



# GOODBYE TO MAGICAL, MUCH-LOVED GADGETS

Reporters look back (mostly fondly) on gear that better software and increasingly inexpensive components have rendered obsolete

DANIEL VARGHESE

The advent of a new year encourages us to make many forward-looking declarations. Many of ours involve our relationship to gadgets, like the way some of us have taken to not sleeping next to the phone, which serves as an all-too-tempting portal to YouTube. The difficulty of actually doing this has made some of us long for a time when technology was less omnipresent, less powerful, just...less.

Here, writers of different generations pen obituaries to that bygone era, stories about the tech they miss the most. For each, we've highlighted current gear or software that might help anyone feeling a similar loss recapture — or even improve on — the magic.

## Film cameras

The scent of my Gen X adolescence wasn't watermelon Lip Smacker or the Body Shop's white musk; it was a vinegary combination of hydroquinone, acetic acid and sodium thiosulfate. Known as "developer", "stop bath" and "fixer" in darkroom parlance, these pungent potions made print-

ing photos from film cameras possible. From 1989, when I took my first photography class, to 2003, when I taught my last class on the subject to high school students, I inhaled a lot of this stuff.

Healthy? Probably not, but it was all part of the process. You had to print photos by hand from the film negative in the dim amber glow of a safelight, using sensitive paper, a device called an enlarger, sloshing trays of the aforementioned solutions — and a whole lot of tactile trial and error. The ritual required attention, and attention made it special.

By the time I was initiating a new generation of shooters into the fold, digital cameras had become common. I hear Gen Z boosters are leading an analog photography comeback. I suppose if it can happen for mum jeans, it can happen for the darkroom.

—Sarah Karnasiewicz  
**A modern alternative:** It doesn't produce an evocative stink, but the Fujifilm Instax Mini Link 2 photo printer lets you add filters and effects to your otherwise plain mobile phone snaps.

## PowerPoint

Modern slide show programs steer you toward building slickly produced "decks". This wasn't the case during my middle school years in the 2000s.

Microsoft PowerPoint, with its massive library of hideous bells and whistles, practically insisted you create truly stupid masterpieces. Star wipes, drum roll sounds and swivelling WordArt ran rampant. Actual scholars and executives deployed PowerPoint's unofficial mascot, a needle-nosed clipart stick figure, to unveil serious research and earnings reports. In my favourite image, the cartoon is scratching his head while look-

ing at a bomb's lit fuse. PowerPoint was the perfect tool when logging on meant enduring a screechy dial-up symphony, high-flying professionals unselfconsciously used the word "webinar" and Clippy was omnipresent. Now every deck I'm forced to watch — explanations of benefits, management training — tries to look like it's my friend. Bring back the bomb guy!

My sisters and I still make each other slide shows of the old, dodgy variety. Their tone is white-collar absurdist, faithful to the medium. "Get Inspired," chimes one recent slide's heading, followed by a bulleted list of schlocky advice. Once, this would absolutely have passed at a team-building off-site — or at least earned someone a solid B+ on an eighth-grade final project. Next slide, please.

—Amy Rose Spiegel  
**A modern alternative:** You can still make silly PowerPoints with your pals, but a game like "Talking Points" will generate ones for you to present. The catch: You won't know what's in them until you're in the middle of your speech.

## The iPod

I went to record shops every weekend during my high school years, stretching my budget to build out my collection. In 2006, I did an about-face, spending \$349 for the fifth-generation 80-gigabyte iPod, a portable music library that could store the contents of 40 vinyl crates.

That year, iPod sales represented 40 per cent of Apple's revenue. It seemed like everyone had one, white headphone cords dangling from their ears. I used mine to go deep into the edges of music, especially once I started digitising the metal demos I'd buy while accompanying friends who played in bands on their tours. Soon, the col-

lection of files I "owned" didn't just mirror my physical collection, it dwarfed it. My turntable became a shelf.

