

Metamorphoses, or how self-storage turned from homes into hotels

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Approaching Christmas 2014, US columnist Patrick Clark complained in an article entitled ‘Hoarder nation: America’s self-storage industry is blooming’:

It’s the time of the year when American households are filling up with stuff. Your living room is piled up with boxes from Black Friday haul, or your porch is creaking with the weight of UPS deliveries. While retail analysts are obsessively tracking buyer behavior to gauge the impact of Cyber Monday on store earnings, one industry that will surely benefit from the binge – eventually – is the storage business.

Clark’s argument was that the growth of self-storage facilities attests to the fact that the accumulation of things is outpacing our capacity to keep them in our homes. He continued: ‘Put that way, the storage business is a darker reflection of the retail economy. Shopping and exchanging holiday gifts are, ostensibly, joyous, but those objects are often deposited in storage units in sadder times’ (Clark, 2014).

As we have repeatedly argued in the Managing Overflow project, too much stuff at home has been a moral center of debate since at least the late 1950s and early 1960s (Löfgren, 2012). Planning has been essential, and techniques for handling the growing influx of things developed both as a result of adjustments to everyday practices and professional help and guidelines and in consequence of an increasing assortment of furniture and accessories intended for storing things at home. As argued in Franck Cochoy’s (2012) chapter in the first volume based on this project (*Managing overflow in affluent societies*), managing is about channeling flows, not about producing overflows. But when overflow eventually occurs, a new managerial task begins: overflow channeling and/or reduction (Cochoy, 2012: 52). The same goes for overflow handling in the home (Brembeck,

2014). As Löfgren (2012) noted, the most drastic transformation is relocation and recontextualization outside the home: to the flea market, thrift store, or waste-disposal station (see also Åkesson, 2012). The market for sell-and-buy has recently been growing, as has the number of give-away sites for used items (Brembeck, 2014). Sometimes things end up being stored in holiday homes (Löfgren, 2012) or even workplaces (Ekström, 2013). It is in this landscape of storage, disposal, and waste that self-storage facilities have emerged.

Self-storage, which began to appear in the mid-1990s, is now spreading all over the Western world. Basically, they are buildings with storage units of various sizes that one can rent for a shorter or longer period as a repository for one's belongings. The Self-Storage Association defines self-storage units more precisely as facilities offering rental on a month-to-month basis in which the tenant applies the lock and has sole access to the unit (Sonne, 2013). Shurgard is the leading company in the European market; its US collaborator, Public Storage, is the world's largest owner-operator of self-storage facilities, with over one million customers and more than 2,200 facilities.

Self-storage facilities are often related to an abundance of stuff. In this chapter, I argue that they can be conceptualized in relation to the creation of currents and pools required in the process of managing overflow.

Origins of out-of-home storage

Although self-storage is a relatively recent phenomenon, the storing of personal possessions outside the home began much earlier. According to stories circulating on the webpages of self-storage companies, personal storage has existed from the earliest of times; 6,000 years ago the people of Xian, in present-day China, are reported to have stored personal belongings in clay pots in public underground storage units.

The next chapter in the history of storage seems to have been written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, during the build-up of the British Empire, when British banking institutions were asked to safeguard valuables for clients on extended journeys. The banks turned to the moving (drayage) companies for storage, and the movers produced storage space in primitive lofts (Darden, 2001). Later, banks assumed responsibility for their own storage in strong-rooms built in the basements of banks with vaulted ceilings – hence the word ‘vault’.

But bank officials gladly relate a grand history of generic safekeeping dating back many thousands of years to ancient Egypt, where powerful individuals were entrusted with valuables in return for a fee. The first traces of a lockable device that resembled a key were reportedly discovered in the tomb of Pharaoh Ramses II, who reigned in the thirteenth century BCE.

In more recent times, banks kept customers' valuables in open vaults, typically in a trunk or case containing the family's silver and jewelry. The safety-deposit box was introduced in the 1850s, and the first independent safety-deposit company, the Safety Deposit Company of New York, was established in 1865. Modern bank vaults typically contain columns of safety-deposit boxes alongside other valuable assets belonging to banks or their customers (like Metropolitan Safe Deposit in the UK).

