The Independent Inquiry

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Do modern products have the potential to become antiques and are antiques needed in today`s society?

Apple store of future antiques adapted from 9to5Mac, Michael Steeber, 2019

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Most present-day designs are going to inflict damage on the antique trade. With more disposable items making it to market and quality within long-term products decreasing, fewer products are worth keeping. Feelings towards products have changed, making it socially acceptable for people to discard and replace items more often. Meaning that the number of products making it to the antique phase is dwindling. I will assess the need for present-day products to become future antiques and discuss the need for longevity and disposability in today`s society. I will also evaluate if the design industry has gone past the point of return, making it no longer feasible to mass produce for longevity in today`s ever-changing world. I will use the theories of The Leisure Class by Veblen and the Antique principles by Rosenstein and case studies featuring the Apple iPhone, Coca-Cola Glass bottles and HP printers to support my thinking.

Originating from the Latin word 'antiquus' meaning former or ancient, the word antique is used to describe an artifact that is over 100 years old (Wiggins, 2019) but can be more specifically used to describe items with high value due to their beauty, rarity and quality that is over a century old (Cambridge dictionary, 2022). Although the definition of antique includes quality and beauty, it is commonly associated with old, dirty, and unstylish furniture, jewellery, and relics (Abramson, 2020). I believe this to be a major factor in the decline of antiques. Yet, individuals still want the quality that antiques offer without the stereotypical filth and outdatedness that surround antiques, so they turn to similar alternatives. Vintage still offers high-quality and features designs from the past but for some reason appeals to today's trends better than antiques. Arguably, however, vintage and antique are so similar they should not differ hugely in stigma, trend, or market. The definition of vintage is something that is not new but was made in an era of good quality (Britannica dictionary,2022) and is said to be over 50 and under 99 years old. The only real difference between vintage and antique is the age of the artifact, if an item is of good quality and still functional it should not matter if it is 50, 100, or 150 years old. Therefore, I am proposing a change of definition for antique and vintage so that vintage items don`t turn into antiques based on their age.

Figure 1. *Victorian mahogany chair sold by Antiques Atlas in 2022*

When reflecting on the past 200 years, there have been major changes in how society trades and values goods. Before items were made to a higher quality with the intention of the user utilising them for their entire lives. People would go straight to carpenters for their chairs and to the shoemaker for their shoes. A single person could see out the whole process of designing, making, and selling their products creating better relationships with their customers. The care and craftsmanship that would go into these items can be seen in fig 1. The armchair in the image is believed to be over 150 years old and still in usable condition. This is down to the owners of the armchair having an appreciation for the item and only using the chair for its intended purpose, but also due to the high quality of the chair. These were made to last and therefore are still in existence and still highly valued, as confirmed by this armchair's £1450 price tag. Furniture and products, in general, are no longer made to this level of specification.

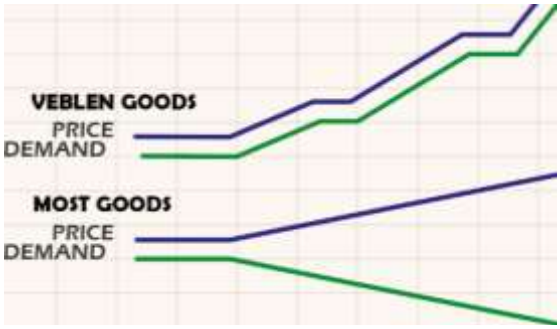

Figure 2. *Diagram of Veblen goods compared to standard goods*

Over the years, the needs of consumers have changed. When The Theory of the leisure class was written by Thorstein Veblen in 1899 there was a clear divide in class. The 'leisure class', a term coined by Veblen, is described as the wealthiest people in society continuously wanting to buy the best, most luxurious things. These items are called Veblen goods, named after the theorist Veblen, which would go up in price to attract more wealthy customers. As shown in fig 2, the price rises and so does the demand. At the time Veblen goods would have included fabrics for dressmaking, jewellery, paintings, furniture, and horse-drawn carriages. Some goods would have fallen into a sub-category of Veblen goods, these items would be bought once and rarely replaced by the wealthy. Like the Gucci and rolls Royce of today`s society, no matter what the age of the artifact, it still holds status. In some instances, the increasing age of an artifact would add to its market value as it would prove its longevity and quality, expand its history, and increase its rarity. Since items had higher quality and trends took longer to pass, items stayed relevant and were appreciated for longer. Both the leisure class and poorer class would dream about owning such expensive, lavish items, even though this would only be a potential reality for the leisure class.

