

Dutch 'Repair Cafe' give trash a new lease of life

March 15 2012, by Nicolas Delaunay

A broken-down vacuum cleaner, an old bicycle, a torn shirt ... almost nothing is impossible to fix for a group of crafty Dutch volunteers dedicated to giving potential trash a second lease of life.

The volunteers of Amsterdam's "Repair Cafe" are part of a network of 20 similar groups across The Netherlands who mend broken [household appliances](#) and electronics, rather than relegating them to the trash heap -- an all-too-easy choice in today's consumer society.

"People have simply lost the culture of repairs. We too easily throw away things that can be fixed," Martine Postma, the driving force behind the initiative, told AFP at Amsterdam's Repair Cafe.

Here in a rented hall, saws, screwdrivers and electric cables hang from the walls. Four electronics enthusiasts and two seamstresses are hard at work, fixing a sound system and mending torn clothing.

Postma, a former journalist, pulls a cell phone from her pocket which she bought a decade ago, saying: "It's missing three keys on the keypad but otherwise it works fine. Surely there must be a way to fix it."

Convinced that no one enjoys throwing things away, Postma, 41, opened the first Repair Cafe in Amsterdam in 2009 "to bring together two groups of people: 'repair volunteers' and those who want to fix things but don't know how."

Margreet Bakker, 57, brought in her [vacuum cleaner](#), preferring the Repair Cafe to the manufacturer. "It's much better to bring it here, rather than have it fixed by the manufacturer, who would charge the equivalent of a new vacuum cleaner," she said.

Bakker and Theo van den Akker, a tax consultant by profession, but also an electronics enthusiast, start probing the machine's innards.

They dismantle it, check its fan, test its electronics ... and within an hour later identify the problem. Simple, really: a loose connection at the plug. With that fixed, the vacuum cleaner hums back to life.

-- 'Devices today are not made to be fixed' --

Visitors to the Repair Cafe, working with "fixers," sometimes learn to do the repairs themselves.

"Devices made today are less and less reliable and they last far less time than they used to," lamented Van den Akker, 64, adding: "They are made less-and-less easy to take apart -- they are not made to be fixed."

What started as a purely local initiative in Amsterdam, the Repair Cafe became an overnight success, far exceeding Postma's expectations.

The initial goal was to set up 18 Repair Cafes across the country by 2013. Today, around 20 are already up and running, and another 50 are in the planning stages.

Postma now works full-time for the Repair Cafe Foundation, which she founded in 2010.

Funded by the Dutch state, the foundation advises volunteers on how to set up their own Repair Cafes.

Each one works independently and sets its own pace -- be it one afternoon a month or two evenings a week -- in a workspace that may be provided by the local municipality or rented to an individual.

It is up to each one to obtain funding, recruit volunteers and find tools.

Now Postma dreams of opening a Repair Cafe in every one of The Netherlands' 415 municipalities: "It could also work elsewhere in western Europe, and why not in the United States as well?" she asks.

Ronald Westerlaken, 37, a former electrician who now works as a designer, said he volunteered because he "wanted to do something with my hands again. My other job requires me to be constantly in front of my computer!"

"When it comes to fixing something, you feel a great deal of satisfaction," he said.

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