The Costs of Convenience: Unpacking the Self-Storage Industry

Guy Arundel

Abstract

Increasing numbers of self-storage facilities on the urban landscape is illustrative of a culture of excessive consumption, underpinned by conventions such as ‘more is better’. This paper explores some key drivers of the growing phenomenon known as self-storage, contending that they are representative of a social malaise we would do well to address. My findings point towards a seemingly ceaseless increase in demand for these storage services, with the implications including that they will continue to facilitate our propensity to consume, and perhaps inadvertently hoard, with direct and indirect negative environmental and other impacts. Unless there is a significant shift in how we act and react in relation to our impulses and desires for goods, the dreams and material aspirations we hold today may turn into the collective global nightmare of tomorrow.

Introduction

Although the human activity of stockpiling has always existed in some form, the manner in which it is undertaken has changed dramatically in Western society since the rise of modern consumerism in the middle of the twentieth century. The transition has evolved over thousands of years, from the nomadic hunter-gatherers to the arrival of Neolithic food storage systems, aiding survival through the harsh winter months and enabling the trade of surplus supplies, to crates held by banking companies for British colonial dignitaries travelling abroad. The start of the industrial revolution in eighteenth century England, with the use of its plentiful coal reserves to power newly invented machinery, facilitated mass manufacturing thus enabling more people to purchase once unaffordable products.

In industrialised society, in an age of apparently endless abundance, with the availability of ‘quick and easy’ credit and online shopping, obtaining a product of desire is a relatively simple task.

This has created a flow on effect whereby an increasing amount of the urban landscape is being taken up by self-storage facilities, typically catering for the need to store possessions temporarily, but trending significantly towards the ‘need’ to store possessions beyond the capacity available at one’s own residence. This ‘overflow’ is becoming a chronic symptom of our consumer society.

The continued growth in the self-storage industry presents a major challenge in sustainability terms, as it fuels and facilitates the accumulation of needless and superfluous possessions. Indeed ‘compulsive’ shopping has come to be called the ‘smiled upon’ addiction, due to its socially sanctioned nature (Hamilton & Denniss 2005a, p. 15).
A brief history of the self-storage industry

Modern self-storage facilities in which the tenant has exclusive access to the storage space began to appear in the United States (US) in the 1960’s. The first facility in the history of self-storage was in Odessa, Texas, and was called ‘A1 U-Store-It, U-Lock-It, U-Carry the Key’. Russ Williams, a retired oil industry worker, came up with the idea. He enjoyed fishing and needed somewhere to house his surplus equipment and boats. He envisaged that firms in the oil industry could use similar storage units for commercial purposes, so he bought a group of apartments and garages and converted them into the world’s first self-storage facility (Farley 2008).

Examining what has taken place in many US urban centres since the industry began, where competition among storage companies is fierce, may point to where other ‘developed’ nations such as Australia are heading. In the US, many blocks of land adjacent to residential and commercial areas have been converted into self-storage. Between 2000 and 2005, over 3,000 new facilities were built each year. In 2012, ten percent of US households were renting a storage unit. In 2013 there were an estimated 48,500 self-storage facilities in the US with nearly 21 million square metres of rentable storage space (Self-Storage Association 2013) (which equates to the combined size of three Manhattan Islands), or 0.69 square metres per person (IBISWorld 2014).

While the US has long been the global leader in self-storage, Australia (and other countries in the region) are following suit with rapidly expanding self-storage capacity. Australia has over two million square metres of space for rent with over 1,100 self-storage facilities. That is around 0.11 square metres of self-storage space per person (Steel Storage 2014). Even so, in 2012 less than 2.5 percent of Australian households were renting a storage unit with industry insiders still considering the local industry to be in its infancy (having started here in the late 1970’s) (Storage King 2012).

Car, wine, art and gun collections are also being stored securely in self-storage facilities (Assured Self-Storage2014). The relentless consumerism driving the growth in self-storage facilities appears to stem from, and be fueled by, the belief that more possessions leads to greater wellbeing and happiness. And when there is no more room to put everything, the rise of the easily accessible self-storage facility results.

Demand for self-storage derives primarily from having possessions that:

- Require temporary storage, resulting from moving house, going interstate or overseas for study, extended holidays or work;
- Were once valued and still considered important;
- Have historical or sentimental value, but not necessarily significant financial value;
- Are deemed inconvenient to keep close at hand.

Storage facilities are not located randomly. Significant market research underpins these choices, based on demographics including home ownership/rental ratios, industry competitors and so on. The proximity of target markets to the facility is a key demand factor (Parham Group 2014).

If you are an urban dweller, it is highly likely such a facility is located very close by.
Consumption and self-storage

Storage industry figures in the US show an upward trend in the number of customers storing items that they no longer need or want. Fifteen percent of customers told the American Self-Storage Association in 2007 that they were storing such items. This figure was projected to reach 25 percent by 2008. The idea of a temporary storage solution is becoming a perceived long term need, and a generally acceptable part of life (Mooallem 2009).

