

Things: The Throw Away Society

Alvin Toffler



Alvin Toffler was an American writer and futurist, known for his works discussing the digital revolution, communications revolution, corporate revolution and technological singularity. A former associate editor of Fortune magazine, his early work focused on technology and its impact (through effects like information overload).

Accenture, the management consultancy, has dubbed him the third most influential voice among business leaders, after Bill Gates and Peter Drucker. He has also been described in the Financial Times as the "world's most famous futurologist". People's Daily classes him among the 50 foreigners that shaped modern China.

The essay, Things: The Throw Away Society is the 4th chapter of his Book, *The Future Shock* (1970).

The Future Shock

- Future Shock is a 1970 book by American futurist Alvin Toffler, written together with his spouse Adelaide Farrell, in which the authors define the term "future shock" as a certain psychological state of individuals and entire societies.
- The book grew out of an article "The Future as a Way of Life" in Horizon magazine, Summer 1965 issue.
- Alvin Toffler argued that society is undergoing an enormous structural change, a revolution from an industrial society to a "super-industrial society". This change overwhelms people. He argues that the accelerated rate of technological and social change leaves people disconnected and suffering from "shattering stress and disorientation"—future shocked. Toffler stated that the majority of social problems are symptoms of future shock. In his discussion of the components of such shock he popularized the term "information overload."
- This analysis of the phenomenon of information overload is continued in later publications, especially The Third Wave and Powershift.
- Future Shock is the shattering stress and discontent that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in a short time.

The Throw Away Society

The Throw Away Society is a generalized description of human social concept strongly influenced by consumerism, whereby society tends to use item once only, from disposable packaging to consumer products which are not designed for reuse or lifetime use. The relationship that new society has with things are becoming more and more temporary. The barbie doll in the essay becomes an extended metaphor of this throw away culture.

1. The Paper Wedding Gown:

- Toffler discusses how home becomes a place of constant change, developing a throw away mentality to match our throw away products slowly transitioning from a long existing relationship with things to a short-term relationship with things.
- The steady expands of globalization and its impact on different parts of the world. America became the epicenter of this trend.
- The rapid change brought by Globalization in Sweden and how the neat streets of the city turned into a place that exemplified the throw away culture.
- E.g. Throw away tissues, Dentamatic throw-away toothbrush.

"We develop a throw-away mentality to match our throw-away products. This mentality produces, among other things, a set of radically altered values with respect to property. But the spread of disposability through the society also implies decreased durations in man-thing relationships. Instead of being linked with a single object over a relatively long span of time, we are linked for brief periods with the succession of objects that supplant it."

2. The Missing Supermarket:

In the 2nd part of the essay, Toffler discusses;

How the shift towards transience is manifest in architecture.

Change in a physical space that represented permanence. i.e., Houses or buildings in general which were meant to last for a long period of time v/s buildings with an average span of about 40 years.

Resulting in physical environments which are less durable and more transient. "The average age of dwellings has steadily declined," writes E. F. Carter of the Stanford Research Institute, "from being virtually infinite in the days of caves to ... approximately a hundred years for houses built in United States colonial days, to about forty years at present."

Toffler cites Louis Auchincloss who calls the city of New York 'a city without history' which he connects to the concept of Vanishing Past put forward by Buckminster Fuller. He describes New York as a "continual evolutionary process of evacuations, demolitions, removals, temporarily vacant lots, new installations and repeat.

