

Organization Experts Weigh In On Self Storage, Clutter

By Michael DeGroot

There is enough space in America's 46,500 self storage facilities to fit every man, woman and child. Everybody would have 7.7 square feet to call their own—more than many Occupy Wall Street campers. To accomplish this feat, however, would require moving a lot of stuff out of the way.

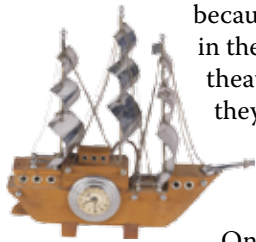
And stuff is what it is all about. Stuff with a cost.

In a recovering economy people look for ways to save money—all the while holding onto stuff they own. But that stuff they own has hidden costs. Costs they don't consider or costs they think are necessary.

Just don't call it clutter.

"Is it clutter just because it is more than can fit in a house?" asks Tim Dietz, senior vice president of communications and government relations for the Self Storage Association.

"I would not say it should be considered clutter just because somebody runs out of space for storage in their home. People turn basements into home theaters or turn garages into family rooms and they need space for storage."



Lost

On a cool November morning, Matt Wolfe walks through the maze of wooden storage units at Downtown Self Storage in Salt Lake City. Light filters into the corridors from old warehouse windows. Wolfe's self-described position at the business is "owner's son." He stops and opens his own rent-free unit. "I'm not a clutterer," he explains. The unit features winter coats, an old microwave, some ski equipment, a few blue Rubbermaid bins and a fake skull on a stick suitable for use at the Burning Man festival. "People don't really keep valuable things in self storage," Wolfe says. "They will keep valuables close at home or in a bank."

Then Wolfe finds a hint of one of the hidden costs of clutter. Behind a piece of plywood leaning up against the unit's wall is a card table. "I've been looking for this," he says as he grabs it, "and I didn't think to look in my own storage unit."

Sarah Stitham, a certified professional organizer in Ulster County, New York, said that one of the hidden costs of clutter is how it hides things. People don't know they already have something because they can't find it and so they go out and buy another one. Stitham sees this happen often when she works with people to organize their homes. "So many of my clients will say, 'Oh! That's where that went,'" Stitham says.

The item-lost-in-other-stuff cost isn't, like clutter, limited to any socio-economic level. "Even if someone doesn't have a lot of money, they can always buy more clutter," Stitham says. "They just shop differently at different stores."



Imagine There's No Clutter

When clutter expert Mike Nelson stood outside his burning apartment in 2005 in Austin, Texas—wearing only a bathrobe and standing next to his dog Fluffy—he had a profound and surprising sense of relief. He was free from the bondage and cost of stuff.

At least temporarily.

"Clutterers are driven by fear. They are afraid of throwing anything away because they fear they will make a mistake," Nelson said. "They think losing something would be the end of the world. But it is not."

Now, years later, Nelson, who lives in McAllen, Texas and is the author of *Stop Clutter From Stealing Your Life*, can easily rattle off several ways stuff costs more than just its purchase price.

"I knew a guy that the only way he would ever really clean out his car was when he would sell it," Nelson says with a laugh. "He would just bring it full of all his junk and tell them to just take it all. And of course they would offer

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Reasons For Renting a Self Storage Unit

Storing items you don't have room for at home	50%
Temporary storage while changing residence	49%
Storing items you no longer want or need	15%
Storing items for relatives because their living situation has changed	14%
Temporary storage while remodeling	10%
Storing college student's things	9%
	10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

SOURCE: SSA *Self Storage Demand Study 2007*

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him a lot less money.” A similar thing also happens when people move—losing them the security deposit.

There are costs from trying to get rid of pests that breed in boxes and around the piles and stashes of clutter.

There are costs to the planet from consumption and disposal.

Nelson says to take your home’s total square footage and subtract the square footage taken up by clutter. Then calculate what percentage of your home payments or rent goes to the stuff. “If clutter was a roommate you’d kick him out,” Nelson says.

Like Stitham, the professional organizer, Nelson talks about how people with clutter tend to lose things and buy them multiple times. “Maybe that is why my book on clutter sold so well,” Nelson says laughing. “Clutterers kept buying it and losing it and had to buy a new copy.”

And then Nelson mentions self storage.

Out of Sight, Out of Pocket

Self storage is a direct way to measure the monthly cost of stuff. The Self Storage Association estimates there was \$20 billion in revenue last year. “Self storage places are filling a need,” Nelson says. “But I’ve worked with a lot of people

and the amount of money that people spend on storage exceeds the financial value of what they’ve got in there ten times over if not more. ... Like the sofa that is worth \$50 at a garage sale, but is put in storage because it belonged to Grandma. People justify storage because of the personal emotional attachments to things.”



SSA statistics show, however, that while it is true 50 percent of storage renters are storing items they don’t have room for at their residence, 49 percent are using it as temporary storage while changing residence.

While it might seem to make sense that more foreclosures in the current economy might lead to a boom for storage places, Dietz at the SSA says it hasn’t really happened. “Storage is a disposable income product,” he said. “People who are out of work or in distress can’t pay.” At best he says it has been flat—and depending on the local economy business could be down five to even 20 percent.

This has been true in Salt Lake City, Wolfe at Downtown Self Storage says. “The recession didn’t hit us that hard.”

Clutter to the Rescue

James A. Roberts sees a different type of cost in clutter. Roberts is a professor of marketing at Baylor University and author of the new book *Shiny Objects: Why We Spend Money We Don’t Have in Search of Happiness We Can’t Buy*. “There are physical costs to store it all,” Roberts says, “but the real costs are psychological. We are working to buy things, but while we are doing that we are ignoring the things that make us happy—personal growth, relationships.”

Clutter expert Stitham agrees with Roberts. “People are trying to fill a void with stuff,” Stitham says. “It is an enormous cost. But the thing people really want is peace, serenity and good relationships.”

Roberts said the key is awareness.

“We are a wonderful nation,” Roberts said, “but sometimes I think we lack imagination about how to think about life without consumer products.”

It was easy for Nelson to think about life without consumer products after the fire burned up everything but his dog and bathrobe. But as a clutter expert he thought of another cost. The cost of no clutter.

“It is a real conundrum,” he says. “If our economy is based on consumption and I preach less consumption then I am saying ‘Destroy the economy.’ I guess, in a way, clutterers are the saviors of the economy.” ❖

Michael DeGroot is a staff writer for the Deseret News in Salt Lake City, Utah. Reprinted by permission.



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