

SUSTAINABILITY

THE DIRTY LITTLE SECRETS OF A DOCTOR OF TRASH

Sharon McIver

I AM A TRASH DOCTOR, which is not to be confused with a *trashed* doctor – we wouldn't want that. I guess I could call myself a trashologist, although musicologist has a more musical ring to it, and that's what I'd intended to become after completing a thesis on Aotearoa dance music culture. But at the outdoor parties I discovered my true calling: trash, a word I prefer to the more polite ways of naming the waste products of modern consumerism.

So why am I so obsessed? I was around in the '70s when paper, cardboard, and glass rubbish (as it was known then) was just starting to be colonised by plastic – and I know that back then our black (ironically, polyurethane) bags didn't hold anything like the amount our shiny bin sets do now. Plus, we used to get money for glass bottles.

I also spent seven years picking up at the dance parties I went to in the name of research, and my love of the culture was eroded every time I stooped for yet another discarded cigarette butt or nitrous bulb. The many hours spent Wombling (another word for litter collection) also gave me time to devise ways to eradicate trash, and post-doc, I realise that amongst all those sacks I've handled piece-by-piece is a golden ticket of opportunity.

Hence, with the full support of the institution and the campus community, I'm convinced that a university waste watchers programme could be implemented that in ten years would more than halve the amount of materials being trucked out as waste.

The benefits of such a turnaround would be phenomenal. It would fulfil institutional requirements to reduce carbon emissions, as committed to when we signed up to CEMARS (Certified Emissions Measurement and Reduction Scheme), and save tons in dumping fees. And, with sustainability-based learning increasingly becoming a draw-card for students, the international pull of having a trash-free campus would do wonders for enrolments.

So how could we do it? To work that out I started with the base product. 529 bags of it, dissected over seven weeks in summer, when I went through at least two campus bin sets a day to find out how the recycling scheme was doing.

Every morning, I'd gleefully don a pair of blue overalls (to match my eyes) and yellow rubber gloves (to match the trash). Don't get me wrong, I'm no fan of trash, but I do love going through it – it's where the truth about our culture resides – and there are things I know about some of the summer residents of the UC that would make the less iron-stomached amongst us puke. Fortunately, I don't have any names so no one can be implicated, but strictly in the interests of scaring people into doing the right thing here's some of what I found in the bags designated for the landfill:

- Four unopened 2L bottles of milk that was over a week away from expiry. (*Okay, who has shares in Fonterra?*)
- 460 pieces of paper in one bag from the Engineering bins. (*Did you know we do paper recycling at UC?*)
- Some pages of a soft porn mag with two unused (thank goodness) condoms inexplicably tucked inside. (!?)
- Several untied plastic bags of dog poo in one week's worth of bin bags taken from the C-Block lawn. (*After the first day I knew to look.*)
- Two BBQ trays of sausages and ham bones from a departmental BBQ. (*Did you know meat can go in the organics?*)
- A bag of Lego, toys, and crystals from the College of Ed. (*My friend's six year old says 'cheers', but there is a charity bin at the Dovedale campus.*)
- And the winner in the "most disgusting thing I've ever found" category (and I've picked up some particularly gross stuff): four orange juice bottles that were actually filled with urine samples taken from a medical hormone test, the patches and packaging details of which were also in the bag. The culprit should be very grateful that in the interests of maintaining self-control I have decided not to pursue this matter, but there are strict guidelines around the disposal of medical waste, and it should never go in the general waste bins. Unfortunately, I can never look at a Charlie's OJ bottle again.

Of course, this is just a taster of what I found out, and that which the cleaners see every day. If you have the stomach for the full version of my report, along with what I'd like to do about it, see the link below. In the meantime, be very, very careful about what you leave in the bins (especially if you're putting an addressed envelope in with it) because you'll never know when someone might be dissecting its contents. Watch this space!

For the full report, see http://www.sustain.canterbury.ac.nz/documents/UC_Waste_Audit_2011.pdf