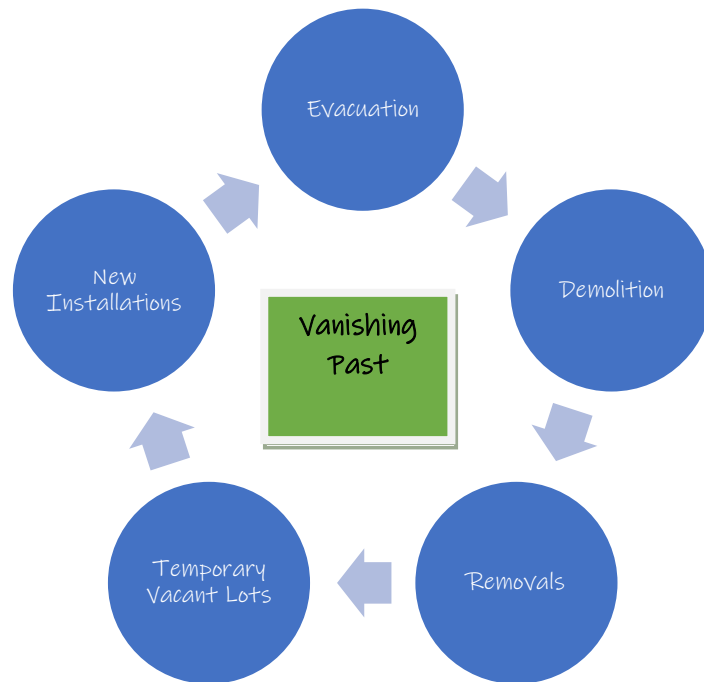


Figure 1: Buckminster Fuller Describing New York

3. The Economics of Impermanence

- It becomes cheaper to replace than to repair, so it is sensible to build cheap, unrepairable, throw away objects, even if they won't last as long as repairable objects.
- It becomes economically feasible to build for short term than for long term due to rapidly advancing technology.

E.g., Buildings torn down in Miami in 10 years as that is cheaper.

- Uncertainty about future needs increase.

As change is inevitable, we hesitate to commit for large, rigid objects which serve unchanging purpose. We avoid commitment to fixed forms and functions, we build for short term use or try making products adaptable.

As Change Increases > Complexities Multiply > giving rise to more disposable concepts > Lessening man's attachment to things.

Economics of Permanence v/s Economics of Transience

- Society was unchanging
- Objects had clear functions
- Economic logic dictated permanence
- Durability and functionality closely related to value.

- It becomes cheaper to replace than to repair
- It becomes economically feasible to build for short term than for long term rapidly advancing technology.
- Uncertainty about future needs increase.

4. The Portable Playground

Disposability and short-term use have similar psychological effect. Dismantling and relocating.

E.g., Use of temporary classrooms. Online classes

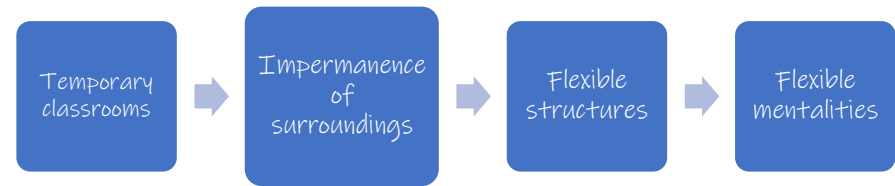


Figure 2 Temporary structures and its impact.

In short:

The rise of Disposability
And spread of throw
away culture.
Why???
Ask yourself...

From permanent fixtures to
temporary movable structures
made to be mobile. Hence the
students in these classrooms will
not develop a sense of belonging
to the place or a physical
attachment that is meant to be
felt.

5. The Modular Fun Palace

Modularism is the new trend: It is the attempt to lend whole structures greater permanence at the cost of making their sub structures less permanent. Like Lego blocks structures are replaced, remodelled and repurposed.

Hence there will be only a thin distinction between disposability and modularity in accordance with duration of relationship with things.