Although the typical bank's safety-deposit box contained only such valuables as gold, silver, and jewelry, the original moving and storage pioneers, the US firm Bekins, devised the first warehouse in the 1850s specifically constructed for household goods and treasured personal items. A first step toward modern self-storage was the introduction of the long-term storage of cars, introduced in the early 1900s: interconnected metal garages for 'cars without homes' (Darden, 2001). The operator or landlord usually had responsibility for the stored items, and customers could not come and go as they pleased using their own keys. The switch to self-storage as we know it today, in which customers have free access to their personal storage, began in the mid-1960s, when Russ Williams and Bob Munn built the first self-storage facility in Texas, one of a chain with the somewhat awkward but pedagogically correct name, A-1 U-Store-It U-Lock-It U-Carry-the-Key.

Modern storage facilities grew slowly through the 1990s, at which time demand outpaced supply and caused a rush of new self-storage developments in the USA. Over 3,000 new facilities were built every year between 2000 and 2005. By 2013, there were 55,000 establishments in the USA, and even though the average citizen's living space was growing, every tenth US citizen was renting a storage unit (Mattsson, 2013).

Self-storage did not arrive on the European continent until the early 1980s, when the first units appeared in the United Kingdom, initially in the London area. By 2014 there were more than 1,000 facilities across the country, representing approximately 3.5 million square meters of rentable space. By 2017 there were 15,000 facilities in Europe, and the Federation of European Self-Storage Associations (FEDESSA) was publishing annual industry surveys and organizing

conferences. The UK still has 45% of all European storage facilities, followed by France (13%) and the Netherlands (11%); Sweden holds only 5% of all European storage space. If one accounts for population, however, a different situation emerges. The British have the largest area of self-storage space per capita at 0.50 square meters, followed by the Dutch at 0.47 square meters, who are in their turn closely followed by the Swedes at 0.40 square meters per capita. But every European country is far behind the USA, where storage space per resident averages 0.70 square meters (FEDESSA 2014).

Overconsumption and the virtue of orderliness

The phenomenon of self-storage has been introduced in several ongoing discussions in science and the popular media. The media generally interpret it as a result of overconsumption and overflow in people's homes, as illustrated in Patrick Clark's lament quoted at the introduction of this chapter. Scientific accounts, too, generally position self-storage as an expression of overconsumption. Design and material-culture scholar Neil Maycroft argued that '[t]he rapid growth of the domestic storage industry over the last decade can be seen as evidence of the growing volume of goods that have to somehow be dealt with, sorted or assigned to the various practices of disposition on offer' (Maycroft, 2009: 356). According to Clive Hamilton (2010: 573), self-storage can be regarded both as the epitome of consumerism ('first they make us buy things, then they invent self-storage to keep our stuff and make us buy more') and its opposite – sustainability ('it's good that people do not throw things away, but save them to be repaired').

This reference to overflow in the home as a reason why people require personal self-storage units can occasionally be found on the webpages of the self-storage companies as well. This excerpt from the webpage of Public Storage eventually argues for the need of a personal storage:

You're in the middle of making dinner and you reach for a good chopping knife. You know it's in the drawer somewhere. Probably buried under the pile of plastic forks from dozens of takeout meals, the As Seen on TV Pogo Whisk, and the 10 spatulas you've acquired over the years. Your frustration mounts, but you can relax because we have expert tips to help you organize your kitchen.

This excerpt from the post 'Three steps to organize your kitchen like a pro' is indicative of another bulk of discourses in relation to storing: to see storing generally (self-storage is seldom mentioned

in this context) as the flipside of clutter. Clutter and storage have become central in consumer life and have paved the way for new services and storage systems – a fast-growing market ready to provide solutions. Television programs, magazines, and handbooks specializing in the problems of home storage teach people how best to organize, categorize, sort, and discard their belongings (Belk et al., 2007; Roster, 2015; Löfgren, 2017).

The horrors of hoarding

The concept of hoarding and connecting hoarding and cluttering seems to be particularly prominent in the USA, where discussions about ‘hoarding disorder’ have been intense. In his book *The hoarders*, Scott Herring (2014) claimed that hoarding came to be classified as a deviation in the USA, basing his claim on three famous cases: the Collyer brothers, found dead, buried in the collapsed mountains of newspapers and other junk in their New York apartment in the 1930s; Andy Warhol, who was after his death revealed to have been a manic collector of everything and anything; and the former New York celebrities and relatives of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Big and Little Edie – mother and daughter – leading an exotic life in their run-down New Hampshire villa, Grey Gardens, which was filled with rubbish. The analysis, which borrows concepts from Mary Douglas, Stanley Cohen, and Michel Foucault, connects hoarding with modernity and presents it as the antithesis of order. In this way, hoarders become one of the ‘folk devils’ of our time, deterrent examples of what is wrong and abnormal – warning examples of how not to be, reminding us that society needs to maintain order.

