

EDITORIAL

by Guy Crittenden

"I can't help feeling that my IKEA experience has been a glimpse into a more desirable future, if everyone embraced it."



IKEA, Me and Dupree

My recent separation launched me into a retailing adventure furnishing the small two-bedroom apartment (plus office) that I currently rent. In addition to a credit card hangover, my shopping binge afforded an opportunity to reflect on our consumer culture and its environmental impacts.

Having given all our furniture to my ex-wife, I had a blank slate with which to work. I could find my own decorative style and also consider (without being puritanical about it) environmental issues in my decisions. This (plus my budget) led me to the granddaddy of ready-to-assemble (RTA) furniture giants: IKEA.

As I'd seen first-hand in recent trips to England, Finland and France, Europeans are brilliant at living comfortably — even luxuriously — in small spaces. In recent years I'd lived in subdivisions and at times, frankly, "way too much house." Now I live European style above a store, walk to work, and shop for food locally every couple of days. Except for my bed and couch, I bought almost every item that I now own, from the smallest teacup or kitchen cutting board to my bookshelves and the kids' bunk beds, from IKEA.

I did right by my budget, but did I do right by the environment?

It's difficult to say. The answer depends on how much I trust my intuition and IKEA's own marketing. I intuitively *feel* that IKEA is on "the right side" of the globalization trend and the environment, but maybe the savvy marketing has brainwashed me.

You can Google your own stats about the giant retailer, or read up at Wikipedia.com, but a few stats provide some scale.

The company, whose motto is "Affordable Solutions for Better Living," turned over €17 billion in 2006. From the first store built by founder Ingvar Kamprad in Älmhult, Sweden in 1958, the franchise chain has built 237 stores in 34 countries. Last year, it offered over 12,000 products to more than 504 million visitors, and distributed 174 million catalogues. Although the company is marketed as Swedish, it's privately-held through a Dutch-registered foundation, controlled by the Kamprad's family. The IKEA brand is subject to complex ownership via several companies and foundations in the Netherlands, Sweden and Belgium. Stores pay a three per cent royalty on all products sold to the brand owners, culminating with the Stichting INGKA Foundation, which *The Economist* reports is the world's wealthiest charity with a net worth estimated in excess of US \$36 billion (more than the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), although the foundation's purpose appears to be largely corporate tax-avoidance and anti-takeover protection.

In many ways, IKEA is a big box store no different than the Wal-Marts and Costco's of the world: a big warehouse in the middle of an asphalt ocean, with local traffic concerns. Yet the parking lot is always full! Like Wal-Mart, it's so popular, so successful, that resistance seems

futile. But unlike Wal-Mart, and in a manner similar to The Body Shop, IKEA has convinced the public that it's some kind of retailing white knight.


Why is this so? In part perhaps there's the assumption that, like Volvo, anything from Sweden must be safe, well-designed, yet thrifty in a Northern Protestant sort of way. IKEA has capitalized on this with avant-garde ads, such as one that targeted gay customers. I suspect IKEA has avoided most of the local opposition faced by other box store giants in part because of Sweden's state socialism — this appeals to the very folks who will lie down in front of bulldozers to stop construction of a new Wal-Mart.

Yet the company is as capitalist as you can get. While the designs come from Sweden, most of the products are apparently manufactured in the Third World. And then there's that tax-avoiding ownership structure. I'm not personally opposed (taxes in Sweden are crushingly high) and producing things in developing nations is okay with me, so long as local work conditions are decent. I don't know if there's a "dark underside" to the IKEA story lingering there.

At various websites you can find lists of the things IKEA does to reduce its ecological footprint. For example, suppliers must adhere to the strict social and environmental standards of its "IWAY" protocols and audits. The company says that it closely monitors its use of hazardous substances and is trying to eliminate many chemicals entirely. It designs products to minimize waste, energy use, packaging and product transportation, and repurposes waste materials to make usable products. Its catalogues are produced from chlorine-free pulp paper, and IKEA offers customers free recycling for fluorescent

lamps, batteries and holiday trees.

Hmm. For me, IKEA's RTA furniture offered an efficient way to quickly furnish a modest apartment (that's only slightly bigger than the 400 square foot model in the showroom that shows how small you can actually go!). The energy-efficient flat-pack distribution methods and use of (mostly) recyclable paper and cardboard packaging, and the "do-it-yourself" experience of buying and assembling the items, converged in my mind with the international flare of the stores to make me feel I was consuming in a sort of Third Way that blends global capitalism with populist thrift and eco-efficiency. I confess, my situation thrust certain decisions upon me, but I can't help feeling that my IKEA experience offered me a glimpse into a more desirable future wherein people consume wisely and reduce their ecological footprint, but also live comfortably.

Are IKEA's claims too good to be true? I hope not. I'm living this way now, and I have to tell you, it ain't bad! 

IKEA founder Ingvar Kamprad lecturing a group of students at Växjö University in Sweden.

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