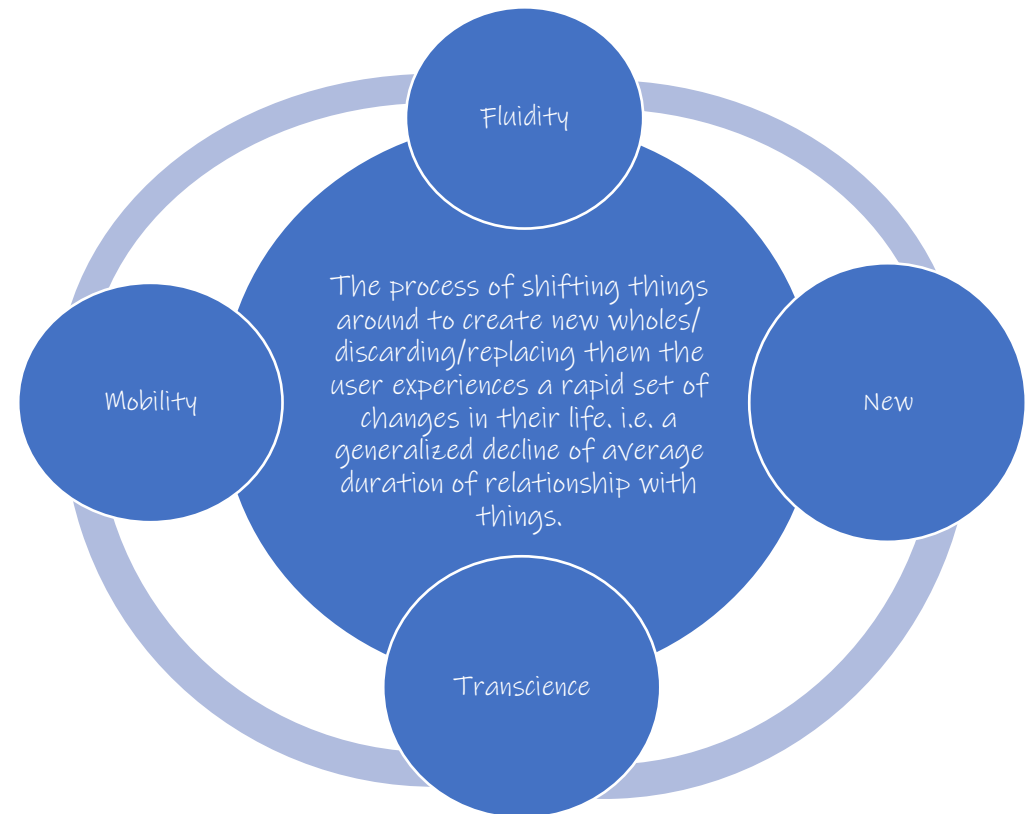
When modules are not discarded but rearranged, it gives rise to a new structure, new configuration, new entity. Even though similar components are used, the old entity has been discarded.

E.g., Permanent buildings of today built with modular plan so interior walls, partitions may be shifted.

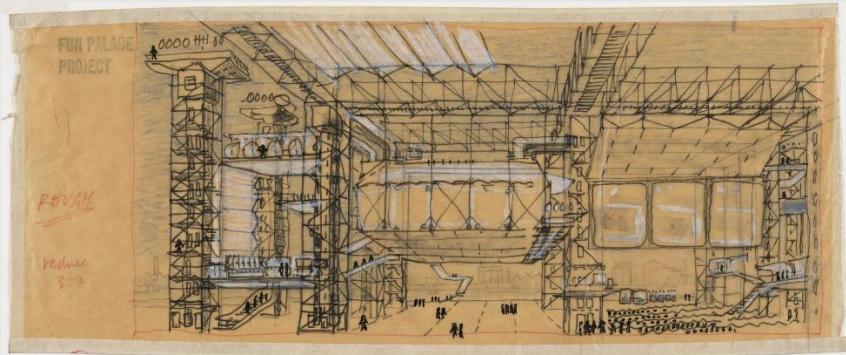
Signs of a Transcient Society

E.g., Uppsala apartments. Transformable living spaces.

E.g., 2. A ball point pen becomes the symbol of modularity with its replaceable refill, keeping the exterior intact and throwing away the spent ink cartridge.



The Fun Palace



In 1961, Joan Littlewood and Cedric Price designed fun palace building, "a Laboratory of fun" They imagined a building linked through technology to other places, accessible to those who would not normally go to art venues or great centres of learning.

Joan Littlewood wanted as the critic Reyner Banham puts it "A **Zone of Probability**".

An auditorium which could be disassembled and rearranged later into a different form catering the event.

"The Fun Palaces when it happens will be indeterminacy raised to a new power: No permanent monumental structure or heroic silhouette against the sky will survive for posterity... for the only permanently visible elements of the fun palace will be the life support structure on which the transient architecture will be parasitic."

Society moving to a transient nature, with the permanent structures being shifted to short term, temporary modules, like an extension of the fun palace, marking the **EPHEMERALIZATION** of Man's relationship with things.

6. The Rental Revolution

Lives Based On Having Are Less Free Than Lives Based On Either On Doing Or On Being. – William Jones

Rentalism also intensifies transience

It provides minimum involvement housing

Which helps temporary structures and modular structures foster

Hence commitments made to an apartment are short term v/s commitment a home owner has to the building.

Underscoring an ever-briefing relationship with physical environment.