As Orvar Löfgren showed in several of his works (see, e.g., Frykman and Löfgren, 1987, and Löfgren in this volume), horror of mess and obsession with order have been running through the twentieth century to the present day in Sweden as well. Links have been made between messy homes and messy lives, persons, and minds. The battle against messiness has been conducted on many frontiers and has become part of the moral economy of the ideal home – often linked to new ideas of scientific management of the household in the first decades of the twentieth century (Scott, 2014; Löfgren, 2017). Another research current with some bearing on this text is consumer studies, especially the investigation of certain spaces as liminal: the garage for men (Hirschman et al., 2012) and children’s rooms left intact for empty nesters (Curasi et al., 2001). Problems of unrestrained consumer habits, uncontrolled clutter, and

shrinking space can be seen as the cultural and historical backdrop to the present-day situation.

Flows, channels, and resting-places

This chapter explores a different strand of research – one that recognizes the home not simply as a place but also as a set of spaces, channels, and flows into which objects find their way, sometimes going through and out of the home (see, for example, Cwerner and Metcalfe, 2003). In the *Managing Overflow* project, we have repeatedly shown that a basic skill in today's Western consumer societies is the ability to manage the inflow and outflow of things at home (Czarniawska and Löfgren, 2012; 2013). It is necessary to select, sort, and control the inflow in order to have enough storage space at home and a controlled divestment strategy (Brembeck, 2014). We are following researchers like Nicky Gregson, who suggested that it would be good to regard disposal in terms of 'moving things along' (Gregson et al., 2007), and thus extend the lives of these things rather than terminating them; and Cwerner and Metcalfe (2003), who said that the home can be understood as a system of channels and flows. From this perspective, storage can be seen as providing the means of organizing space and controlling clutter, thus creating proper flows through homes and lives. This is also in accordance with Cochoy's remark that management is basically about (producing and) channeling flows (2012: 52). Cwerner and Metcalfe suggested that the house also comprises flows of people, and that their movements through the house may, but ought not to be, impeded by the accumulation of stuff, working as 'blood clots stopping the flow of vitality in the body' (2003: 233).

Although Cwerner and Metcalfe never left the home in their analysis, as they were interested in such places as corners, spaces under tables, spare bedrooms, attics, and basements, they did put forward a significant argument: if homes are channels and flows, they require moments of rest and storage. This argument can be extended to self-storage as well.

One of the rare examples of a self-storage study is Neil Maycroft's 'Not moving things along' (2009), in which he analyzed storage spaces in and outside the home. Even though his perspective was somewhat different from that of Cwerner and Metcalfe, he, too, saw storage units as resting-places for stuff with uncertain trajectories waiting to be destroyed, reused, or moved. It seems, therefore, that flows and circulation require 'pools' – spaces of stillness, rest, and reflection

for objects and people. This is certainly the way the store managers I have been interviewing wanted the storage units to be understood: as a way of managing the flow of stuff in consumer society.

Methods and material

The relevance of studying self-storage in relation to currents and pools emerged during data collection in Gothenburg, Sweden, during the fall of 2015 and the spring of 2016. The study consisted of interviews with store managers, staff, and the CEO of Self-Storage Sweden, along with an analysis of webpages and marketing campaigns, and annual reports and newsletters from Self-Storage Sweden and other European and US organizations. Most important, the basis of this chapter consists of fieldwork at Humlan – a local self-storage facility in Gothenburg.¹

I visited Humlan, spent time with staff now and then for a few weeks, learned all I could about the business, and interviewed the manager, the founder, and the present owner. I also studied their webpage, information leaflets, and everything I could find about Humlan on the Internet. This material has been subjected to comparisons in the search for cross-cutting themes. Particularly, my interest was drawn to the way self-storage facilities were positioned as normal and natural ways for people to handle their stuff. Strategies such as ‘cozyfying’ and ‘safe-making’ were recognized. The story of the introduction of Humlan to Sweden has proved especially valuable for this purpose. It illustrates these processes of normalization, which I describe in what follows. I wrap up the chapter by returning to the argument that self-storage can and should be studied in relation to flows, currents, and pools.

