Ford Boxes

by Katherine McClatchie

I first saw concrete proof of Cork’s Ford connection when I wandered into the former factory buildings on Centre Park Road. I’d come from Dublin to edit an architectural survey for the Department of the Environment, and I was progressing through the eastern fringes of the city, recording large industrial sites and dodging trucks and forklifts. When I turned into the former Ford site, I began the usual process of recording: photographing, examining, and putting building forms and materials into systematic words. I quickly realised at this point that these buildings had made my day.

Ford’s principal architect in the U.S. He may never have visited the site, but his designs, if they were his, had brought a very contemporary, modern movement sensibility to Henry Ford’s Cork outpost. The Ford factory’s place in the city’s social history became more apparent to me the longer I spent in Cork, and, one glorious summer’s day, while swimming in Robert’s Cove after work, I looked up and was struck by the unusual forms of the little holiday homes, perched on the cliff overlooking the bay. I was informed that they were what was known as ‘Ford Boxes’. They had been, as I understood it, sheeted timber packing crates for tractor parts that came into Ford’s Cork factory from ships on the river. In a time far from the property hysteria of today, modest sites were found by those associated with the factory to brilliantly recycle these huge crates as simple holiday houses. Windows and doors were created by cutting holes out of the sides of the boxes. Cork’s original ‘eco-houses’ (many without such environmentally unfriendly interferences as running water) became a common sight, dotted around the lovely traditional swimming beaches at Robert’s Cove, Myrtleville and Fountainstown.

Although many of the Boxes had been modified over time, and many more lost, failing to meet modern expectations of domestic comfort, I continued to look out for the skeletons of their boxy forms whenever I was near any of the seaside sites. I was fascinated by them, not only with the simplicity of their form and materials, but the association with carefree seaside summer holidays (it remains my dream to find an unaltered one, miraculously perfectly maintained, yards from a fantastically quiet swimming spot, on sale for half nothing…).

Back in the real world, I first came in contact with Bik Van Der Pol when I attended a lecture given by them in the Crawford Gallery. I was especially drawn to their Nomads Residence/No. 19 project, a beautifully made mobile art studio, shown to us photographs taken in a number of locations. It immediately brought the Ford Boxes to my mind, although their mobile studio was a more sophisticated, purpose designed item created for a specific function, while the Ford Boxes were a more opportunistic phenomenon. The boxes are also ephemeral, in that they were not constructed to last, and most of them have now been lost. It is likely that all traces of them will have disappeared in just a few more years, particularly as their site values increase.

When I spoke to Liesbeth and Jos after the lecture, I told them how the project had reminded me of the Ford Boxes. I described the boxes to Liesbeth, and I think my slightly romantic view of the boxes must have reminded them of the Ford Boxes. I told them how the project had interested me in the boxes, and they had been interested in them long before I had, became involved in our meetings about the project, which led to many interesting conversations about the boxes, their aesthetic appeal, and their increasing scarcity. Once Liesbeth and Jos spoke to others in Cork about their project, lots of stories about memories of Ford Boxes, their locations and roles in families’ lives emerged. Through the process of this project, finding out more about the boxes has been an illuminating experience; through the reconstruction of the history, the boxes live on.

Ford Boxes

is an architectural research project by artists Bik Van der Pol (Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol), which focuses on the impact of the Ford car factory in Cork in relation with the built environment of the city.

The Ford Box project took place on the invitation of Cork Caucus, as part of Cork European Capital of Culture 2005. Cork Caucus was devised and curated together by Annie Fletcher, Charles Esche, Art/not art, and the National Sculpture Factory. Bik van der Pol would like to express their gratitude to Dennis Cullinan, Tom Dineen, Dennis Forde, Gus McLoughlin, Donnie Kelly, Maureen Hogan, Helene Spillane, Mary Whooley, Kay Harmon, David Kennedy, Kathy Barry, Conal Creedon and of course Sheila Fleming for their enthusiasm, generosity and time.
I was on a bus coming from Skibbereen and this couple got off. And they were looking for my parents. They wore strange coats. I knew that they weren't Irish anyway, they were English. We had a house that our parents let out every summer, like a holiday home. And obviously these people had been in the area and they were looking for some place to stay, and somebody had suggested our parents. So they stayed there. But in the summertime they had to leave because the regular people that came for the holidays were moving in. Before they came to Ireland they lived on the Thames, on a houseboat.

