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The Environment: Topics**Ecological Furniture Recycling Refurbished Second-Hand Furniture in Designer Styles**

Tissues from recycled paper, elegant wine glasses from recycled glass and park benches from recycled plastic are today considered perfectly normal. But environmental awareness and technical progress are still lagging miles behind in the race against the throw-away attitude of modern households and the growing refuse mountains. In Dortmund a network of scientists and craftsmen has been trying for a year now to reduce Germany's furniture mountains. Funded by the Federal Ministry of Education, Ecomöbel has so far tested, refurbished and sold around 500 pieces of second-hand furniture. The aim of this Dortmund University research project is to build up regional recycling networks for eco furniture across Germany in order to boost the recycling economy.

Grandma's old chest of drawers, that velvet settee and giant wing-chair remind us of our childhood. In the past purchasing a piece of furniture was an investment for life, and valuable pieces were often passed down to the next generation. Even though solid furniture does still find its way into our homes (alongside all the trendy pieces with Swedish names), things are still very different from Grandma's day. Every few years the fashion in furnishings changes and three-piece suites, kitchen cupboards and cabin beds land on the tip, where they pile up to form towering furniture mountains – seven million tonnes each year in Germany alone, of which only five per cent is reused. The rest is either burnt or turned into wood chips.

Free from harmful substances - the Ecomöbel stamp

People who want to live healthily and ecologically may think about renovating a flat or buying a low-energy house, but seldom think about furnishings. Ecomöbel furniture is for anyone concerned about environmental compatibility and sustainability as well as style and comfort. Ecomöbel is the new furniture brand from a network of restorers, refuse collectors, charities, research institutes and craftsmen's workshops that want to offer high-quality furniture at affordable prices whilst doing their bit for the environment. Last year, in the environmental workshop of the Christliches Jugenddorf in Dortmund, master joiner Harald Mohr and his team refurbished over 500 cupboards, tables and chairs that were being thrown out, the vast majority from house clearances. The 16 apprentices do more than just sand down, saw, hammer and drill – they also routinely inspect each piece of furniture for the harmful chemical formaldehyde. The Dortmund craftsmen carry out what would normally be a time-consuming analysis in next to no time. The Fluxomat, a special drill with integrated test apparatus developed by the Dortmund Institut für Umweltforschung (INFU – Institute for Environmental Research), gives a result in red and white: if the wood contains only very little formaldehyde the test liquid is pale pink. Wood with an extremely high formaldehyde content turns the liquid a deep wine-red colour, and does not get the Ecomöbel stamp.

Ecological furniture network

The members of the network collect pieces of furniture from households, inspect them for harmful substances and refurbish them before selling them. Only the highest quality furniture is selected. Orders are shared out within the network and the customers are supplied at a correspondingly low cost. Each piece of Ecomöbel furniture comes with an Ecomöbel certificate containing all the available information on the types of wood used, surface treatment, metal

fittings, designer, age, origin etc. To guarantee the certification there are strict conditions for the wood restoration as well as for the harmful substances analysis. The joiners in the furniture network are committed to using only products from a special positive list when doing up Ecomöbel furniture.

New from old second-hand designer furniture

From March 2004 interested customers can buy furniture with the Ecomöbel stamp in Hagen (Werkhof Möbel und Mehr) and Hattingen (HAZ Mäck Möbel), as well as at the two existing shops in Dortmund. In keeping with the times, and with the aim of improving the standing of second-hand goods and smoothing the path into the world of fashionable furniture, customers can also shop online using the virtual Ecomöbel catalogue. And it's not just the marketing the standard of design of the furniture rescued from the tip is also right up there with the furniture advertised in glossy brochures. From simple furniture via antiques to graffiti designs, the Ecomöbel partners redesign the pieces in original ways and to meet individual customer requirements naturally in an environmentally friendly way. The ecological furniture movement also creates jobs and strengthens the region's craft sector.

The idea of the Dortmund recycling pioneers is being sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research until the end of September 2004 as part of its key sustainable economy programme. Fashion trends keep returning to ideas from the past kidney-shaped tables, club chairs and dumb waiters: there are bound to be one or two products of the 50s, 60s or 70s lying around in attics and cellars. A few of them may find their way into the Ecomöbel workshop and from there once tested and revamped back into people's homes instead of landing on the tip.


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Any questions about this article? Please write!

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