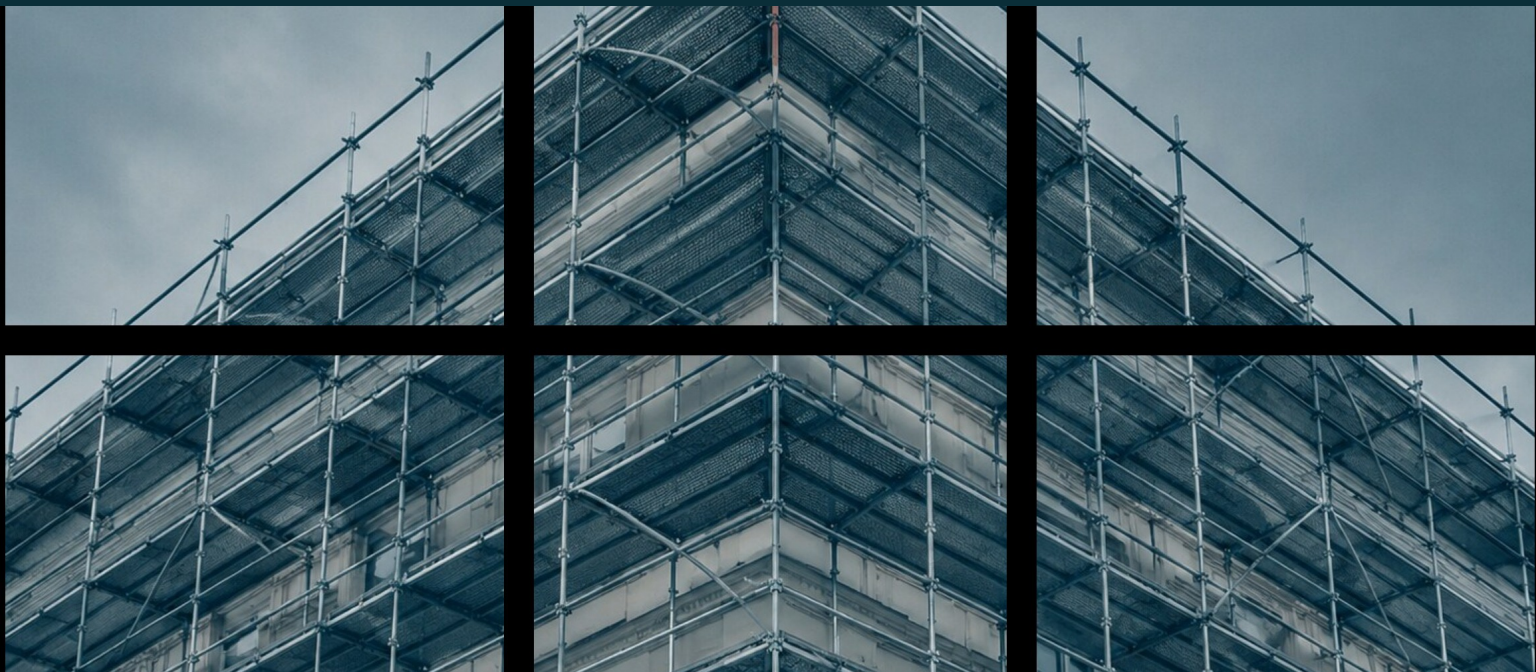


BEYOND THE COST CUT

Temporary Forever: How the Crisis Shortcuts Became Permanent Architecture

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Hidden Debt of Transformation Under Duress



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Contents

1. Executive Summary	3
2. The Fix That Outlived Its Emergency	3
3. The Many Ledgers of Debt	4
4. Why Temporary Hardens Into Permanent	4
5. The Interest Nobody Books	5
6. Paying It Down Without Another Crisis	6
7. The Choice Before Us	7

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“Unowned debt is never repaid.”

1. Executive Summary

Between the autumn of 2008 and the end of 2009, organisations made an enormous number of expedient decisions under conditions none of us would have chosen. Systems were patched rather than rebuilt. Governance was compressed. Teams were reshaped in a matter of weeks. Almost every one of these choices was justified with the same word: temporary. Now, in the middle of 2010, a great many of those temporary fixes are still in place — and something has quietly changed. They are no longer stopgaps awaiting a proper solution. They have become the architecture.