And we thought...well, in those years, this was very unusual. We couldn't visualize that, on a houseboat on the Thames.

We called her Lilly of the box, that's how we related when we were talking about her. His name was Jack, but we never called him Jack of the box. I knew that they were very intelligent, educated people, whatever had happened to them in their lives.

I remember that she obviously worked in an ammunition factory in London, at time of the Second World War. I also remember that when there was a question, she would have the answer faster then any of us would. She could talk on any subject. You just wonder what went wrong in their lives.

When they had to leave the summerhouse they got this Ford box; a farmer brought out the box and Mom and Dad let them put the Ford box on their land. Here it was, on this old road, it's a lovely road. How big the box was? I don't know, I would say small. How did they live...there was no door in it, she hung plastic bags, that kind of toughened plastic, they hung that on the door. She had a heater on three legs, like a stove, it was a very smelly old thing. And they had cats. We used to go in there.

When Mom served dinner to her husband, her brother in law and us, she would take the dinners up to them. They lived as I said a couple of minutes walk away, and we used to say 'do we have to do that every day', and she used to say it was charity. They had become very stiff and feeble from living inside. They had layers of cloth on. They used to sit them down in front of the fire, especially in wintertime. There was a flood one time, the poor people. She came down looking for help. All the water had rushed down the drain, had flooded the little laneway and it all went into the box. And everything, I remember everything was swimming around, and she was running around with big plastic sheets, like boots made out of bags on her feet.

I think they were the first ones of what you'd call today the Travelers. They were the first real pioneers, yes they were.

They were right here, and as I said the day that they were flooded the water obviously came from up on the road and came down here and filled the drain here you see, it had nowhere to go and they were right in the center of it.

(from: interview with Mary Whooley)
Dance Floor

I worked at the Ford’s until I retired in 1984. During the 1950s I drove around Ireland with a Ford Transit, which had a mobile film unit in it. It was a mobile projection studio. I still have some of the reels with films on it. I showed films about Ford and cars and so on. It finished in 1970, that

was when television entered, and adverts were shown on television. Ford timber boxes were used for many on-orthodox methods outside from what they were originally constructed for, which was holding Ford car parts, body panels, engines, gear boxes, mechanical train of drive shafts, back-axes, chassis frames and small parts. The boxes of 16 feet in length by 5 feet high were shipped from Dagenham to Cork where they were unloaded from ships on the quay side and transferred by crane onto waiting trucks to the

FORD BOXES

Ford boxes and urban space in Ireland

by Owen O’Doherty

The ‘Ford boxes’ have lived many lives. From tree to timber, from timber to box, from box to container and then from container back to timber again. In terms of their careers, they all started the same. Pressed into service as enclosures for car components, it was when they reached Cork that their new lives could begin. The instant at which the boxes were sold as timber was the point at which their individual ‘biographies’ diverged and they set out on their own specific vocations: as box cars, dancing platforms, pigeon lofts and seaside bungalows.

If we were to write a cultural biography of one of those boxes from within our current climate of globalisation, we might see the box as constituting a link between international movements and local conditions. Dramatic worldwide changes in trade and technology set these boxes off in their journey that would see them become a local phenomenon.

They started life at the Ford motor works in Dagenham, Essex. This 500-acre site was designed to make ever-higher numbers of cars for Britain and Europe, at ever greater speeds and lower costs. This expansion in Britain (and Ireland) was part of a movement of new and powerful American capital into the European market, with new manufacturing plants making commodities that created desire for such consumer goods as cars (Ford, Firestone), razors (Gillette), and household appliances (Hoover).