A year after I bought my iPod, the first iPhone came out, which made tagging and syncing up MP3s feel like the chore it was. Eventually, I gave up and began paying for Spotify. More recently, frustrated that the service keeps removing albums I like, I've started downloading music again. If I really love an album, I buy it on vinyl. That old iPod still sits near my turntable. But only one of them is collecting dust.

—Sami Reiss  
**A modern alternative:** Get a record player, pick the weirdest album you can find at your local record store and drop the needle. Embrace the lack of a skip button.

## BlackBerry

Just a year ago, BlackBerry announced it would shut down its proprietary operating system, but many of us had felt the sting of its loss much earlier. The BlackBerry was the first piece of technology that made me, a millennial, feel like a grown-up. They were so much lighter (therefore cooler) than the bricks our parents carried. Their raised keyboards elevated handheld typing to an Olympic-level sport, and Brick Breaker was the only game we needed. Emails were fired off with elan.

BlackBerrys felt exclusive and executive, but they weren't just a work phone — they were pop culture. The Hills star Lauren Conrad typed about boyfriend drama on a BlackBerry Curve. Kim Kardashian carried a BlackBerry Bold to answer emails, though she took selfies on an iPhone. Even former president Barack Obama refused to part with his beloved BlackBerry once he took office.

Today, phones are all screen, rarely have a keyboard and easily perform all sorts of gymnastics. But after 10 years of iPhone ownership — 10! — I still fumble with the on-screen keyboard, misspelling words and struggling to select text. I'm confident I never made a typo with BlackBerry's tactile typers.

—Todd Plummer  
**A modern alternative:** The digital Fleksy keyboard allows you to customise the stock set provided with iOS and Android software, and tends to be more responsive and accurate.

And just in case you needed more reason to long for less advanced days, here's six more nostalgia-inducing gadgets.

## Six-disc CD player

Car versions varied: my sister's was in her boot. Listening with these players was simple, but stocking them was a pain. So you planned out an extended mood. You could still skip tracks to bypass soupy ballads and rap skits. You might override a whole album — but you would immediately be met with another.

—A.R.S.

## VHS tapes

There is no better medium for showing off a film collection than the VHS tape. Sure, that's not the point of the collection, but I miss having my tapes before me as a prominent, physical display of my movie-viewing options. I'm even a bit nostalgic for the whirr of the mechanical rewind.

—Magdalene J. Taylor

## Duck Hunt

Even when anything can be rebooted, this 1984 Nintendo Entertainment System title, in which you would shoot hapless fowl out

of the sky, will probably stay in the past. That is because the game's controller, a fake gun called the Zapper, was only designed to work with old-school, cathode-ray tube TVs. I didn't know that when I, barely out of nappies, grabbed the hardware from my older sibling and took aim. No birds (or bros) were harmed.

—Paul Schrodt

## Tiny TVs

Before innovation drove down the price of the massive LED panels you'll find in most 4K TVs, the only idiot box I could ever imagine myself buying had a 22cm screen and a VCR slot. When my parents got one for their bedroom, it became my favourite way to watch episodes of Arthur they had taped for me.

—Daniel Varghese

## Tamagotchi

I discovered the Tamagotchi at a school camp in 2003, six years after The New York Times called the pocket-size device housing a blobby digital pet "a sensation around the world". I treated mine as if it were a real pet. Leaving it wrought anxiety: was his poop accumulating too quickly? By comparison, my cats are easy.

—Jane Starr Drinkard

## Label makers

Up-to-date models of Martha Stewart's preferred labeller, the Brother P-touch, are Bluetooth-enabled and offer 800 symbols and more than a dozen fonts. Mine, the Dymo Executive 3, is chrome-handled, with a rotary alphabet wheel and a spool of red plastic embossable tape. I used a similar one in the 1980s to label folders and mixtapes. Today, it keeps my spice drawer looking punk rock.

—S.K.

## Beauty over profit, reignite a city's soul

MILLY MAIN

There is a growing global movement to revive beautiful architecture and good urbanism. This comes in response to the increasing sense our cities are becoming uglier and more hostile, and rejects images of a futuristic high-rise dystopia for warm, timeless, well-built streets and buildings with traditional architecture.