Normalizing self-storage

Normalizing self-storage means building infrastructures, finding land, constructing buildings, and recruiting staff. But this is not

1 A few months after I had completed my fieldwork, Humlan was acquired by a larger self-storage company, 24Storages. 24Storages’ concept is based on smaller-than-average facilities, greater automation, and locations closer to the customer’s home. It was a good fit with that concept. Carl, Humlan’s founder, told me that he sold the family business not because it was not doing well, but because no one in the next generation wanted to take charge of the company (personal communication).

enough. Owners need to make the whole notion of storage known to people, to make the routines of storage fit people's everyday practices, and they need to create meaning – stories that fit their ideas and images of storage and the way it is performed. Therefore, they must act at the intersection between business and culture. Storage needs to become the accepted node or assemblage of materiality, meanings, and practices in overflow management.

Making self-storage and storing a normal and accepted part of everyday life does not happen by itself. Normalization takes a great deal of work, especially if something new is being introduced. Here Humlan is a particularly interesting case, as it was founded in 1988 – nearly 30 years ago – as the first self-storage company in Sweden.

A first challenge for the founder, Carl, was translating the concept of self-storage and the architecture of the buildings to a Swedish context. In 1988, spending money on renting storage space in a building far from home was alien to Swedes. Stuff was traditionally stored at home – in closets, attics, and basements. In the countryside there were additional options: sheds, outbuildings, and barns.

To make the concept of distant storage appealing to a Swedish audience, the founder wanted to associate it with the home, making the storage unit resemble ordinary storage in the cellar or attic. The very name was a problem. In Britain, where the first European self-storage facilities were launched, they were called 'warehouses', but this word was associated with something big – something that only business companies would use. Humlan used the term 'mini warehouse' (*minilager*), but the subsequent designation of 'storage' (*förråd*) was more suitable. It seemed to denote something smaller and less businesslike, although the English term 'self-storage' did not translate well into Swedish. Now, the preferred denomination in the self-storage business is *hyrförråd* ('rental storage').

Carl also believed that the buildings needed to be of good quality and appear sturdy and home-like, which he did not think was always the case in the USA, where he had gone to study the concept. Thus, the outer walls of Humlan's buildings were wooden, resembling the solid barns of the Swedish countryside. One of their facilities has even received an architectural prize. The name Humlan (meaning 'the Bumblebee') was derived from the name of the site of the first storage facility, but of course the association with the diligent bumblebee collecting nectar was perfect for a homey association. The buildings were painted black and yellow, the colors of the bumblebee, and decorated with bumblebee images, the logo of Humlan. The private storage units inside were supposed to look

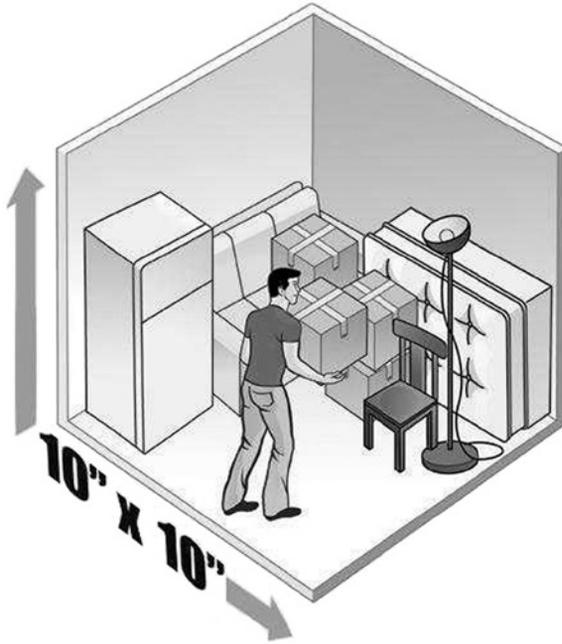


Figure 2.1 Teaching customers storing techniques

similar to ordinary storage in the attic or basement of apartment buildings. Carl thought that the US storage units were small and that Swedes needed more space. There should also be a slower tempo and a more personal atmosphere, with helpful staff that were not exclusively preoccupied with the idea of ‘selling, selling, selling like in the USA’, Carl told me. The first storage facilities provided sofas and coffee machines (coffee being the typical Swedish drink) for *fika*: a break and a chat.