Less refined items were made for the lower classes, even though this cost less they were still worth a considerable amount to the less wealthy as they were also built for longevity. Applying the theory of the leisure class to today`s western society, I believe we have different variations of leisure classes within society; the wealthy people that can afford it, the people that save up to afford it, the people who loan or join contracts to afford it, and the people that buy fakes to look like they can afford it. To simplify this, more of us can now get what we want, and greed has become accepted within society.

Figure 3. *Queue outside Apple store for iPhone X*

Fig 3 shows a huge crowd of people queuing at an Apple store first day of the release of the iPhone X, the most expensive phone on the market at the time of sale. The blankets, knitted hats, and coats in this image indicate people were eager to buy the iPhone x despite the uncomfortable temperatures. People interviewed confirmed they had queued 6 days prior to getting the iPhone x (Gibbs, 2017). Many people seen in the queue would have had a working phone, yet they still felt the need to have the latest, most expensive phone. Francesca Forsythe from Leiden University writes about humans having 3 basic instincts, one of them being a social instinct. Forsythe states due to this instinct we have the drive to feel accomplished, "secure a place with others" and gain approval, admiration, and status. Each of these can be shown threw material. For accomplishment, we may get a trophy. To feel a part of a community we buy into a brand. To gain approval, admiration, and status we may buy expensive items to make people think we are worthy, hard-working, or of a higher class. We constantly want the best and are happy to discard anything outdated even if it is still usable and in the same condition as when it was bought just to get the next best thing as shown by people queuing to upgrade to the next iPhone.

It is now easier to buy what we want as soon as we want it. In January 1948, the first UK Supermarket was opened by the London Cooperative society. The introduction of supermarkets has meant the buying of different goods could take place under one roof. The progression of technology has allowed us to trade goods online, we no longer have to leave our homes to purchase goods. It is estimated 26 percent of sales will take place online this year, and this is expected to increase in 2023 (Retail Research, 2022). We are buying goods quicker and more often. Pop-up advertising and flash sales on our phones and computers push us to panic buy without too much consideration. Consequently, we buy things that won't get used. Social media makes it easier to see what other people have. Individuals are keen to post about their new car or handbag causing people to feel the need to go buy the same one or a new version to one-up others. This creates a vicious cycle of people wanting the next best thing. Money has gone digital meaning every time we purchase goods, we don't physically see the handover of money. This can make it easier to spend money as people don't value numbers on a screen the same as cash.

After discussing the changes seen within society over the last 200 years regarding the consumption of goods, I believe the way antiques are perceived has also changed. The way we trade, use and perceive goods have changed so it stands to reason the perception of aged goods has changed. Therefore, I am going to explore different definitions of the term antique.

One option could make vintage and antique interchangeable, breaking down the stigma around antiques and removing the categorisation of artifacts based on their age. However, I believe we have formed too much of a strong perception towards the word antique and if antique were to mean the same as vintage it may get erased as vintage would be recognised as a more attractive way of saying antique.

