

The Phone That Would Not Die

At the repair stall, a device is not finished until three people say so.

6 min read

Before you read

- **obsolete** — no longer supported or supplied, though not necessarily broken
- **salvage** — to recover something useful from what has been discarded
- **component** — an individual part within a larger assembled device
- **proprietary** — designed so that only the manufacturer can supply or service it
- **ingenuity** — cleverness at solving practical problems with limited means
- **apprentice** — someone learning a trade by working alongside a skilled worker
- **corrosion** — the slow chemical eating-away of metal
- **incentive** — a reason built into a system that makes a choice attractive

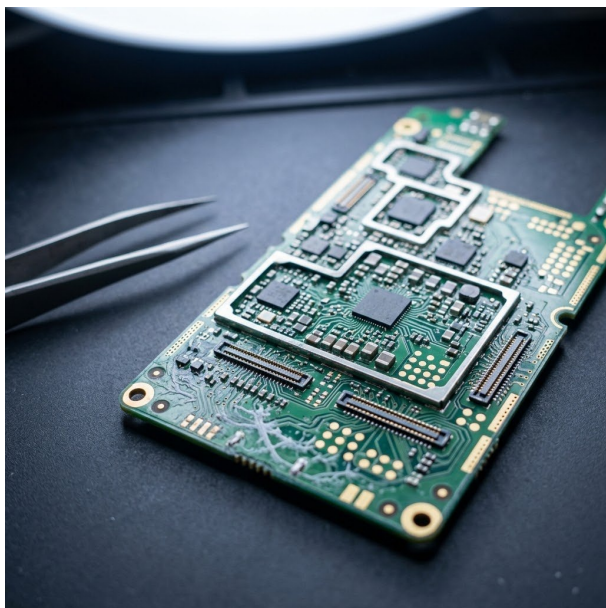


A repair stall in a Dakar market, its wall hung with salvaged parts

¹ The woman had been standing at the stall for ten minutes before she said what was actually wrong. Not that the phone would not switch on — she had led with that — but that there were four years of photographs on it and no copy of them anywhere else.

² Awa had heard a version of this most Saturdays since she started working at her uncle's stall in the Dakar market. People do not bring a phone in because it has stopped working. They bring it in because something inside it matters.

³ This one had gone into a bucket of water. The customer had done what everyone does, which is put it in rice, and then waited two days, which is the worst possible sequence. Rice absorbs almost nothing useful. The waiting, meanwhile, gives the water time to work: it carries dissolved salts across the board, and as it dries, corrosion begins eating at the tiny connections.



A circuit board under the lamp, waiting on a cleaning bath

⁴ Her uncle opened it under the lamp. The screws were the five-pointed kind that no ordinary screwdriver fits — proprietary, chosen partly so that only approved workshops open the device. The battery was glued rather than clipped. The board came out stained with the pale residue that means the water had been sitting.

⁵ “Cleaning bath,” he said. “Then we see.” Isopropyl alcohol, an ultrasonic cleaner, a slow dry. It works more often than people expect, which is the part of the trade that does not look impressive and matters most.

⁶ The stall's rear wall is the real asset. It carries hundreds of salvaged components in labelled trays: charging ports, speakers, cameras, screens, connectors, whole boards from phones that could not be revived. Every device that fails becomes supply for a device that has not yet failed. Awa had spent her first six months as an apprentice doing almost nothing else — stripping dead handsets, sorting what came out, learning by handling which parts were interchangeable and which only looked as though they were.

⁷ That wall exists because the alternative does not. New parts for a four-year-old model are frequently unavailable at any price; the manufacturer has moved on, the model is officially obsolete, and nothing is made for it. A phone can be in perfect condition except for one worn charging port and still be, in the official sense, beyond repair. Salvage is not a cheaper option. Often it is the only option.

