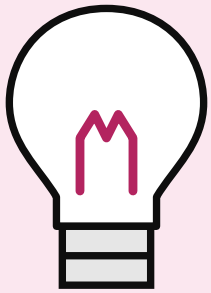
Concept

Planned obsolescence

Deliberately shortening a product's life, through how it is made or through fashion, so it gets replaced sooner than needed.



In Spanish
Obsolescencia programada

Origin
London (1932); popularized by Stevens (1954)

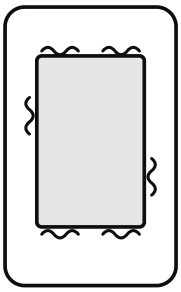
What problem it addresses

It explains why we throw away things that could still work. It goes to the heart of design, because how long a product lasts and whether it can be repaired is decided when it is designed.

An example

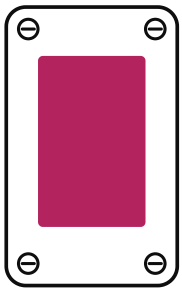
An illustrative example: two identical devices whose battery wears out after a few years.

Glued-in battery



To replace it, you have to force the case open. **The whole thing gets thrown away.**

Screwed-in battery



It can be replaced with a screwdriver. **It keeps working for years.**

The battery is the same; a design decision changes. Since 31 July 2026, the European Union requires certain products to be repaired even outside the guarantee (Directive 2024/1799).

Why it happens

1 

A product stops working because of a weak part or one that can't be replaced,

2 

or stops appealing because a model with a new look comes out;

3 

and it gets replaced even though it could still be used.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

Decide from the start how long the product should last and how the parts that wear out will be replaced.

✕ Avoid

Gluing or soldering parts that wear out, such as the battery, or blocking their replacement through software, without a technical reason.

👁 Don't fall for it

Before swapping something that works for the new model, ask yourself what it gives you besides the look.

1,800 h → 1,205 h



What the research says

Average life of a reference light bulb in 1926 and in 1933–34. In between, the Phoebus cartel set a 1,000-hour limit and fined factories that departed from it (Krajewski, 2014).

●●○ **Debated evidence.** It is the best-documented case. Packard (1960) already distinguished between products that break early and products that just go out of fashion.

Connections

Used in

- Circular design
- Sustainable design
- Ecodesign

Related to

- Design for the real world

Authors and works

1932	**Bernard London**	In the middle of the Depression, proposed that the state put an expiry date on goods to force their replacement and revive employment. It is one of the first texts to use the phrase.
1954	**Brooks Stevens**	Popularized the phrase in a talk in Minneapolis and framed it as instilling the desire to own something newer sooner than necessary.
1960	**Vance Packard**	Distinguished three types: of function (something better comes out), of quality (it breaks early) and of desirability (it goes out of fashion).
2024	**European Union**	Directive 2024/825 bans selling, without warning, a product with a feature that limits its life. Directive 2024/1799 requires certain products to be repaired at a reasonable price, even outside the guarantee.

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