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The death of quality

Is everything really as 'robust' as commentators keep telling us it is?

I don't think so.

I go shopping for a mobile phone. Bits have already fallen off some of the display models. I go to look at a new 2 bedroom house to rent. It is claustrophobically small and the construction is flimsy. I go to buy something to wear, but can't find plain simple black 100% cotton or linen trousers.

What became of quality - meaning style, durability and comfort?

Remember when a suit meant a fitted suit? No, me neither.

Remember when guitar amps had valves?

Today neither fitted suits nor valve amplifiers are the standard. Today fitted suits are for celebrities. Valve amps are sold at a premium and branded 'vintage' or 'classic'.

Today's ergonomic must-have products lack durability. Once the rechargeable battery goes, I wonder how many of us will crack open our mp3 player to replace it?

Too many consumer goods are the same. They are all destined for a car boot sale or landfill within a few years of purchase. Fashion clothing is worse. You've barely got an item off the hanger before the synthetic mix makes you break out in a sweat.

Recently I've been thinking about built-in obsolescence. Nobody wants a car with a scratch down the side of it, right? So, why are mobile phones sold with plastic displays which scratch whilst in your pocket? Early models had non-scratch glass. Early models even survived being dropped... repeatedly.

Why is it we so readily accept lack of durability. Why is it that we are so easily lured by the novelty of the new and not so good? What is going on here?

Here's a hypothesis. Quality has become really expensive. Even in the UK, the fifth richest nation in the world, quality is slipping out of reach. It is becoming aspirational, rather than a given.

Is it possible that quality is becoming more exclusive? This, despite a period of much lauded gains in national productivity which ought, surely, to have made quality more pervasive?



Think about this. Productivity is going up, but a lot of us can't afford quality. Producing more just seems to get us to a place where "more is less".

100 years ago 'organic' food was the norm. Today food not produced intensively carries a price premium.

50 years ago, most couples had some hope of moving into a house (either bought, or rented to them by their local council). Since then, families in the UK and USA have been forced to lower their expectations. In the last 40 years the number of US citizens living in mobile homes has risen from 1% to 6%. In the UK we have built more flats in the last three years than there are people who can afford to buy them. The footprint of new homes is shrinking, but mortgages eat up about three times as much disposable income as they did in 1963.*

Let's try another tack. Perhaps the loss of durability is all down to global price competition.

Suppose the first examples of a new product type is over-engineered. Then comes the subsequent flood of imitations which cut as many corners as possible in order to reduce costs. They won't compete on originality, so they compete on price. This means cheaper components, less rigorous quality control - in short, products which don't last as well but cost less.

The problem with this line of reasoning is that it assumes that wealthy folk (meaning most of us in the UK) are helpless suckers - always given to making false economies, always inclined to buy lots of not very good things rather than a smaller number of durable things.

I beg to differ. I think all of us have an eye for quality. It is only lack of disposable income that makes us gravitate towards second best.

In fact, research does suggest that the life span of consumer products has been falling for years.* Vacuum cleaners now last, on average, less than four years. That old push lawn mower in grandad's shed will probably outlast this year's plastic hover mower.

Naturally there is a business imperative behind this. More repeat purchases keep the order book full. But replacing products means additional energy consumption, more transportation miles and increased carbon dioxide emissions.

So, despite all the positive noises about tackling climate change, sustainability continues to fall further and further away from the systematic reality of Western consumption patterns.

Low cost has become the key driver.

Quality is dying, not because we can't tell the difference, but because fewer of us can truly afford it.

Ends | 11 Apr 2007 | The Leg

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Essential Reading:

The Waste Makers by Vance Packard
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