⁸ It is tempting to describe this as ingenuity, and it is. But ingenuity is a response to a situation someone else designed. Devices are increasingly built in ways that make opening them difficult: glued assemblies, non-standard screws, components paired in software so a genuine replacement part is refused unless the manufacturer authorises it. None of this is accidental, and none of it is irrational from the manufacturer's side. The incentives point towards replacement, because a company that sells devices earns nothing from the fifth year of one it already sold.

⁹ Campaigns in several countries now argue for a legal right to repair — mandatory spare parts, published manuals, standard fasteners. The arguments are usually made in terms of waste and cost. In a market like this one the argument is simpler and more immediate: repairability is the difference between a trade existing and not existing, and between a household keeping a working phone and not keeping one.

¹⁰ The board came out of the bath and went under the lamp again. Two pads needed rework; the charging port was finished and a salvaged one went in. It took the afternoon.

¹¹ When the screen finally lit, the customer did not look at the phone. She asked Awa to open the photographs first, which Awa did, and then waited while the woman scrolled through four years of them in the middle of a market, checking that they were all still there.

¹² The repair cost less than a quarter of a new handset. That figure is the one people quote. It was not the one that mattered in the slightest to the person standing at the stall.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. Why does the passage say putting the phone in rice made things worse?
 - A The rice dust entered the charging port
 - B Rice absorbs little moisture and the delay allowed corrosion to begin
 - C The rice held heat against the battery
 - D The rice prevented the owner from switching it off
2. What is the purpose of the components on the stall's rear wall?
 - A They are displayed to attract customers
 - B They are new parts bought from the manufacturer
 - C They supply parts no longer made for older models
 - D They are waiting to be sold as scrap metal
3. What does the passage say about the five-pointed screws and glued battery?
 - A They make the phone more durable in water
 - B They are design choices that make independent repair harder
 - C They were added by a previous repairer
 - D They are a standard required by law
4. According to the passage, why do manufacturers have little incentive to support repair?
 - A Repair work is more expensive than manufacturing
 - B They earn nothing from a device they have already sold
 - C Spare parts are too difficult to produce
 - D Customers rarely ask for older models to be fixed

5. What point is the writer making in the final paragraph?
- A The repair was good value compared with a new phone
 - B The customer could not afford a replacement handset
 - C The cost saving was not what actually mattered to the customer
 - D Repair prices in the market are set too low

Part B Write your answer

Answer in three or four sentences, using evidence from the passage.

6. The writer says ingenuity “is a response to a situation someone else designed”. Explain what this means and how the passage supports it.

7. Explain why the writer says that in this market the argument for repairability is “simpler and more immediate” than arguments about waste and cost.

8. The passage opens and closes with the photographs rather than with the repair. Explain what this structure achieves.

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Take a position and justify it.

9. Should manufacturers be legally required to make devices repairable, even if that makes them thicker, heavier or more expensive? Argue a position and name what you are willing to give up for it.

10. Awa learned the trade by stripping dead handsets for six months before repairing anything. Is there something that can only be learned that way, or was it simply unpaid work? Use the passage, and give your reasoning either way.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B | 2. C | 3. B | 4. B | 5. C

Part B

6. The repairers' resourcefulness is real, but it is made necessary by deliberate design choices — proprietary screws, glued batteries, software-paired parts, discontinued spares. Credit answers that connect the praise to the constraint rather than treating ingenuity as simply admirable.

7. Elsewhere the case is environmental and financial and somewhat abstract. Here, repairability decides whether the trade exists at all and whether a household keeps a working phone. Accept any answer that contrasts a long-term, general argument with an immediate, local one.

8. Framing the piece with the photographs keeps the human stake visible and makes the closing point land: the value of the repair was never the money saved. Strong answers name the effect of the frame, not just its presence.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

9. Mark whether the student actually names the cost they accept — thickness, price, waterproofing, slower innovation — rather than claiming the choice is free. Either position is acceptable.

10. A strong answer takes a position and tests it against the text: the sorting taught which parts are genuinely interchangeable, which is tacit knowledge gained by handling. A strong sceptical answer would note the passage never says she was paid or taught deliberately. Both are creditable.

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