By 2007, the once typical self-storage client, the family in the middle of a move using storage to solve a short term logistical problem, was no longer the majority.

_Half of renters were now simply storing what wouldn’t fit in their homes, despite the size of the average US house having almost doubled in the previous 50 years (Mooallem 2009)._  

The industry’s continual expansion has both enabled, and been enabled by, excessive consumption fuelled by higher disposable incomes, price decreases and continuous technological advancements generating high product replacement rates. According to an American Self-Storage Association spokesperson:

_There’s a lot of junk stored in our properties. I’ve sometimes said that we could put a torch to this building and it would have zero effect on the local economy, because that’s how much junk is stored in our properties. Human laziness has always been a big friend of self-storage operators, because once they’re in, nobody likes to spend all day moving their stuff out of storage. As long as they can afford it, and feel psychologically that they can afford it, they’ll leave that stuff in there forever (Mooallem 2009)._  

Yet our collective consumption habits are unsustainable, pushing up against a range of planetary limits. If everyone on the planet followed the consumer lifestyle of the average Australian it would take the bio-capacity of three Earths to support it (World Wildlife Fund 2014).

The notion that there are such limits needs to be better recognised and acted upon. We are called to consider if we really need to hold on to so many possessions. Perhaps we can become more accustomed to reusing, recycling, sharing or donating instead? Certainly, these options need to become regarded as more normal, positive, socially and environmentally appropriate things to do.

Does everything we acquire need to be new and wrapped in fancy packaging? While moving away from this may initially take the (accustomed) ‘gloss’ off the acquisition process, deeper fulfillment is on offer given the merits of the change. However, we are generally not encouraged to do such things in a society where success is measured, formally and informally, by individual wealth and material possessions. We need to change our habits and debunk the fallacy that the more we have the happier we become, to simplify our lives by having less things to hold on to and maintain, to redefine our notions of comfort, and in doing so become more engaged with each other and the direct experience of living generally.
The Dogma of Ownership

*How many things I have no need of! – Socrates (Laërtius 1853)*

In the essay ‘Waste not want not’ a marketing analyst comments: “We are so beyond satisfying life’s basic demands that we have moved to a tertiary level where consumption becomes leisure” (Hamilton & Denniss 2005b, p. 1).

*The propensity to accumulate is caused in part by what Associate Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, Brian Knutson, calls the ‘endowment effect’.*

Pursuant to this economic theory, by virtue of the mere fact of owning something, we endow a possession with more value than its market price. It therefore follows that we are willing to pay for its storage rather than using this money for a replacement (De Castella 2011).

Expectations and the modern notion of ‘doing it tough’

According to Homelessness Australia (2011), on any given night one in every 200 Australians is homeless (without safe, secure or affordable housing). The response to this problem has been to call for the construction of an additional 220,000 affordable dwellings by 2020. Similarly, one in 200 Americans also experienced homelessness over a twelve month period (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2013, p. 1). The perception of many would be that Australia’s homeless problem is not as acute as in the US, but the data indicate otherwise. The implications for both countries, as to how we are increasingly choosing to allocate urban space, are significant.

Many Australians consider that they are ‘doing it tough’ financially (Hamilton 2002). While there is little doubt this is the case for those living in impoverished circumstances, for others it says more about our expectations. In 2002, a Newspoll survey found that “almost half (46 per cent) of the richest households in Australia …. say they cannot afford to buy everything they really need” (Hamilton 2002, p. 5).

*The proportion of ‘suffering rich’ in Australia is even higher than in the USA, widely regarded as the nation most obsessed with money (Hamilton 2002, p.vii).*

“The belief that large swathes of the population are suffering from some form of deprivation is accepted as one of the underlying suppositions of public debate and policy formation in Australia” (Hamilton 2002, p. 26).

A shift in how we view the world is needed, and may well pave the way for more of us to live more materially simple and fulfilling lives. Interestingly, it seems this is something that often occurs to us in later life. However, if change is forced upon us by unforeseen events at an earlier age, it can be personally liberating. I remember someone in his early twenties telling me about an experience he once had when awoken one night by the smell of smoke. His home was on fire and the flames were spreading fast. He had little or no time to get out, but before he did he grabbed just one thing, the same electric guitar now by his side, scarred
with some burn marks from that terrifying night. How had he felt about losing nearly every single thing he owned? To my surprise, instead of feeling loss, fear and insecurity, he felt liberated, and more content than he had ever been before, living each day as it came, working in music shops and playing in a band.

What are looking for?

The modern notion of material affluence is interesting to consider in light of pre-colonial indigenous cultures and their spiritual and physical connection to the earth. For instance, in pre-colonial Australian indigenous culture, material items were shared within groups. By Western notions, they were relatively materially poor. However, they created a rich social and cultural life cultivated by respect (Sahlins 1972, p. 168). Food gathering, social organisation, spirituality, law and art were inter-dependent practices. It is generally believed they lived a satisfying and emotionally secure life (Sveiby 2009). British colonial settlement brought a culture with an economy that emphasised competitive activity and the value of material possessions and found the Aboriginal philosophy and way of life difficult to understand and value (Natraj & Kapoor 2004, p. 288).