This essay makes a single argument: the most consequential legacy of the crisis is not the cost that was taken out but the debt that was quietly taken on. That debt is not only technical. It is spread across systems, processes, structures and governance, and like all debt it charges interest — an interest now being paid, invisibly, in the drag on everything the organisation tries to do next. I examine why expedient fixes harden into permanent ones, why the interest goes unbooked, and what it would take to pay the principal down deliberately, before the next emergency forces the question on far worse terms.

2. The Fix That Outlived Its Emergency

Every practitioner who worked through the last two years has a private catalogue of the shortcuts they took. The integration that was supposed to be a bridge until the real one was built. The manual reconciliation stood up over a weekend because the proper fix would have taken a quarter no one believed they had. The reorganisation drawn on a whiteboard in an afternoon because there was no time for anything more considered. The control that was waived “just for now” to get cash out of the door.

At the time, every one of these was defensible. Under genuine duress, expediency is not a failure of discipline — it is discipline of a different kind. The organisations that survived did so partly because they were willing to do the ugly, provisional thing rather than the elegant, slow one. I would defend most of those decisions again today.

The problem is not the decisions. The problem is the word.

Temporary carried an implicit promise: that when the emergency passed, someone would come back and do it properly. The emergency has largely passed. Almost no one has come back.

The true legacy of the crisis is not the cost we took out but the debt we quietly took on – and the promise, attached to every shortcut, that someone would return to repay it.

What we are living with now is the accumulated residue of a thousand deferrals. The provisional has become the permanent, not through any decision to make it so, but through the simple absence of a decision to undo it. And the residue is not inert. It is actively expensive.

3. The Many Ledgers of Debt

The language of technical debt has served us well as a metaphor for the compromises baked into software when we trade long-term cleanliness for short-term delivery. But the crisis revealed that technical debt is only one account among several. We borrowed far more widely than that, and the other loans are less visible precisely because they have no obvious ledger.

Ledger	What we borrowed	The interest we now pay
Technical	Patched systems, brittle integrations, deferred upgrades	Every change costs more and risks more than it should
Process	Manual workarounds stood up to bypass broken flows	Effort and error scale with volume; the fix cannot grow
Organisational	Structures redrawn in haste, roles merged or hollowed	Accountability is blurred; good people leave the confusion
Governance	Controls waived, approvals compressed, oversight thinned	Risk accrues unseen until it surfaces all at once
Capability	Training, hiring and succession postponed indefinitely	The skills to repay the other debts have themselves eroded

The last row is the cruel one. A financial debtor can at least hire an accountant to help restructure. An organisation that deferred its investment in people during the crisis finds, two years on, that it has weakened the very capability it now needs to repay everything else. The debts compound into one another.

What unites these ledgers is a shared characteristic that makes them dangerous: none of them appears on any statement the leadership actually reads. There is no line in the management accounts for fragility, no quarterly figure for accumulated workaround. The debt is real, it is growing, and it is off the books.

4. Why Temporary Hardens Into Permanent

If everyone understood these fixes to be temporary, why did almost none of them get undone? The answer is not laziness or forgetting. It is a set of structural forces that quietly convert the provisional into the permanent, and they are worth naming, because you cannot resist a force you have not identified.

1. The debt has no owner. The person who took the shortcut solved their problem and moved on. Repaying it would be someone else's cost, on someone else's budget, for a benefit that shows up as the absence of a future failure. Unowned debt is never repaid.
2. It is invisible until it compounds. A workaround handling a hundred transactions a week is barely noticeable. The same workaround at ten thousand transactions is a crisis of its own — but by then it is load-bearing, and removing it is genuinely dangerous.
3. The incentives reward the fix, not the repayment. We celebrate the person who kept the lights on through the emergency. We have no ceremony, no recognition, and usually no budget line for the person who quietly retires a piece of accumulated debt. What gets rewarded gets repeated; what goes unrewarded goes undone.
4. The workaround becomes the process. This is the most insidious force of all. New people are hired into the organisation as it now is. They are trained on the workaround. To them it is not a scar from a crisis they never witnessed — it is simply how things are done here. Within eighteen months, the provisional has been institutionalised by the innocent.
5. The crisis reset the standard. Under duress we lowered our tolerance for imperfection because we had to. But tolerances, once lowered, are strangely reluctant to rise again. The compromised becomes the normal, and the normal becomes the expected.

“The provisional does not become permanent by decision. It becomes permanent by the simple, repeated absence of a decision to undo it.”

Read together, these forces explain something that otherwise looks like collective negligence. No one chose to make the shortcuts permanent. The system chose it for them, one unmade decision at a time.

5. The Interest Nobody Books

Debt would be harmless if it did not charge interest. The whole danger of what we are carrying is that it does — continuously, and at a rate that rises the longer it goes unpaid.

