

# Disruption in shipbuilding

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## The 'Liberty Ships'

The disruptive technology (**welding**) enabled the industry to progress from:



To.....



The time is possibly right for a disruption in the way we build ships. A disruption is a change that leads to something new: what follows no longer looks like what went before. The photograph shows what welding enabled when it replaced riveting in the emergency shipyards of the US in WWII. People sometimes react with disbelief when I say that the last disruption in shipbuilding was over 80 years ago, but everything since then, right up to AI, has been a development, not a disruption.

The trigger may come from labour shortage leading to a shift from human to fixed capital (automation). The disruption may be needed because the current shipbuilding strategy does not lend itself optimally to automation.

So, what could future shipyards look like? I don't know, but I have some ideas where to start looking. It is hard to see a disruption because it is difficult to see what has never been. Henry Ford summed this up when he (possibly) stated in relation to his development of the Model T and the opening of motoring to the masses, that if he had asked transport users what they wanted they would have said "faster horses". This suggests that the last people we should ask about possible disruptions in shipbuilding are shipbuilders. Understandably, it is difficult to see the possible beyond further development of the existing and beyond the imperative to achieve the greatest return from the existing investment and organisation. It is also likely that, to achieve a disruption, capital engineering will present greater difficulties than production engineering and, therefore, we may make better headway by tasking the most talented business and economic strategists to take a look at the industry, rather than engineers. We should also note that welding was introduced into shipbuilding from outside – from civil engineering and automotive. What are other sectors doing from which we could learn?