Every culture has its own socially constructed perspectives on commerce and material possessions, although there is arguably some universality when it comes to the ethics and values within which these are applied. Mahatma Gandhi said that:

*Capital as such is not evil; it is its wrong use that is evil. Capital in some form or other will always be needed (Gandhi 1947).*

Gandhi also believed that commerce without morality is a sin and that:

*Nature ... has implanted in its creation the instinct for food. It also produces enough food to satisfy that instinct from day to day. But it does not produce a lot more. That is Nature’s way. But man, blinded by his selfish greed, grabs and consumes more than his requirements in defiance of Nature’s principle, in defiance of the elementary and immutable moralities of non-stealing and non-possession of other’s property, and thus brings down no end of misery upon himself and his fellow creatures (Gandhi 1947).*

Buddhism in turn teaches that we should not go through life grabbing at one thing after another seeking a sense of security. If we are continually searching for something outside ourselves to make us happy, no matter how ‘successful’ we are materially, we will remain unsatisfied. His Holiness the Dalai Lama (2009, p. 10) wrote:

*We must attempt the impossible. I am convinced that if we continue to follow a social model that is entirely conditioned by money and power, and that takes so little account of true values such as love and altruism, future generations may have to face far worse problems, and endure even more terrible forms of suffering...but it seems to me that you are living in a constant state of tension, in an atmosphere of never-ending competitiveness and fear. And those who are brought up in such an atmosphere will find themselves lacking all their lives: they will not know that wonderful quality of depth and intimacy that is the richness of life. They will stay on the surface of the troubled sea, without ever knowing the calm that lies beneath.*
Limits to growth

*We need to realise that an ever-expanding economy is not compatible or plausible with a finite planet (Priesnitz 2002).*

Originating in the US, and stemming from economic conditions around the time of the Great Depression in the 1930’s, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has become the primary measure for economic performance. It is increasingly inferred, and we are thereby encouraged to believe, that to consume is to perform our ‘civic duty’. We are told to keep spending in good times and to spend our way out of bad times, so as to keep the economy growing. As long as economies are growing there is little dissent, or none that is seriously welcomed, listened to or heeded (McKibben 2010).

We are encouraged to engage in our own material wealth creation, by investing and becoming stakeholders in the growth economy. “We are told we must all collectively believe in this system for it to work, so there is a lot of forward momentum to work against if we are to alter this paradigm” (McKibben 2010).

However, various economists before and especially since Lebow have made the comment that “Capitalism is already showing signs that it can no longer generate the social morale so essential to [its] continued existence” (Lebow 1976). Lebow (1976) argued that:

*It has freed more than half the American people from scarcity and want.... But at the heart of this business civilisation is a ‘hollowness’- everything is evaluated in money terms.*

Owing less stuff is not so tough

*Possession isn’t nine-tenths of the law. It’s nine-tenths of the problem - John Lennon (cited in Short 2011, p. 183).*

In order to deflate the bubble of our perceived ‘need’ for self-storage, how can we reduce our material possessions and the burden they place upon us, and in turn upon others and the rest of the planet? Some ways in which to reduce one’s impact and thereby develop an alternative and more sustainable culture, may include:

- Join sharing and recycling programs;
- Engage in share housing or downsize your residence;
- Give things away and purchase second hand, thereby reducing the demand for new things;
- Re-contextualise things (for example, turn the springs of an old mattress into tomato trusses or an old door into a table);
- Re-vitalise and restore;
- Demand higher quality and more durable products;
- Cycle to work or car pool;
- Value quality of life over materialism.
Conclusion

A closer look at why self-storage facilities exist and why it is such a growth industry helps to highlight the need for us to change our hoarding and consumer habits and systems. What is revealed is that we need to seek alternative ways of expressing ourselves and feeling secure, so that we might curtail the burden of our excessive consumption, be able to ‘let go’ of things, and essentially share and look out for each other more. We need to better recognise the impermanence of all things, and the value of the intangible things in life, rather than relying on material items for personal satisfaction and feelings of wellbeing. In this way we may indeed attain that improved quality of life we seek, and have a gentler impact on the planet and its other inhabitants.

It can be initially confronting to come to terms with insecurities tied up with material possessions, given how accustomed we have grown to defining ourselves in terms of those possessions. Feeling the fear of not owning so many things may feel akin to losing oneself. Though what we experience spiritually, within and between us, is of far greater value. Less really may be more. Maybe it is time to face up to ourselves, to see what is really stored within.

References


McKibben, B, 2010, Eaarth: Making a life on a tough new planet, Black Inc. Melbourne VIC.


