

Self-Storage Nation

Americans are storing more stuff than ever.

By Tom Vanderbilt



Consider the four square feet immediately around you. Now consider that you are occupying your average per capita share of the Great American Self Storage Empire. According to the Self Storage Association, a trade group charged with monitoring such things, the country now possesses some 1.875 billion square feet of personal storage. All this space is contained in nearly 40,000 facilities owned and operated by more than 2,000 entrepreneurs, including a handful of publicly traded giants like Public Storage, Storage USA, and Shurgard.

What this translates into, apart from one hell of a lot of stationary bikes kept behind padlocked metal doors, is an industry that now exceeds the revenues of Hollywood (and doesn't have to deal with Tom Cruise). One in 11 American households, according to a recent survey, owns self-storage space—an increase of some 75 percent from 1995. Most operators of self-storage facilities report 90 percent occupancy, with average stints among its renters of 15 months. Last year alone saw a 24 percent spike in the number of self-storage units on the market.

How did self storage, or "mini storage," as it's sometimes called, become such an enormous enterprise? And what on earth are people keeping in there?

For a resolutely banal landscape feature, self storage is a surprisingly fertile cultural indicator. One distinctly modern phenomenon that helps explain its recent rise is that many high-volume eBay sellers use self storage to house their goods; ironically, these people are sometimes selling goods auctioned off from self-storage units whose owners failed to keep up on the rent. More broadly, self storage's popularity clearly has something to do with American mobility: Many people use self storage during a move. The average American will change residences 11 times in his life; Americans on average are more than four times as likely to change residences in the course of a year than the Japanese are. But the mobility rate in the postwar years has never fluctuated outside of a rather narrow band (16 percent to 21 percent of the country moving), which raises doubts that sheer mobility could have caused such a dramatic recent rise in self storage.

Another obvious suspect, then, is American consumerism. No other country in the world spends as much on consumer goods. As Morgan Stanley notes, in just one telling index, "Over the 1996 to 2004 period, annual growth in US personal consumption expenditures averaged 3.9% — nearly double the 2.2% pace recorded elsewhere in the so-called advanced world." The real prices of many consumer goods are as much as 50 percent less than they were a century ago. It's never been so easy for so many to amass so many consumer products. And who doesn't take pleasure from owning things? But living in a land of wants, not needs, creates its own dilemmas, as evidenced by the concurrent rise of stores like *Hold Everything* and the Container Store—stuff to hold stuff. Note the curious growth in the "home organization" market: reality shows like *Clean Sweep* and magazines like *Real Simple*, or, more strikingly, the robustness of the National Association of Professional Organizers, which saw a 50 percent rise in membership in the past year.



And behind door No. 3?
Your old stuff!

But as consumption has grown, so too has the average size of the American house. The National Association of Homebuilders reports that the average American house went from 1,660 square feet in 1973 to 2,400 square feet in 2004. So, let's get this straight—houses got bigger, *average family sizes got smaller*, and yet we still need to tack on a billion-plus square feet to store our stuff?

Well, it's not quite that simple. For one, those living in older houses, with their smaller closets and rooms, simply might not have room for today's consumerist haul. Many homes built in the postwar years until today—particularly the bungalows and ranches so popular in the temperate states that have seen the most population growth—come without

basements or attics. It is thus no surprise that the three states that have the most self-storage space—Florida, Texas, and California—are in the Sun Belt. (The Northeast, by comparison, has less self storage per capita.) A third factor to consider is the disappearance of the American attic. While many of us have memories of rummaging through a grandparents' hot, musty attic, filled with old hope chests and dress dummies, in the past few decades the attic has simply vanished. The primary reason was the shift from rafters-based roof framing to the use of **trusses**, which are cheaper for builders but fill up most of the available space under the roof.

The first self-storage facilities originated in Texas in the late 1960s. As one industry participant put it, "They just decided to build a bunch of garages in one day. They were able to rent them out. They built more. They rented them. Someone else caught on and did the same." Then, as now, they were little more than prefabricated tin garages, usually situated on the industrial periphery of cities and suburbs, and built on former infill sites or among drive-in theaters and other occupiers of low-cost real estate. In the early 1970s, what would become the big national players arrived on the scene—Shurgard National

Storage Centers, Public Storage (the orange one), Storage USA. One wonders why this fringe idea—keeping your stuff outside of the home—suddenly blossomed into competitive commerce in the space of a few years: Perhaps it was the American household, in step with the global economy of the early 1970s, lurching into a "crisis of overaccumulation." Or perhaps it was the great emptying of the Northern cities and the incipient rise of the Sunbelt, a rise in mobility that led to a need for more temporary storage. Or maybe even the rise in divorce levels, aided by the emergence of "no-fault divorce" laws, which suddenly had more households in transition.



The catacombs of consumerism

Despite their popularity, self-storage facilities have always had a bit of an image problem. Often a speculative real-estate play for yet-to-be gentrified areas (several of the biggest self-storage outfits are quite profitable Real Estate Investment Trusts), they bring—comparative to their size and infrastructural requirements—few jobs or sales-tax benefits to towns. They tend not to be particularly aesthetically pleasing, and their marginal location, as well as the transitory nature of their "product," has long seemed to attract people doing something they don't want to be caught doing at home. To take just two recent appearances of self-storage units in Hollywood films, *Monster* and *Primer*, the lockers have served, respectively, as the abode of homeless serial killer Lee (based on Aileen Wuornos) and as an illegal laboratory for dangerous time-travel experiments.