Customers were still uncertain of what this new thing was all about, and they often wanted to examine the premises before deciding to rent. They also needed a great deal of help and instructions on how to use their storage unit and what to keep in it. (‘Things you do not need at the moment, seasonal objects, and valuable possessions’, the ads read.) They had to learn rules and regulations: only dry objects and no flammable or hazardous goods were allowed in the storage units; rugs and textiles had to be laminated and tightly sealed to protect them from insects. Customers learned about opening hours, hygiene, alarms, the loading and unloading of goods, and

the workings of the lock codes. They were also given a great deal of practical help and tools – boxes, tapes, wrapping paper, bubble wrap, and padlocks. They were provided with handcars and wagons to ease transportation and were taught how to calculate the number of boxes that would fit in storage units of various sizes and how many boxes were needed for the contents of a regular flat. The impression, staff members told me, was that people generally needed smaller spaces, but for longer periods than they had thought necessary, and the personnel tried to educate their customers. Service was important. Good relationships were developed with returning customers. The receptionist at Humlan placed gifts she had received from grateful clients on the windowsill of her workspace.

Making storage harmless, cozy, and safe

This was not all that needed to be done. Although the concept of ‘hoarding disorder’ was not mentioned in the interviews, all interviewees were aware of media representations of out-of-home storage as somber, uncomfortable places. Urban folklore, films, and crime novels often situate shady activities in attics or basements with long, winding corridors – spaces that are dark, dirty, unsafe, and mysterious. The iconic place is a turn-of-the-twentieth-century Victorian apartment block, with a creaky elevator going several floors up to spooky attics or down to spooky basements. It is not difficult to imagine the uneasy feeling when lights go off and one finds oneself in complete darkness, with only rats and rustling old newspapers as companions. Cellars and attics are often presented as places out of control. It is not too far-fetched to assume that this cultural backdrop was behind the strategies that store managers and staff invented to attract customers. For them it was vital to create the feeling that everything was under control, to erase the scary images that rendered storage facilities the antithesis of order and safety. Three strategies in particular were visible in the field material: making them harmless, cozy, and safe.

Making them harmless: the storage facility needed to be clean, bright, and orderly. Humlan’s interior is painted white and spotlessly clean, with no rubbish in sight. Bright lamps, burning 24 hours a day every day, spread a clear light over the facility. The corridors are neither long nor winding; the premises consist of several small compartments joined together, making every compartment easy to access, and the customer is always close to the main corridor and entrance. The storage units are dry and warm, with eco-friendly

geothermal heating, and the customer is required to clean the storage unit properly before vacating it.

Cozyfying: there are also measures that make the storage facility a nicer, maybe even homier place. The walls of Humlan are decorated here and there with brightly colored pictures – mostly framed ads for the company. There are flowers and furniture for seating in the reception area, soft music often plays in the corridors, and the staff are supposed to be service-minded and helpful – but, as we shall see, only to a certain degree.

Safe-making is essential. The premises are equipped with a burglar alarm, fire alarms, and video surveillance; tamper-proof steel gates at the entrance require personal key cards; security guards patrol after dark; and the personal storage units are protected from view. Clients can buy additional insurance against fire, water, and theft. The fact that the staff are advertised as ‘strongly involved in the daily operations’ is supposed to enhance the clients’ feelings of safety.

Interviewees mentioned other images of storage facilities: magical places filled with treasures or gateways to magical worlds, like the wardrobe in the Narnia books, opening up new worlds. Several people mentioned TV series like the American *Storage Wars* and *Storage Hunters*, in which the participants compete or bet on the contents of storage units of tenants who disappeared with unpaid bills. The CEO of the Swedish Self-Storage Association told me that he had been approached several times by TV producers who wanted to create Swedish equivalents, but he refused. For one thing, this phenomenon does not exist in Sweden, simply because storage rents are higher here and customers are generally better off, according to Carl. This duality of the mysterious and the precious is also a reminder that overflows, such as the one that can be found in a self-storage facility, can be seen as generating nervousness and uncertainty on the one hand and opportunities and richness on the other (Czarniawska and Löfgren, 2012; 2013).

These strategies of translation were essential for the normalization of self-storage, making them obvious instances of people managing their stuff in a way they could feel good about. As an ad for Humlan promises: ‘Leave your stuff safely stored. Just like at home.’

