

The rise of storage spaces

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions. Give reasons for your answers.

- Do you prefer e-books to physical books? Why?
- What things, apart from books, that used to be physical objects are now digital?
- Why may people prefer to own physical objects that take up space instead of digital versions of them?

2 Reading for gist

a. Skim the article and choose the statement that best summarises the main idea.

1. The increase in storage units suggests that customers do not buy digital goods.
2. Storage units are a growing business because people feel strongly attached to physical possessions despite digitalisation and minimalist trends.
3. The storage industry is growing because the younger generations don't want to keep as many things as the older ones.

3 Key words

a. Choose the key words or phrases that match the definitions. Check your answers and your understanding of how the words or phrases are used by using them to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition. Then read the complete article to see how the key words are used in context.

lease	occupancy	recession	housing squeeze
high-density	listed companies	supplanted	consumer confidence
decluttering	supply	packrats	liminal spaces

1. the act of getting rid of things you no longer need, popularised as a way to feel more organised, emotionally lighter _____
I need to do some _____ in my home library. I have so many books that I won't read again.
2. to rent something like a car or a home temporarily, instead of owning it

If you can't decide if you should buy this car, why don't you _____ one first to test it for a few months?

3. having a lot of people live in a small space, often leading to smaller homes or higher property prices _____

Hong Kong is a(n) _____ area, which is why they build high-rise buildings with lots of tiny flats.

4. the amount of space being used in a facility, like how full storage units _____

The hotel needs at least 80 per cent _____ at all times to be profitable.

5. businesses that are publicly traded on a stock exchange (e.g. Big Yellow, Safestore) _____

Some of the country's top _____ are expected to announce their earnings this month.

6. a situation where it's difficult to find affordable or enough housing, often due to overcrowding or high prices _____

London has been experiencing a(n) _____ for decades, meaning that young Londoners often can't afford a property.

7. a period when the economy is struggling, people are losing jobs and there is inflation _____

The _____ after the 2008 economic crisis caused a lot of people to lose jobs.

8. the total amount of something available, like the number of storage units _____

The _____ of cheap housing is not keeping up with the demand, so property prices are increasing.

9. replaced with something else _____

E-books haven't yet totally _____ the paper copies. Many people still love to smell paper and hold a book in their hands.

10. people who keep a lot of things and find it hard to throw things away _____

The war generation people were often _____ because the hard times they'd experienced made them save everything in case of need.

11. places that feel like in-between zones, not fully part of our lives _____

Airport terminals are such _____. You're technically in a city, but just waiting to move on.

12. how optimistic people feel about their financial situation and the economy, and how likely they are to spend money _____

The instability of global markets is caused by the lowered _____, so sales are down.

Despite the digitalisation of goods consumers cling to real things by renting storage units

DIGITAL GOODS WILL NEVER MATCH THE ATTACHMENT FELT FOR THINGS IN THE REAL WORLD

BY ELAINE MOORE

- 1 There is a comforting theory that millennials and Gen Z are swerving the traditional purchases of adulthood because they prefer to access everything online. Who wants framed paintings when Art Basel Miami Beach will let you buy into the digital art craze by minting your own non-fungible token? And who needs a car when you have an Uber account? I was once even teased by a younger colleague for keeping credit cards in a wallet — something they compared to dragging a fax machine around on a night out.
 - 2 Digital possessions and the sharing economy upended the old rules around ownership. Instead of buying things like cars, homes, clothes and desks outright, we can lease them from tech companies. Still, it's not true that this has supplanted the impulse to keep physical belongings. For proof, look at the explosion of storage units around the world.
 - 3 Roll up the metal shutters and you'll find countless lockers stuffed with old furniture, bike wheels and boxes of books — a collection of ghost houses filled with things but no people.
 - 4 This is the price we pay for cheap imported goods and high-density urban minimalism. The shift in behaviour is long-term. That's partly because the housing squeeze shows no signs of reversing, and partly because temporary solutions can easily become a habit. If you've ever rented a storage unit you'll know how addictive they become. These odd, liminal spaces allow you to tuck away the inconvenient parts of life on the outskirts of town and forget about it. Even when the bills roll in, it is tempting to keep delaying the hassle of collecting whatever was stored.
 - 5 The UK has more storage units than any other country in Europe. Perhaps we're a nation of packrats, but a Royal Institute of British Architects survey once found that we also fold ourselves into smaller homes than the rest of the continent. As houses shrink and more people live in shared, rented accommodation, self-storage units are multiplying.
- When I first rented one in 2018 there were 1,505 sites across the country. According to the Self Storage Association, that number has increased by almost 80 per cent to over 2,700, with 60mn square feet of shelf storage.
- 6 Growth — driven by both individuals and business — spiked in the pandemic. Occupancy at listed companies Big Yellow and Safestore has slowed since, but this is partly down to new supply (it's not that hard to build more metal boxes).
 - 7 Still, the fact that demand exceeds the level in a period as strange as the pandemic should be cause for concern. Storage unit use tends to rise during downturns, as living situations grow more precarious and businesses fold. As a recession indicator, it can be added to a growing 2025 list that also includes plummeting consumer confidence indices, diners financing cheap food delivery orders via Klarna and Gen Z's penchant for baggy silhouettes (a variation on the hemline index).
 - 8 That's the rational explanation. Moving items into storage as the result of temporary economic hardship, relocation or bereavement makes perfect sense. What makes less sense is the decision many of us take to keep paying monthly bills for years in order to hang on to things we don't really need.
 - 9 The American writer Cat Marnell, a habitual storage unit user, calls them traps for disorganised people. That may be true. But they are also a testament to the power of physical belongings and the pain of losing them. When the literary critic Sir Frank Kermode lost half his book collection in the course of a house move (he mistook rubbish collectors for removal men) it was reported as an incalculable loss. No Kindle collection would warrant the same lamentation.

