

The New York Times

May 8, 2012

# An Effort to Bury a Throwaway Culture One Repair at a Time

By SALLY McGRANE

AMSTERDAM — An unemployed man, a retired pharmacist and an upholsterer took their stations, behind tables covered in red gingham. Screwdrivers and sewing machines stood at the ready. Coffee, tea and cookies circulated. Hilij Held, a neighbor, wheeled in a zebra-striped suitcase and extracted a well-used iron. “It doesn’t work anymore,” she said. “No steam.”

Ms. Held had come to the right place. At Amsterdam’s first Repair Cafe, an event originally held in a theater’s foyer, then in a rented room in a former hotel and now in a community center a couple of times a month, people can bring in whatever they want to have repaired, at no cost, by volunteers who just like to fix things.

Conceived of as a way to help people reduce waste, the Repair Cafe concept has taken off since its debut two and a half years ago. The Repair Cafe Foundation has raised about \$525,000 through a grant from the Dutch government, support from foundations and small donations, all of which pay for staffing, marketing and even a Repair Cafe bus.

Thirty groups have started Repair Cafes across the Netherlands, where neighbors pool their skills and labor for a few hours a month to mend holey clothing and revivify old coffee makers, broken lamps, vacuum cleaners and toasters, as well as at least one electric organ, a washing machine and an orange juice press.

“In Europe, we throw out so many things,” said Martine Postma, a former journalist who came up with the concept after the birth of her second child led her to think more about the environment. “It’s a shame, because the things we throw away are usually not that broken. There are more and more people in the world, and we can’t keep handling things the way we do.

“I had the feeling I wanted to do something, not just write about it,” she said. But she was troubled by the question: “How do you try to do this as a normal person in your daily life?”

Inspired by a [design exhibit](#) about the creative, cultural and economic benefits of repairing and recycling, she decided that helping people fix things was a practical way to prevent unnecessary waste.

“Sustainability discussions are often about ideals, about what could be,” Ms. Postma said. “After

a certain number of workshops on how to grow your own mushrooms, people get tired. This is very hands on, very concrete. It's about doing something together, in the here and now."

While the Netherlands puts less than 3 percent of its municipal waste into landfills, there is still room for improvement, according to Joop Atsma, the state secretary for infrastructure and the environment.

"The Repair Cafe is an effective way to raise awareness that discarded objects are indeed still of value," Mr. Atsma wrote in an e-mail.

"I think it's a great idea," said Han van Kasteren, a professor at the [Eindhoven University of Technology](#) who works on waste issues. "The social effect alone is important. When you get people together to do something for the environment, you raise consciousness. And repairing a vacuum cleaner is a good feeling."

That was certainly true for the woman who brought her 40-year-old vacuum, bought when she was a newlywed, to a Tuesday night Repair Cafe. "I am very glad, very glad," she said as John Zuidema, 70, sawed off the vacuum's broken nozzle. "My husband died, and there are all these little things around the house that he used to fix."

To some, the project's social benefits are as appealing as its ecological mission. "What's interesting for us is that it creates new places for people to meet, not just live next to each other like strangers," said Nina Tellegen, the director of the [DOEN Foundation](#), which provided the Repair Cafe with a grant of more than \$260,000 as part of its "social cohesion" program, initiated in the wake of the political murders of Pim Fortuyn, a politician, in 2002, and Theo van Gogh, a filmmaker, in 2004. "That it's linked to sustainability makes it even more interesting."

Ms. Tellegen added that older people in particular find a niche at the Repair Cafe.

"They have skills that have been lost," she said. "We used to have a lot of people who worked with their hands, but our whole society has developed into something service-based."

Evelien H. Tonkens, a sociology professor at the University of Amsterdam, agreed. "It's very much a sign of the times," said Dr. Tonkens, who noted that the Repair Cafe's anti-consumerist, anti-market, do-it-ourselves ethos is part of a more general movement in the Netherlands to improve everyday conditions through grass-roots social activism.

"It's definitely not a business model," Ms. Postma said. She added that because the Repair Cafe caters to people who find it too expensive to have their items fixed, it should not compete with existing repair shops.

The Repair Cafe Foundation provides interested groups with information to help get them started, including lists of tools, tips for raising money and marketing materials. Ms. Postma has received inquiries from France, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Ukraine, South Africa and Australia.

Tijn Noordenbos, a 62-year-old artist in Delft, started a Repair Cafe there four months ago.

“I like to repair things,” he said, noting that the repair shops of his younger days had all but vanished. “Now, if something breaks, you take it back to the store and they say: ‘We’ll send it to the factory and it costs you 100 euros just to check out the problem. It’s better if you buy a new one.’ ”

William McDonough, an architect, said, “What happened with planned obsolescence is that it became mindless — just throw it away and don’t think about it.” His “cradle to cradle” design philosophy, which posits that things should be built so that they can be taken apart and the raw materials reused (though not necessarily repaired ad nauseam), also inspired Ms. Postma.

“The value of the Repair Cafe is that people are going back into a relationship with the material things around them,” Mr. McDonough said.

Take, for example, Sigrid Deters’s black H&M miniskirt with a hole in it.

“This cost 5 or 10 euros,” about \$6.50 to \$13, she said, adding that she had not mended it herself because she was too clumsy. “It’s a piece of nothing, you could throw it out and buy a new one. But if it were repaired, I would wear it.”

Marjanne van der Rhee, a Repair Cafe volunteer who hands out data collection forms and keeps the volunteers fortified with coffee, said: “Different people come in. With some, you think, maybe they come because they’re poor. Others look well-off, but they are aware of environmental concerns. Some seem a little bit crazy.”

Theo van den Akker, an accountant by day, had taken on the case of the nonsteaming iron. Wearing a T-shirt that read “Mr. Repair Café,” Mr. van den Akker removed the plastic casing, exposing a nest of multicolored wires.

As he did, Ms. Held and Ms. van der Rhee discussed the traditional Surinamese head scarves that Ms. Held, who was born in Suriname, makes for a living.

When Mr. van den Akker put the iron back together, two parts were left over — no matter, he said, they were probably not that important. He plugged the frayed cord into a socket. A green light went on. Rusty water poured out. Finally, it began to steam.



OPEN

**MORE IN EUROPE** (1 OF 48 ARTICLES)

## **Turmoil Spreads at BBC as Two More Executives Step Aside**

[Read More »](#)