Home or hotel

Advertising self-storage as ‘just like at home’, as Humlan does, may have been essential at the introduction of self-storage; but ‘home-like’ soon became problematic. Some clients started to use the facilities

as social meeting spaces. Craftspeople who stored their tools there started to spend time and have coffee together; elderly ladies socialized with the staff and never wanted to leave. The staff sometimes acted as therapists for newly divorced or widowed clients (part of the special skills the company emphasized). Clients more or less moved into their private storage units, or used them as garages or workshops, bringing tools, repairing old cars and other used stuff. This was not the purpose of the units, the managers told me. Swedes had not perceived them correctly. The facilities were not supposed to be social meeting-places. They should be kept simple and practical; their function is supposed to focus on self-service, where people come and go. People are not supposed to stay there and make themselves comfortable. Self-storage facilities were never supposed to be homes – not for stuff and certainly not for people. Something had gone wrong in the translation. The companies had to learn how to teach their clients what self-storage was about if they wanted a better balance between the desires and habits of their customers and their own interests.

So Humlan began to launch itself into a new image. Coffee machines were removed, which decreased chitchat among customers, and electric outlets were taken out of the private storage units, making it impossible to use them as workshops. Later the overhead light fixtures had to be removed, because people found imaginative ways to connect their electric equipment to the sockets. Private storages were sufficiently illuminated by light in the corridors, staff members argued. But something needed to be done on a conceptual level as well. The managers I spoke to told me that they currently use the ‘hotel’ as the key metaphor. Hotels are modern, clean, efficient, and inviting, but not necessarily personal. The concept of the hotel is also a way to teach clients that self-storage facilities are not places to stay; they are meant to enhance mobility, speed, and circulation, to permit people to take care of things that flow from one place to another.

The translation of self-storage facilities from ‘homes’ to ‘hotels for stuff’ also facilitated an imagined and desirable future of the business on the part of the owners: digitalizing self-storage facilities, reducing staff and costs by running them from a distance with the help of call centers, video surveillance, and digital codes that could be downloaded from the Internet. At least a younger generation of Swedes should be comfortable with this kind of digital self-service, they claimed, the same way that younger people had learned to use e-commerce, carpools, and food-box schemes over the Internet. To

maintain the everyday, local character of storage, it was necessary to have smaller facilities, close to where people lived, instead of huge barns outside the cities. On the other hand, transport to and from the storage facility could be arranged using the computer. Recently storage companies have started taking care of this bit as well, delivering portable storage units, ‘smartboxes’, directly to the consumer’s doorstep. The whole process of self-storing can be run from the computer, just like other ways of handling overflow, such as buying and selling stuff on eBay.

Understanding self-storage: currents and pools

It is obvious that the concepts of flow and channeling are critical elements in the daily operations of self-storage; managers must keep stuff and people in motion, especially if they are to prevent the perception of certain spaces as liminal – men’s garages (Hirschman et al., 2012) or ‘blood clots’ (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003: 233) in the storage system. As I have shown in this chapter, several measures were taken to keep circulation going – from the simple measures of removing coffee machines, electric sockets, and light fixtures to the more extreme measures of auctioning off abandoned storage units on US television. By definition, a large majority of the clients are older people ‘flowing’ from houses to flats, and the rest are people of all ages moving together and apart. There is also an obvious mobility between generations – the stuff inherited from the grandparent generation flows into the homes of children and grandchildren, and the stuff belonging to teenagers who have left home needs to be moved elsewhere. And the residuals of wardrobe clearances – those clothes too precious to be thrown away – must be channeled somewhere else to make room for new stuff. In the channeling process, self-storage facilities have emerged as powerful new actors. And styling consultants use storage facilities as a temporary place for furniture to be located while an apartment is being redecorated to match a more fashionable aesthetic and be sold. There is also a more tragic and less glamorous use of storage: those rented by the social services for victims of evictions. There is good evidence for viewing self-storage as an extension of the system of channels and flows that makes up a home.