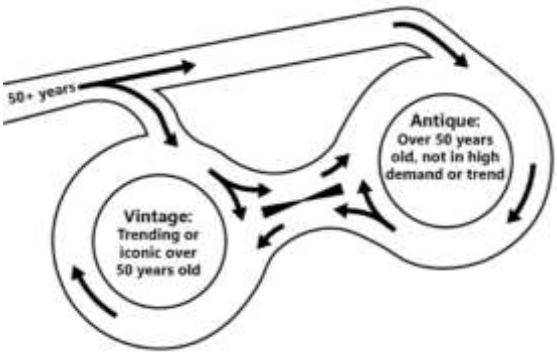

Figure 4. *Roundabout diagram for redefining antiques and vintage*

An appreciable number of antique dealers feel the need for the definition of antique to be changed to over 50 instead of 100 years (Iverson, 2019). This would not only overlap but engulf the vintage phase of an item, meaning that an item would be both vintage and antique between 50 and 100 years old and loses its ability to be vintage after 100 years. Making full use of two words, antique and vintage, there should be two different definitions. Based on my findings, antiques could be redefined as an item over 50 years old, if vintage was redefined as an antique item that continues to trend or an iconic artifact of a past era as depicted in fig 4. However, this creates a few problems. This would encourage individuals to see antiques as worthless artifacts rather than showing them the appreciation they deserve as potentially useable, beautiful time capsules of history. It would also create a large grey area between antique and vintage because it would be put down to opinion whether something is vintage or antique. The proverb 'one man`s trash is another man's treasure' sums up how taste can differ between all of us, therefore one man`s antique is another man`s vintage.

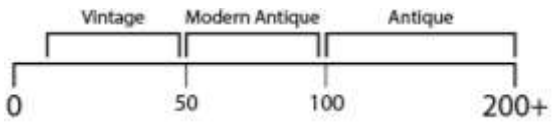

Figure 5. *Timeline for vintage, modern antique, and antique*

Alternatively, the definitions could be updated with vintage being 10 to 49 years, modern antiques being 50 to 99 years, and antiques remaining over 100 years old. The term 'modern antique' is currently used to describe an item between 50 to 99 years old and is highly collectible. Working around this definition, as demonstrated in fig 5, set boundaries can be created for vintage and antique on either side removing any overlap there once was. This would mean today`s vintage items will be comparatively younger than their predecessors at the time they became vintage. This is acceptable as trends aren't lasting as long. Advances made in global communications, manufacturing techniques, materials, and advertisement have allowed us to design, manufacture, advertise and purchase items faster. As fast as something can trend, it can also lose popularity. With more products coming to market, older products are being replaced quicker, as individuals are quick to move on to the next trend (McClinton, 2019). Because trends are moving on so quickly, the timescale for an item to be vintage should move forward to match a similar number of trends an item would have to be proceeded by to become vintage.

On the other side, we could increase the age for an item to become antique or vintage. Rather than seeing it as the number of trends an item must be proceeded by, we could see it as the number of lifetimes it must surpass. On average we are living longer, so items should last longer. For example, if you bought a brand-new cake mixer at the age of 20 and used it until you were 80, you would probably see it as a very good cake mixer. If you then passed it down to the next generation e.g., your children. They would probably see it as a well-used old mixer. If they passed it down, the mixer would probably be viewed as an antique.

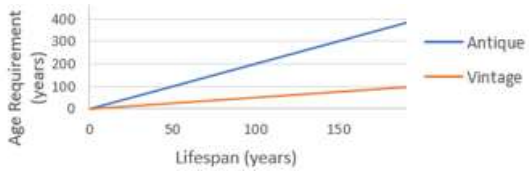

Figure 6. *antique based on average lifespan*

Based on this concept, the definition of an antique should change to an item that is twice as old as the average lifetime as shown in fig 6. Therefore, an antique would have to be over 160 years old (2x average lifespan). If we take this back 100 years when the average life span was in the late 50s, an item would have been passed down quicker. To not overcomplicate matters, if the average lifespan was 50 an item would have to be over 100 years old to become an antique a decade ago. This is the same as the original definition of antique, meaning the original definition is overdue an update if we base antique age requirements on the average lifespan. This definition would have to be continuously updated if the average lifespan continued to increase. If antiques are older than 2 lifetimes, it only seems fair to make vintage relative to half a lifetime. Vintage would then describe something of the past but also something the older generation will remember using when it was new. However, this is still using age to categorise vintage and antique items and I have established my opinion of not categorising items solely based on age.

