

NZZ article

Littering problem at Utoquai in Zurich

Zurich's filthy party mile

On the lakeside promenade, mountains of waste grow, night after night. And every morning, Utoquai and green spaces look almost as good as new. But will the littering problem ever be solved?

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Source: Wikimedia Commons

At least they tried. Four cheerful guys in their early twenties are sitting at Utoquai on a balmy summer evening. Hard liquor straight from the bottle, drinking, laughing, dancing, arm in arm. It's Friday just before 10 pm, the night is still young – the party moves to its next location. The young men pack up and leave. What remains are several cups, bottle caps, cigarette butts, scraps of paper, a beer bottle on the low wall, a beer crate and a drink carton in the flower bed. The group of friends is almost out of sight; the reporter runs after them to ask:

Quick question, why didn't you take your trash with you?

We have to catch our bus! – We took our things with us (he points to a plastic bag with empty bottles and other trash in his hand). The other stuff was from our friends who left earlier. We're not cleaning that up.

The evening takes its course. Portable loudspeakers turn Zurich's lakeside promenade into an open-air disco. The signs put up by the city pointing to waste bins and forbidding the use of stereos are overlooked: 'Respect. Please. Everyone.' The message falls flat.

Meanwhile, one boombox blares: 'Partyrock is in the house tonight / Everybody just have a good time!' Sing along, scream along, celebrate – with the next can, the next cigarette, the next cup in hand.

A few steps further along, up at Falkenstrasse: Gangster rap, the smell of weed in the air. One lonely whiskey bottle on a low wall, used cups littered about. A different group of very young men has left them behind, even though waste bins were nearby. The partygoers are now marching towards the Bellevue.

Excuse me, I'm writing about littering. The bottle and the cups back there, are they yours?

Uhm ... yes?

Why didn't you throw them in the trash?

Why didn't we? Why are others not doing it? I don't know, I'm just drunk.

What if you weren't drunk?

But in the morning, the cleaning crew comes to collect it. I'm creating jobs by not doing it. That's actually true! I'm doing something for them, too. I don't usually litter. Today I left it there, just this once.

Would you do that during the day?

No, I wouldn't. I wouldn't do it in the daytime.

These answers typify the littering problem that Zurich has been struggling with for years. The young man doesn't like being asked about his littering. He knows that it's

not right and stresses that he wouldn't usually do it. He doesn't want to be a 'litterer'. But what's the big deal? In a few hours, the waste collectors from the city cleaning service will come anyway.

Good intentions, disinhibition and indifference: all shade of grey. As soon as the sun goes down on the summer party mile, social norms crumble. The first bottles, cans, plastic bags on the floor lead to a domino effect for many of the young people: Why dispose of their own waste when others leave theirs lying around as well? Why bother, when nobody notices you under cover of darkness anyway?