There is also plenty of evidence that self-storage facilities enable the mobility not only of stuff, but also of people – the changing representation of self-storage from home to hotel testifies to this as well. The CEOs provided insights into this change and the altered

representation of the consumer from a person who needs space for excess stuff – such as the customer who just inherited granny’s old sofa, has no space for it, but does not want to discard it – to a mobile person with an ever-changing lifestyle, moving between cities, countries, jobs, houses, and relationships. The ideal customer is similar to a middle-class businessperson or a globetrotter traveling around the world with lots of money to spend. For the CEOs, self-storage is not about such a trivial thing as storing goods, but about enhancing mobility and a modern lifestyle: an imaginary concept placing customers far from the image of the hoarder, the addictive consumer, and the muddy terrains of drug use, criminality, and prostitution as depicted in media representations.

Just as important are rest and stillness. Self-storage is not there merely to enhance flows, but also to provide temporary resting-places where objects can be kept well protected, safe, and in good repair. As Parsons and Maclaran (2009) have argued, the relationship between the moving of things in relation to space is clearly under-researched, and few studies of cupboards, attics, and basements have been undertaken. One of the few is Maycroft’s (2009) study of hoarding, but he pitted hoarding against ‘acceptable practices of re-situating objects in space’ (2009: 360), of which ‘commercial storage facilities’ is one. In fact, he defined self-storage as the most remote places in an outward movement from the home, which can explain the necessity of integrating them in the home sphere, in order to normalize them. Maycroft’s view of self-storage as temporary resting-places for stuff with uncertain futures is a good starting-point. Prospective tenants find themselves in an uncomfortable position: They do not really know how to handle certain stuff, but what will the next step be? For the newly divorced and the globetrotter, storage units are resting-places for things belonging to people with uncertain futures.

From the actor–network perspective informing the project (Latour, 1988), one learns that even the humblest new actant in a network changes the network as a whole. What role does this give self-storage in the process of managing overflow? The space of a personal self-storage – a space that is safe, warm, tidy, bright, and expensive – is obviously something different from one of Maycroft’s examples: the space behind sheds at the backs of gardens, where objects inevitably undergo transformations due to weather, climate, and natural processes of decay. First, self-storage invites or symbolizes a new sorting practice, which resonates with Cwerner and Metcalfe’s (2003) insistence that self-storage is fundamentally about training

minds and bodies through the adoption of good organizational routines: disciplining bodies as well as learning new routines and ways of handling stuff, to which the staff at Humlan testify. Second, self-storage creates a new category of stuff in the sorting process: those things that are too bulky to keep at home, too valuable in economic or sentimental terms to sell, to give away, or to throw away, yet need a well-protected, safe, and spotlessly clean temporary storage-place – things deserving of the economic sacrifice involved in renting storage space. It is a way of honoring stuff in a consumer society by paying for its resting-place and giving it the chance of a second life – maybe even be upgraded to parading in the living-room again. Third, self-storage says something about the possibility of buying oneself time to make the final decision and enabling the chain of inevitable circulation to proceed at a slower pace, the comfort of not hurrying, not having to decide, of waiting – or, for the mobile consumer, freedom from the burden of stuff without having to dispose of it.

Self-storage can also be understood as erasing the border between what Erving Goffman (1959) called front stage (the tidy front regions of the home) and back stage (the messier back regions). Via self-storage, the dismal back regions of storage are drawn into discourses of cleanliness and tidiness, and rendered presentable for outsiders. The spaces for unsorted soiled rubble in the household are diminishing, as stuff-managing becomes transparent and open to public inspection. No one but the tenant has access to the actual storage unit, but the companies do their best to teach clients how to organize them in a proper and rational way by drawing a plan of the storage unit and teaching customers the best arrangement for their stuff, keeping everything in boxes with those things that are often needed close to the door, and piling boxes up to the ceiling at the back of the storage to make good use of the space (see Figure 2.1).

Slowing down the circulation of stuff allows people time to sort out relationships with important things in their lives (and allows things time to sort out relationships with their owners), in the same way people sometimes need to sort out their personal relationships in conversation with a counselor. The way Humlan's staff took pride in their roles as therapists reveals people's close relationships to their stuff and the sadness of parting and ending relationships. This new actant in the overflow-managing network may also be regarded in terms of a possible new relationship to individual possessions which entails loosening the ties between individuals and

their possessions, maybe even paving the way for new practices in relation to stuff: renting, sharing, lending, and co-owning.

In summary, self-storage can be understood as an attempt to have one's temporarily superfluous stuff in a safe resting-place while utilizing the opportunity to wait, think, and reflect, or to travel around the world without having to carry the burden of one's possessions.

Field material

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