A major innovation that Ford brought to Europe was assembly line production and the division of labour, employed to drive down unit costs. The act of making a Ford then was not only the building of a car but its break down into a series of parts that had to be contained so as to be assembled elsewhere. And so the Ford boxes became a by-product of Ford’s production methods. Those cheap manufacturing costs, in its use to propagate the Model T Ford as the biggest selling car of its time, turned the car from the preserve of wealthy enthusiasts into an almost indispensable personal transport mode, available to the majority of consumers in Europe and America.

It also brought about a major transformation in the form of European cities. Existing streetscapes were dramatically changed and the car was key to the expansion of the suburb, the defining characteristic of the 20th century city.

The primary career of the Ford boxes was terminated in 1980, as the result of another global trend driven by a technological innovation with a major impact – the shipping container. Beginning in the 1950s, the introduction of standardised, weatherproof containers for the shipping and storage of freight impacted on city ports across the world. There was no longer any need for the huge manpower involved in loading and unloading goods at dock sides – shipping containers could simply be craned out and stacked and were secure in themselves. Being weatherproof, they no longer required the vast areas of warehouses which characterised the form of dockland areas. As ship design developed in response to containerisation, they became bigger requiring deeper berths so many ports moved further out of the city to deeper water areas. As urban docklands areas were abandoned, so was a whole culture of stedeovers, early houses, tea chests and barrels of porter. The Ford boxes also disappeared off the quayside. But many of them had already reappeared – as box cars, dancing platforms, pigeon lofts and seaside bungalows.

Appropriation

The story of the Ford boxes is one of appropriation. In terms of function, the materials for the Ford boxes were repurposed from their part in a programme of manufacturing semi-disposable, mobile and commodified objects in the form of motor-cars. The space inside the boxes was created by an industrial culture of mass production, and was as identical and interchangeable as the components it contained. The box, at which the boxes were appropriated as useful spaces by their new owners in Cork was the point at which their new, individualised stories diverged. Emptied of their car fragments, those spaces were appropriated by their new owners and given new highly differentiated functions: to provide a surface to be danced on, to prop up a wall, to be the body of a box-car. Abstract space became place.

This story of appropriation has parallels with broader movements in Ireland occurring at the time.

Much of the form and structure of Irish cities and towns was developed during a period which, by the time of independence, had been contested territories. For example, from the mid-19th century Dublin was at once the centre of power of a unionist administration but the power base of the occupying power. In terms of function, the materials for the Ford boxes was part in an urban space in the mid-19th century Dublin was at once the centre of power of a unionist administration but the power base of the occupying power.
Shipping

Basically we handled the shipping of the Ford boxes from about the 60’s. The Ford motor-company closed in 1984, but the wooden Ford boxes totally ceased in 1980. The containers came around that time, and therefore the Ford boxes were completely knocked out. The original Ford boxes started in Dagenham in the U.K. They would assemble a container in Birmingham, a container in London, a container all over the U.K. Then they were shipping the containers up to Hollyhead and then down all the way over the Irish Sea into Cork. The whole thing was not economically. So I always recommended that they moved to containers.

Anyway, before they moved over to containers everything came into boxes. Engineers did not come in the actual Ford boxes, they came in crates because they were very heavy. The Ford box would have been too light for the things.

All boxes then were made of marine plywood that was the best timber. Water-resistant. The sizes varied. The larger ones could be nearly twenty feet by about fifteen to twenty feet long and about eight to ten feet across, and the weight of those boxes would have been a ton or so. They would have door panels and things. And they were about six to eight feet high.

Normally if you were taking boxes out of a ship you would have slings that would come right around like that, but the Ford boxes had a centre of gravity and what they used to do is this: they had a special grabber going down in the centre and that would just lift them up. The grabber was shaped with teeth in it. Like a set of dogs. They would just put the chain and here and there and just lift it up in the centre, you see?

The engine parts were not in Ford boxes, they were in ordinary boxes. You would sling them and they would be quite heavy. These boxes had the design featured belts to be put in the centre. Made of metal.

After knocking them down and after the parts were taken out, they would go straight from the shipside to the quays.

(from: interview with Dennis Cullinane)