an old phone, answering machine and computer mouse -- before a mustachioed gent towing a trailer wheeled up and snatched it. For some inexplicable reason, he left behind a gutted barbecue grill.

My neighbor admitted to offering a local kid \$10 for the armchair he dragged home from down the street. And OK, I'll confess too: I got a couple of hanging flower baskets and a wicker footstool.

Believe it or not, several Internet sites are devoted to the art of trash-picking, whose proponents say they are helping to keep useful goods out of landfills. The Motley Fool financial Web site (www.fool.com) even has a message room called Dumpster Diving where scroungers share tips (use a small boat ladder to climb the sides of trash bins) and crow over their favorite finds.

Meanwhile, consumers are spending even more these days to manage the stuff they don't throw away. Business is brisk at self-storage facilities, custom-closet designers and stores selling "get organized" goods.

"I remember getting boxes from the grocery store as a child," said Mike Spake, storage products buyer for Kmart Corp. in Troy.

These days, consumers want waterproof, bug-proof containers and they're willing to pay for them. Demand for household organizing products jumped a mind-boggling 27 percent between 1998 and 1999, Spake said. Plastic storage totes are a \$750-million-a-year business, with consumers lugging home 40 million of the top selling model alone, a 26-by-22-inch lidded plastic tub.

"It's become a very fashionable product," Spake said. "Due to the economy, people just have a lot of stuff."

But Strasser points out that we pay a price for the luxury of throwing away useful goods.

"It's complicated. We are working long hours and getting ourselves in debt and making some other pretty serious sacrifices to get this stuff. And the irony is the stuff that's costing us so much is our reward for all the sacrifices."

Trashy treasure hunts

Several Web sites are devoted to the art of trash-picking. Locate them by using the term "Dumpster diving" at search engines such as Yahoo! and Excite. Here's a sample of what you will find:

*Bring supplies, such as work gloves, hand sanitizer, a flashlight and a "dive stick" -- a pole with a hook on the end for snaring.

*Obey "no trespassing" signs and don't climb fences.

* Don't forget about commercial trash bins, but avoid medical-related buildings because biohazards exist.

Sources: Yahoo!, Excite