

## Architecture

### Self-storage warehouses are prisons for excess stuff

Stacked up in giant boxes are things in limbo between useful and rubbish



The Lockaway Self Storage building in Brooklyn, US © Scott Eells/Bloomberg  
Edwin Heathcote NOVEMBER 10, 2017

Anyone who has gone through a move, rented a smaller place or just has too much stuff will probably be familiar with one of the strangest and seemingly most successful of emerging architectural archetypes, the self-storage warehouse. These domestic warehouses have always existed in some form, often largely invisible on the industrial edges of cities or suburbs but in recent years huge, bright-coloured, blocky buildings have popped up in surprisingly central (and presumably expensive) city sites. They are curious because they are, in a way, an inversion of our homes. Where our homes face the world through their windows, the glimpses into these buildings reveal only locked doors. Particularly at night-time there is something unsettling about the views into these vast, empty blocks with their rows of brightly-coloured, faux cheerful yet actually oddly prison-like doors.

And, in a way, that's what they are: prisons for the excess stuff in our lives, awkward objects and boxes of things that have been banished from the home because they are too big, too unfashionable or too ugly, but too potentially useful (or with some assumed residual value) to be thrown away. They are a symptom simultaneously of an era in which we have too much but, at least if we live in cities, our homes are being squeezed by increasingly unaffordable rents and prices. Also, by

fashion. Once it might have been OK to accumulate stuff, domestic interiors gradually becoming private cabinets of curiosities packed with the souvenirs, finds, trophies, knick-knacks and general detritus of our lives. Our grandparents or parents' homes, for instance, became layered with subsequent waves of ill-matched things. Now it has become fashionable to declutter, to live like minimalists in a faux loft, only without the dimensions. These things then, occupying the sad limbo between useful and rubbish, stack up in self-storage.

## **The city-centre self-storage unit is a simulacra of the suburban garage for people who don't have the space for one**

The buildings appear as architectural mongrels, accumulations of bits of half-remembered archetypes. Their scale is industrial, a memory of the one-time warehouses that have been turned into those unaffordable lofts or tech-company offices. Their stripped-down interiors — exposed ductworks, polished concrete floors, industrial shutter doors and engineering-grade fittings are, in a way, very similar to the aesthetic of the contemporary art gallery, a

pure, functional modernism stripped to its bones.

Yet their architecture, the face they show to the world, is something else. Sometimes the buildings are entirely glazed, like office blocks illuminated all night. Sometimes they have touches of local colour, a little fake adobe, industrial estate or agri-barn cladding or a Victorian brick-type façade. Sometimes the architecture is the branding, the strange roadside lighthouses of Shurgard and Lighthouse in the US, the yellow bigness of Big Yellow. They are the sign and the signified. Theirs is an embryonic architecture, a typology which hasn't emerged because it is so difficult to express its function, which is blind to the outside. If anything it's a very counterintuitive idea, a stacked suburban garage. The domestic garage became the depository of the unwanted and the overspilt but it is itself a symptom or sprawl. We can only have garages if there is space — and in a dense city centre there isn't. The city-centre self-storage unit is a simulacra of the suburban garage for people who don't have the space for one. That's why it has those garage doors and that's why, perhaps, these don't feel like places for people but a kind of limbo with all the attributes of architecture except habitability.

The inside is something more mysterious. Even if these endless corridors, repetitive rows of garage doors, lack character, they manage to be, I'd suggest, some of the eeriest and most sinister spaces of the contemporary city. Like their mysterious and blocky digital counterparts, data centres, they are blind and inexpressive, buildings for things and not for people. The people parts are the corridors and, with their flickering, sickly fluorescent lighting, grey finishes and day-glo shutter doors there's something sepulchral about their blank repetition. Behind these doors lie the lives we might have had, stacks of boxes and memories, squished up sofas and the detritus of abandoned

hobbies and technologies, the things we say to ourselves we might need again but, in reality, just can't bear to throw out. This is the columbarium of consumerism, the tomb of too much stuff.

At the root of the whole weird phenomenon is, perhaps, the name itself. Self-storage. It is a very curious phrase indeed. As if the intention is to store your self. And perhaps that is what makes them so strange. We accumulate things, whether clothes, books, records, furniture, collections or kitchen utensils, which are each a little landmark in our lives, a reminder of a moment, a temporary obsession or a time when we might have been happy. As people increasingly desire a return to the city centre they sacrifice the suburban luxury of garages, cellars, sheds and lofts and the things that tell those stories, that provoke those memories are sequestered in self-storage. In those dark compartments, the forgotten props of our memories languish, imprisoned like a parallel memory. The stories of ourselves in storage.

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