The interest shows up first as a tax on change. An organisation carrying heavy technical and process debt discovers that every new initiative takes longer and costs more than the same initiative would have cost before the crisis, because each one must be threaded through, or around, the accumulated compromises. Leaders experience this as a mysterious loss of pace — a sense that the organisation has become sluggish, that things that ought to be simple have become hard. They rarely connect it to the shortcuts of 2008, because the connection is diffuse and undramatic. But that sluggishness is the interest payment, debited automatically from every project.

The second form of interest is fragility. Systems and processes assembled in haste have thin margins and hidden couplings. They work until they suddenly do not, and when they fail they fail in ways that are hard to diagnose, because no one fully designed them — they accreted. An organisation can run on such foundations for a surprisingly long time, which

is exactly what makes them treacherous: the absence of failure is read as soundness, right up until the failure arrives.

The third form is human. Capable people can tolerate a great deal of dysfunction if they believe it is temporary. What wears them down is the dawning recognition that it is not — that the workaround they were promised would be fixed has become a permanent feature of their working life. The best people, who have the most options, leave first. And they take with them the institutional memory of why the workaround exists, which means the debt outlives the only people who understood it.

The absence of failure is not the same as soundness. On borrowed foundations it is simply interest not yet come due.

6. Paying It Down Without Another Crisis

It is tempting to conclude that only another emergency will force the reckoning — that debt like this is repaid only when it finally breaks something large enough to command attention. That is the default path, and it is the worst one, because a crisis-driven repayment happens on the crisis's terms, not yours. The more useful question is whether the debt can be paid down deliberately, in calmer conditions, before it chooses its own moment.

I believe it can, but only if it is treated as what it is — debt — rather than as a vague sense that things could be tidier. That reframing carries a few practical consequences.

- Make the debt visible. You cannot govern what you refuse to name. The first act is to build a register of the significant compromises — the load-bearing workarounds, the deferred upgrades, the hollowed controls — and to describe, for each, what it would cost to repay and what it is costing to carry. This is uncomfortable, because it makes explicit a liability everyone has preferred to leave implicit. That discomfort is the point.
- Distinguish prudent debt from reckless debt. Not all of it needs repaying. Some shortcuts were shrewd and remain fit for purpose; to “fix” them would be to spend good money chasing an elegance no one needs. The discipline is to separate the debt that is quietly compounding and endangering the organisation from the debt that is stable and cheap to service. Repay the first; consciously keep the second.
- Fund repayment as a standing charge, not a project. The reason debt goes unpaid is that repayment is always someone's discretionary initiative, and discretionary initiatives lose to new features every time. The organisations that stay solvent treat a portion of their delivery capacity — a fixed fraction, protected from the pressure to spend it elsewhere — as a permanent allocation to servicing debt. It is not a programme with an end date. It is a cost of staying healthy.
- Give the debt an owner with authority. Unowned debt is never repaid, so ownership must be assigned deliberately and paired with the authority to act. Someone senior must hold the register, report on it, and be answerable for whether the balance is rising or falling — the same way someone is answerable for the financial balance sheet.
- Decide, don't drift. For each significant item the choice should be made consciously: repay it, refinance it into something more sustainable, or knowingly continue to carry it. Any of the three can be right. What is never right is the fourth option we have all

been exercising by default — to decide nothing, and let the drift decide for us.

None of this is technically difficult. It is difficult because it asks an organisation to spend visible effort today on the prevention of an invisible failure tomorrow, and that is the least natural expenditure there is. But it is precisely the expenditure that distinguishes an organisation that learned from the crisis from one that merely survived it.

7. The Choice Before Us

There is a version of the next few years in which none of this is done. The workarounds stay. The register is never built. The interest accrues, quietly, until one of the borrowed foundations gives way at the worst possible moment — and the repayment, deferred so long, is finally made all at once, under duress, on terms dictated by the failure rather than chosen by us. That is not a hypothetical. It is simply what happens to debt that is never deliberately addressed. It is called in.

The alternative is less dramatic and far less costly. It asks us to treat the accumulated compromises of the crisis not as an embarrassment to be ignored but as a balance sheet to be managed — named, owned, and paid down at a pace we choose while conditions are calm enough to allow it.

The crisis is behind us. The debt it left is not. We took it on to survive, and that was the right call. Whether we repay it on our terms or wait for it to be called on someone else's is the decision that now defines what kind of organisation the crisis has left us. That decision is still, for a little while longer, ours to make.