This optimistic movement has had wins in cities such as Paris, in the UK and in New York. Despite its underdog status, it has on its side the undeniable beauty of thousands of years of traditional urbanism in cities across the world, and the obvious failure of modern planning regimes, developers and designers to achieve good new places people love.

People want good urbanism. Planners will bend over backwards to achieve walkable streets, "ground-floor activation" and "design excellence". Despite their hopes and efforts, the outcomes often fall short of Australia's best traditional streets — think Sydney's Surry Hills and Melbourne's Fitzroy, where former workers' housing is now the privilege of the affluent.

What has been missing is an alternative positive vision, which has now arrived. The Sydney Is Beautiful competition seeks to restore beauty and fine building to public design at the precinct level. It is the first such competition focusing on traditional architecture in 70 years.

There were 19 entrants from five countries and they were asked to design a building using local and sustainable materials for a long-vacant site in Sydney's Woolloomooloo owned by Transport NSW. The competition is a grassroots effort, and was executed without the involvement of the state government, as the perfect blank canvas for our ideas. NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet will announce the winners on Tuesday night.

Sydney Is Beautiful rejects relativism, and believes beauty is deeply desirable and easily recognisable. Of course, the Instagram feeds of Australians and the fact we flock to classic European cities belies this notion of subjectivity.

King Charles is known for Poundbury, a "new traditional" urban extension just outside Dorchester in England's west, designed by Léon Krier. A less well-known example is Paseo Cayalá, which combines entertainment, business and housing across 25ha of Guatemala City, and the commune of Le Plessis-Robinson in Paris, the beauty and appeal of

which only the most hard-hearted cynic could deny. Of course, in 100 years no one will care when these cherished places were built. Like Poundbury, where the land is worth about 30 per cent more than surrounding developments, this housing will command a premium. We are calling for Australia's patient capital, such as super funds, to invest in quality development, because the pay-off is higher in the long term.

The winner of Sydney Is Beautiful will be announced at a ceremony in Glebe. One of the entrants is ADAM Architecture, the practice that collaborates with the Prince's Foundation on King Charles's developments in Poundbury and at Nansledan in Cornwall.

State governments should promote new gentle density that is beautiful. This would reduce opposition to development. The answer is right in front of us. In Sydney, it's St Neot Avenue in Potts Point; in Melbourne, pre-war East Melbourne apartments. Governments should consider Australia's equivalent to the UK Government's Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, the motto of which was "Ask for beauty, refuse ugliness and promote stewardship" as it sought to remove regulatory obstacles.

In the middle of last century, we broke from building tradition, throwing thousands of years of urban design knowledge and wisdom in the bin. The art, design and building skills required to build the State Library of Victoria or Customs House are no longer taught or known, and it is not clear that this is a good thing. You have to know the rules to break them. Without a baseline for building quality and objective notion of beauty, design outcomes are unpredictable and unenforceable. The end result of this is endless apartments with tilt-up concrete plastic and prefabricated materials as far as the eye can see.

Research suggests people prefer traditional architecture, warm colours, ornamentation and coherent symmetry. This is not an accident. Traditional architecture was honed over thousands of years and contains more embedded wisdom than any designer can hope to achieve from scratch. From England, Italy, Persia and the Levant to India, Japan and China, each civilisation has its own glorious version of traditional architecture.

Architects are not the enemy. They are just another victim of our relentless utilitarian culture of efficiency and productivity above all else that pretends to be compassionate. Planners are left fighting for a couple of trees and some grass in exchange for two more storeys. Public space is mostly concrete to keep maintenance costs down. Prioritising short-term profit over beauty means we are all impoverished. You don't need to take my word for it. Take a walk outside. Trust your own eyes and open your heart to the possibility that good and beautiful building has been done before, and can be done again.

Milly Main is founder of Street Level Australia, organiser of the Sydney Is Beautiful competition.



Images of Queen's Cross, above, and Juanita Neilson Way, below, part of a Woolloomooloo, Sydney makeover



M. J. SUTTIE ARCHITECTS