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- 10 Paying to keep hold of stuff can be a way to delay the inevitable — such as selling a late parent's furniture, for example. There's a reason Marie Kondo was able to turn decluttering into an entire career. It's the same reason Michael Landy's artwork *Break Down*, in which he dismantled and destroyed everything he owned, from car to toothbrush, retains a grip on imaginations 25 years later.
- 11 Storage can also be a source of stability. Last year, the journalist Julie Pool wrote about her mother's lengthy storage unit habit during the years her family bounced between hotel rooms. For her mother, she wrote, the unit was "her most fixed address, an extension of home".
- 12 Digital repositories offer no such solace. Storage units are a promise to your future self that one day, life will be different. If the global economy falters further, expect their number to grow. A fixed address in a liminal space is better than no address at all.

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Elaine Moore April 13 2025.

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4 Understanding the article

a. Are these sentences True or False according to the information in the article? Tick (✓) the correct sentences and rewrite the false ones.

1. Shopping for digital goods has replaced shopping for physical things. _____
2. People rent storage units because they don't have enough spaces in their small flats. _____
3. People in the UK live in smaller properties than in other places in Europe. _____
4. The number of storage units has increased 80 per cent. _____
5. Big Yellow and Safestore have a growing competition. _____
6. Storage units are expensive, so they are less popular during an economic crisis. _____
7. Cat Marnell thinks people rent storage because they are disorganised. _____
8. Sir Frank Kermode threw away his books to declutter but then regretted it. _____
9. People use storage because it is emotionally difficult to let go of some things. _____
10. Experts expect the popularity of storage units to grow. _____

5 Business language – describing trends

a. Complete the table with the words and phrases in the box.

plummet
increase

spikes
low down

multiply
grow

Go up	Go down

b. Complete the sentences with one of the words or phrases from the table in task a. Change the word to the correct grammatical form where needed.

1. During the pandemic, the demand for office furniture _____ to nearly zero.
2. The numbers of storage units will _____ steadily if the economy continues to decline.
3. After a few years of rapid growth, the profits began to _____ due to the rising operational costs and lower sales.
4. The cost of raw materials doubled causing the prices of products to _____, and in the case of some products, even tripling.
5. The price of gold _____ momentarily after the announcement of the council but then lowered back to the previous levels
6. When governments _____ import taxes, the sales of foreign products go down because they're less affordable.

c. Write six sentences about your own work using the words and phrases above.

6 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

1. In your experience, how common is using storage spaces?
2. Why do people find it hard to let go of things?
3. Have you ever gotten rid of something and then regretted it?
4. How often do you declutter?

7 Wider business theme – unusual indices to track recession

- a. You are going to prepare a presentation on upcoming market trends using unusual economic indices. Read the paragraph and fill in the table based on the text.

Unusual economic indicators offer unconventional analysis of market trends. The **Lipstick Indicator** suggests that in times of recession, consumers buy more affordable luxuries like lipstick, while they avoid big purchases. The **Men's Underwear Index**, popularised by Alan Greenspan, claims that sales decline during economic downturns because men delay replacing essential items. The **Hemline Indicator** proposes that skirt lengths rise in prosperous times and fall during recessions, suggesting that consumer confidence is reflected in fashion trends. The **Garbage Index** tracks waste production—more garbage implies higher consumption, which means better economic times. Though not fully scientifically backed, these indices provide an interesting look into consumer behaviour.

Indicator	What it measures	Reasons
Lipstick Indicator	Consumer behaviour during economic downturns	People buy small luxuries instead of big, expensive items in difficult times
Men's Underwear Index	_____	_____ _____ _____
Hemline Indicator	_____	_____ _____ _____
Garbage Index	_____	_____ _____ _____

- b. Choose one of the indicators in the table or another one that you want. Research more about this indicator. Prepare a short presentation on this indicator, its uses, scientific basis (if any) and any other useful information.

- c. Present your findings to your group or to the class.

Useful language

Now, I will show you an unusual way to understand the economy ...

This idea may sound strange, but it shows how people change their spending.

It is not a perfect method, but it can give us useful information, for example ...

We usually see this trend when the economy is getting worse / better because ...

These examples help us see what is happening in daily life, not just in numbers, as you can see in ...

b. Read the paragraph. Then follow the instructions to prepare a presentation.

To be a good influencer, you have to prepare your presentations. Influencers don't simply stand in front of a camera and promote a product. They mention a company's product or products in the context of an interesting personal anecdote or while explaining how to do something. They talk about why they love the product so much, but it has to sound like a natural part of the anecdote or explanation.

- Choose a product that you really like. Write down a description of the product and the reasons you like it. Mention specific features and benefits of the product.
- Prepare a short anecdote that includes information about the product but is not entirely about the product itself, eg, when and where you wore an amazing piece of clothing or why a certain tool is useful when you are doing a specific activity.
- Make a list of the types of video scenes or photos you would use when you film your anecdote.

c. Tell your anecdote to your class as if you were doing it online. Answer their questions or respond to their criticisms about the product.

Useful language:

One of my favorite things to do / use is ...

Doing/Using (product) makes (activity) so much easier/more fun.

This means that you can/don't have to ...

As you can see, ... This picture shows ...

When I'm (activity), I love using / wearing (product) because ...