This unsavory screen persona has a basis in fact. In the last year, scanning the newspapers, one can find instances in which self-storage units were found to contain: a corpse (more than once); lye, ammonia, and the other detritus of a meth lab; two girls, age four and five, playing inside a padlocked unit to which they, along with their mother, had made their residence as of a week before; the cameras and photographs of a child pornographer; and the "office" of a self-proclaimed gynecologist who in fact had no medical degree. Both Timothy McVeigh and Ramsi Yousef stored chemicals in self-storage units, and in 2003 the Department of Homeland Security issued guidance on how storage operators can spot potential terrorists.

And even when the stored items are innocent possessions, a certain poignant sadness haunts them: They are mementos we somehow can't live with, and yet can't live without, and exemplify the downside of acquisition, the moment when you realize there are more bread machines, plastic lawn chairs, and treadmills than anyone could use in a lifetime. Or they signify the thirtysomething moving back in with his parents, with nowhere to put his black leather couch. The *Onion* rather mischievously labeled one fictional self-storage facility in Chicago a "Museum of Personal Failure."

This is not the picture of self storage the industry wants you to have, of course. They want you to know that today's self-storage spaces are increasingly upscale redoubts, with landscaping boasting 30-foot waterfalls, air conditioning, and architecture that is, as one builder put it, "like walking into a custom home." Self storage now boasts 55-degree wine cellars, as well as capacious berths for RVs and yachts, since many homeowners associations now have restrictions against parking such things in driveways.

Like our possessions, self storage is clearly here to stay. In Topeka, Kan., the "coolest new building" in town, according to one critic, is Flex Storage Systems, a well-lit, natural-wood-accented structure that seems capable, if nothing else, of making self storage safe for the *Dwell* generation. Its location is ironic, to say the least: Near a "glorified junkyard called Joyland"; across from an "abandoned K-Mart Store"; and near "Fresh Start Auto Credit: Second Chance Finance." Here one can find the whole gamut of American consumerism. "You can't take it with you," as the proverb begins—but you can certainly find a place to stash it away.

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Celebrate *Bojack Horseman* Weekend With *Crusader Rabbit*, the First Made-For-TV Cartoon

By Matthew Dessem



Crusader Rabbit, the first animated character created specifically for television.

20th Century Fox

It's *Bojack Horseman* weekend, when we're all hunched over our televisions binge-watching the newest season of the **greatest animated television show** since *The Simpsons*. So what better time to look back at the very first made-for-TV animated show ever, *Crusader Rabbit*, which kicked off the 67 years of TV animation that led, slowly and inexorably to *Bojack*? *Crusader Rabbit* isn't just *Bojack*'s ancient ancestor in terms of its medium, it's also part of a long line of cartoons with jokes pitched at adults as much as children. Without *Crusader Rabbit*, there's no *Rocky and His Friends*, without *Rocky and His Friends*, there's no *Simpsons*, and without *The Simpsons*, we'd probably be spending the weekend watching Netflix's new *Puppets* series.

Crusader Rabbit was the brainchild of Alex Anderson, the nephew of animator **Paul Terry**. Terry, a former newspaper cartoonist, founded animation studio Terrytoons, where he created **Mighty Mouse**. More importantly, Terry also pioneered techniques of **limited animation**, allowing his studio to compete with better-funded rivals like Disney—the Tiffany of animation studios to Terrytoons' Woolworth's, according to Terry. Anderson worked at his uncle's studio—first for an eight-month stint after high school, then later after World War II. When he saw a television for the first time, he realized his uncle's cheap, fast techniques might make it feasible to move animation into the new medium. Terry was uninterested with Anderson's pitch of an animated TV show—or, more accurately, worried that Terrytoons' theatrical distribution partner Fox would drop them if they started doing business in the threatening new medium—so Anderson returned to Berkeley and set out on his own.

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The Folly of Elon Musk's New Master Plan

The Tesla founder wants to be Steve Jobs. He needs to be Henry Ford.

By Daniel Gross

Facebook's Exhibit No. 1066

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Tesla CEO Elon Musk speaks during an event to launch the new Tesla Model X Crossover SUV on Sept. 29, 2015, in Fremont, California.

Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

Elon Musk rolled out his second “**master plan**” this week—it involves integrating home energy production with electricity storage, making electric pickup trucks, achieving autonomous driving, and enabling car sharing. Now, as I’ve **noted**, Musk has been a brilliant innovator of not just technologies but also **business models**. The Musk-industrial complex—SpaceX, Tesla, and SolarCity—has put real, functioning products into the world and inspired competitors. And with this bold plan, he’s remaking himself in the mold of Steve Jobs—ultra-nimble, visionary, disruptive, multitasking.

But Musk is acting as if he has already achieved the **first master plan** he laid out 10 years ago—make a really expensive electric car, then a somewhat expensive electric car, then a cheap electric car in large quantities. He hasn’t yet. And for the next few years, unless he wants to blow Tesla’s future—and **\$32.95 billion market capitalization**—Musk needs to behave less like the most visionary businessman of our current age and more like the most visionary businessman of 100 years ago. Musk should be taking his cues from Henry Ford—an obsessive, detail-oriented engineer who focused single-mindedly on perfecting the production at scale of a democratic automobile.

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