Age is one of the easiest values of an item to document and therefore the easy way to categorise. However, do we need to categorise solely based on age as age should not matter? We should buy antique and vintage things based on their value to us, this should include our emotional attachment, the usability of the item, and the way it appeals to our style. As claimed by Leon Rosenstein "an antique is a primarily handcrafted object of rarity and beauty", its age is confirmed by its style and material deterioration, and has the ability to preserve an "image of a world now past"(Rosenstein, 2009, p.160) So, the definition of antique should change to

something we value that is not made for present-day life, and instead of retiring the word vintage, we should repurpose it to mean an item created to look like an antique, this means vintage will have all the characteristics of an antique but is made to appeal to current trends and can be made using modern techniques. Rosenstein also says that antique items need to fulfil 10 categories to become antique: subject, condition, technical perfection, rarity, size, completeness, age, authenticity, provenance, and context. Age is a part of the process of becoming antique but there are many factors to an item becoming antique.

Depending on whom you ask, antiques can be defined in many ways. After exploring several options, I have decided for an object to be defined as antique it needs to be of value to us, as individuals. The origin of the value can differ between individuals, an object may be valued due to its rarity, historical significance, sentimental attachment, style, and design. I have previously mentioned using 100 years to mark an object as an antique. For an object to achieve 100 years in existence it either needs to be preserved by being unused or have been designed for longevity. I believe products should be designed for longevity and this thinking is parallel with other designers. Deiter Rams mentions in his book, 10 principles for good design, that we should all be designing for longevity, "the most important task of design is to optimise the utility of a product`s usability". Hence, I have chosen to remove the over 100 years requirement and propose that any object made for longevity can be classed as an antique once it has proven its longevity.

Figure 7. *Left to right, Coca-Cola glass bottle by The Coca-Cola Company and the Panton chair by Vitra.*

This brings up the question, how can we identify longevity in different products? In fig 7 an image of a glass bottle and a plastic chair is displayed. For the foreseeable future, we will always need containers for our beverages and a place to sit. However, the needs of these products largely differ. The Coca-Cola bottle is intended to be used once and then recycled whereas the Panton Chair could be used for another hundred years and remain in a useable condition. The Coca-Cola bottle could be kept and treasured by another that collects Coca-Cola memorabilia. Yet if everyone was encouraged to keep glass bottles, it would take longer for these items to become collectible, and wouldn`t be highly valued due to their lack of rarity. It would be a waste of glass if the bottles were kept as they could be reused to make new products, at the same time, it would be better if the glass bottles were being actively used. It is better when a product stays useful rather than recycling it as it takes energy to do so. The Panton chair is made to last, some of them may be taken out of circulation due to general wear and tear or individuals not valuing them enough to keep them. The amount in existence will softly decrease and their value will rise due to their rarity.

If we design for longevity more products will become antiques. In an ideal world, products would be made for longevity and only discarded after they have been deemed unusable due to damage or wear and tear. However, in the real-world peoples` tastes, needs, and wants change. Emotionally durable design is a user-focused approach to sustainable design because longevity is the best way to achieve sustainability. Nevertheless, there is no justification for designing for longevity if the user has no desire to use the object. Hence why it is so important for the emotionally durable design to be paired with longevity as they create the foundations for good design from the aspect of sustainability. Jonathan Chapman`s Emotionally durable design explains that products can be seen as "existential mirrors" as

the consumer only buys products reflecting their hopes and dreams. Once that object has passed through a period of fantasy to reality the consumer no longer desires that object. Chapman concludes that we can design for longevity, but it won`t change how customers interact with goods. For individuals to keep hold of their items they need to "produce stronger, longer-lasting relationships" between them and the manufacturers to increase longevity (Chapman, 2018). Design research has suggested that the "longevity of products entails not only the extension of their physical lifetime but also the optimisation of their psychological lifetime", meaning that when we design for longevity, we should define how long a product should last and how we can get the consumer to use the product for longer (Ko, Ramirez & Ward, 2010).