Rentalism parallels and reinforces the impact of throw away items, temporary structures and modularism.

Upsurge of rental activities in various other fields which was all but unknown in the past.

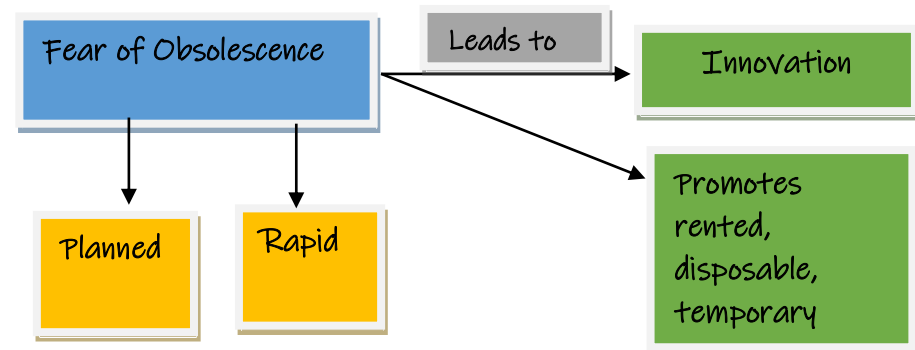
E.g.,1, The life expectancy of a car in one owner. They keep it around for three years and trade them. This trend changed to auto rental business.

Renting vehicles for commute and for getaways being a trend in cosmopolitan cities where there is a space restriction for parking. This was condition stated in 1970 when over half a million cars were carried abroad for their use overseas.

If this was the condition in 1970's guess the condition now!!!

E.g.,2, Emergence of General stores which sell nothing but rents everything. Any product can be rented and over 9000 such stores were there in United States renting from household items to luxury items for rent.

7. Temporary Needs



Obsolescence is disturbing and upsetting for people bred on the idea of permanence.

The triumph of advanced technology is that the death of an old product has been deliberately hastened by manufacturer for the appearance of a "new improved model."

Obsolescence occurs under three circumstances:

- Product deteriorates and no longer fulfils its function.
- A new product outperforms functions of the old product.
- When the needs of the products change and the functions of the products are also altered.

Eg. Choices in purchasing a car and how it is not based on just conveyance but also reflects personality of the user, symbol of status, source of pleasure, etc. Hence all products become multifunctional, or rather all products become multi-functional.

Just think, what brands like Audi, Rolls Royce, Lamborghini, Ferrari, Hyundai, Volkswagen, Maruthi, Renault etc means to you.

In a society of scarcity, needs are relatively universal and unchanging because they are starkly related to gut functions. As affluence rises human needs become less directly linked to biological survival and more highly individualized.

The More rapidly Changing the society, the more temporary the needs.

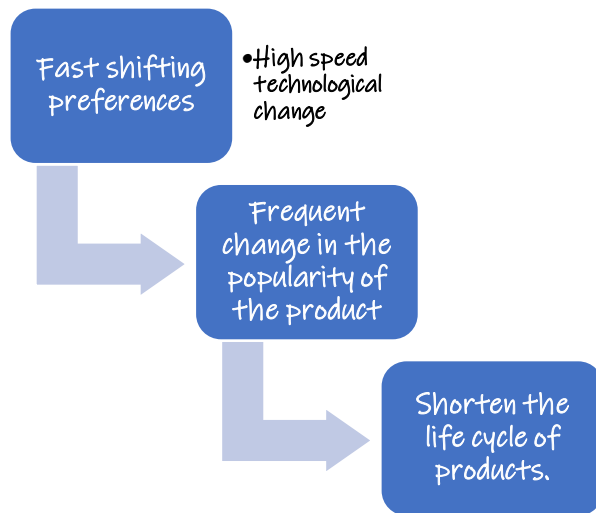
So, consumer has a vague feeling that he wants change, without having a clear idea what he needs.

Advertising encourages and capitalizes this purpose feeling. One of the primary functions of advertising is to create a "durable preference". But now this concept is miserably

Many brands drop out of existence and among brands that exist there is a continuous reshuffling of the position.

This continuous shuffling and reshuffling introduces into the short run, everyday life of the individual a dazzling dynamism, heightening the speed, turmoil and impermanence of the society.

8. The Fad Machine



It is the craze or short-lived fad which determines the popularity and life of a product.

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