From this, two questions have formed. Why did product designers stop designing for longevity and what are the best methods for creating bonds between user and product? In answer to the first, design for planned obsolescence controlled product designers to design for limited product lifetimes in the hope of manufacturers financially benefitting. In Geneva, in 1924, lightbulb manufacturers, including Osram, Philips, and General Electric formed the Phoebus Cartel. Its one purpose was to restrict and manage the manufacture and sales of light bulbs globally (Docevski, 2007). Famously, the Phoebus Cartel was the first to implement planned obsolescence out of fear of losing business. The theory was that light bulbs would last so long that the need for them would decrease and therefore it would not leave enough room in the market for all the manufacturers to survive. This was also documented in a film written and directed by Cosima Dannoritzer named The Light Bulb Conspiracy. It discusses the findings of light bulbs that have been continuously on for 110 years, named the Livermore light. This type of bulb never made it to market. The only light bulbs produced at this time had a cap of 1,000 hours. Any company producing longer-lasting bulbs would be fined by the Phoebus Cartel. In 1942 the Phoebus Cartel was uncovered by the US government, and all founding manufacturers were fined on the charges of "price fixing, unfair competition and reducing the lifespan of the incandescent bulb" (Dannoritzer, 2011). Even though these lightbulb manufacturers faced consequences, planned obsolescence still happens today, whether it is done by products having intentional failing parts, digital updates slowing our technology items down, or prevention of repair (Soke, 2021).

Figure 8. *Approaches of extended product lifetime*

If we truly want to design for longevity, designers should consider what is said in the image above, fig 8. It forms 3 steps that we should consider when designing. Firstly, how to make a product physically and emotionally durable. Secondly, how to maintain and upgrade when it starts deteriorating, reinforcing its original quality. Lastly, once it becomes unusable or undesired how can we reclaim material, repair it for use, or repurpose the product. This is the best solution to achieve longevity and sustainability. This is a good model to follow because it allows for change of context "for instance be: a change in user or owner, or the reuse of a product for a different purpose" for instance, a shoe becoming a flowerpot (Bakker and Schuit, 2017).

Figure 9. *Best Outcomes of longevity*

Not every object is suitable for longevity, some must be disposable, normally due to hygiene reasons. All reusable and continuously used products should meet at least one of these stages identified in fig 9: upcycled, material reclaimed and antique. These are the best possible outcomes for any product. I believe that any product that meets these stages has fulfilled its purpose and has been well-designed. Although all these outcomes tick the box of longevity, the ability to repair an object best supports the future of antiques.

This leads to the rights-to-repair movement. Many manufacturers make it hard for people to repair their own items. The rights to repair movement want manufacturers to ease restrictions on manuals and documents and create spare parts that are accessible to all. This movement has been gaining momentum for a while but only recently the UK and EU governments have started to bring in rules for manufacturers. The UK government released regulations that apply to products "brought from 1st July 2021, but manufacturers have a grace period of up to 2 years to make spare parts available" (House of Commons, 2021). These parts must be supplied for at least 7 years after the product is discontinued and are compatible with standard tools. At the moment, the government is only in support of repairs from licensed professionals. This only applies to certain electrical products, including dishwashers, fridges, and tumble dryers.

The right to repair is easier to implement on furniture than it is on technology. People don`t have to have specialised knowledge to identify an unstable leg on a chair or a missing handle from a dresser. Parts for furniture are easier to source. They can come straight from the manufacturers or be reproduced by a carpenter. If a leg is missing from a table, there is an option to change out all legs with new legs. Digital items are harder to repair because the manufacturers have more control. More often than not all spare parts are produced by the original manufacturers. For this reason, manufacturers can make it difficult for people to obtain spare parts through high prices, complicating the repair process by requiring specialised tools and restricting access to certain parts that are prone to failing. Manufacturers can also decide if their technology is compatible with others. To explain this, I will use HP printers as a case study. It has become widely known that HP has put in place barriers for HP users to make it extremely difficult to use non-HP ink cartridges in their own printers. Many online articles can be found on how to reverse this, yet this isn't accessible to all, as it takes a high level of digital knowledge to complete which many individuals don't have. According to the HP support forum, you can use non-HP cartridges but there is a purposefully complicated 18-step process with sub-steps. HP claim that not using HP ink cartridges damages their printers and risks print performance. The print quality may differ with different inks but there is no evidence to suggest other inks damage HP printers. Considering HP cartridges can be four times more expensive than compatible competitors, is there any truth behind it or is it a marketing ploy?

One company emphasizing the right to repair is Fairphone. One of their most recent products the Fairphone 4, has been claimed to be "the most repairable phone on the planet" (Fatmi & Johnson, 2021). Fairphone states to fix the phone all you will need is a Phillips screwdriver. Every part can be replaced and

upgraded as technology expands. In terms of sustainability, it ticks a lot of boxes, being repairable and electric waste neutral. However, I don't believe everyone could be persuaded to buy this phone with the way society is. Even if this phone could last a lifetime and keep up to date with technology, people still like having something new and don't want to spend the time repairing it themselves despite having the capability. In regard to antiques, there is a limit to the amount times you can replace parts before it is no longer a certain age. To simplify, a broom only has a head and a handle, if you change both parts it is no longer the same brush. After considering this, antiques may not be as sustainable as previously thought.

There are more reasons to keep an item than the longevity and sustainability aspects of it. There is a huge amount of historical importance and sentimental attachment that comes along with antiques. From time to time people are given family heirlooms, that may not be useful, and more often than not in style but we still feel an attachment to them. We may even go as far as hating the physical item yet still keeping them hidden in our attics or locked away in draws due to the psychological attachment, knowing that the item was once loved and hoping it may be loved again. Antiques help us remember and unlock memories that were once forgotten.

Throughout my exploration, I have found ways for manufacturers and product designers to develop physically and emotionally durable designs. It is my firm opinion that we, as product designers, should take greater responsibility when designing. There are many factors to take into consideration in the design process. These factors should include what will happen to a product when the user no longer values it. By considering and implementing techniques, such as the right to repair, we can achieve longevity within products. I strongly encourage all designers and manufacturers to stop designing for planned obsolescence. But, money talks, it is hard for people to do the right thing when they are being paid to do a job that involves looking the other way. On the whole, product designers and manufacturers do receive a lot of the blame and consumer empathy is a reoccurring theme. We are all consumers, and we have the power to encourage change. Now is the time to start utilising this power. Upon the discovery of planned obsolescence, we are quick to voice our feelings, yet this rarely turns into action. We can decide what companies to trade with and alternatively which ones to avoid. As individuals, we can decide to remove ourselves from the cycle of replacement by prioritising longevity within a product, only upgrading when a product has lost purpose, and thinking about the need for the product before purchasing. Antiques are not just about longevity. It is about the designer leaving a legacy, the user passing on a physical item to allow others to remember them and inspiring the future generation to expand upon past ideas. Sustainability is a hot topic currently. So I ask, what is more sustainable than having a well-designed item that can be utilised for multiple lifetimes? Antiques are sustainable if they still hold purpose. It is when this purpose is lost we need to move on and be able to reclaim the material. The ideal is to have an object that can last emotionally and physically for an extended period of time with the ability to reclaim the material once it has reached its end of life. Even though this item could last longer than 100 years I am still unsure if that is what makes it an antique.

To conclude, antiques still have a place in today`s society. There is still a need and I believe there will always be a need. We move so fast in the design world especially now technology is a part of our daily lives. Sometimes there is a need to slow down and take a few steps back. Antiques are a good source of inspiration and information. Retro furnishings are in style and the inspiration for these has come from past designs. Antiques have stood the test of time and we can obtain knowledge from antiques by learning about

the types of techniques used to make such items. We can learn a lot from the past. Antiques can be sustainable. They can be used throughout multiple user lifetimes but because of this reason, they could be hard to discard. The sentimental attachment that comes with antiques makes parting with them unbearable even if they are useable. However, it should be at this stage we repair them back to useability and repurpose or reuse the materials and components. We are going in the right direction with television programs such as the repair shop on BBC educating and raising awareness on the things that can be done to restore items. The rights to repair movement has also meant products made today stand a chance of becoming antiques. Reflecting on this, I am going to design not only with the physical lifetime in mind but also the psychological one too, and make sure these correlates. I would see it as an achievement if my designs became antiques. This would prove my designs stood the test of time and it would mean I could inspire future designers. For me, having a name that lives on through an item means you are one of the greats. That is the ultimate goal.

The Long View: Exploring Product Lifetime Extension

Victorian Mahogany Scroll Frame Armchair - Antiques Atlas (antiques-atlas.com)

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