



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 were much more interesting than many of the other 20th century functional concrete structures I'd seen that day. There had clearly been an architect involved in their design. Now in a multitude of uses, divided and altered, there was still clear evidence of a considered design in the expression of overall form, distinctive roof structures, the use of glass blocks to create distinctive fenestration, or window, patterns.

On further inspection, there were even some great interior elements left: terrazzo flooring, staircases and even a reception desk, and an intriguing disused building that looked like a small theatre, with a stage (probably the canteen: I couldn't get access to it). At the risk of sounding slightly tragic, the 'discovery' of these buildings had made my day.

Mention of the site a few days later to Pat Ruane, the city council's conservation officer, brought the even more interesting insight that the buildings were likely to have been designed by Albert Kahn, 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 care-free 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 sold them to her, because we exchanged e-mail addresses and said we'd talk about them further. We did, and Bik Van der Pol decided to develop their discovery of the Ford Boxes into a project for Cork Caucus. I think their socially-engaged form of art practice meant that the way in which the boxes had been used appealed to them, more than any desire to manufacture them as an ideal of a sophisticated architectural form.

My boyfriend, Gareth O'Callaghan, an architect who shared my interest in the boxes (and 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.

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Lilly of the box

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 than 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 come down quite a lot to our place. Mom would 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 '70s 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-aches, 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



production stores where the over-headed crane would lift them from the trucks to be pulled in the stores. There they would be opened by the store man, relieved from their contents and placed outside the stores, where purchasers would buy 3,4, 5 boxes a time. The boxes were then stored at companies like Cosmos who would use them to form garden wheelings, chicken coops, bungalows, garden sheds and dog boxes.

After all about that, I also have my own personal experience with the boxes.

I bought several bundles of timber to build a bungalow and locate it in the area of Cross-haven, which was a very popular place to locate at that time. My brother and I, we had all the sections ready that would form the four walls structure, when I decided to get married and the bungalow never materialized. The timber sections that were brought up became very handy. Before my wedding day in 1955 my brothers laid all sections in the back garden and we had the most marvelous dance platform, where the guests danced away to their hearts content.

Two gallons of stout, the piano player, accordions, great singers and as much as you as wanted to eat. No hotel could have provided such an enjoyable reception. And it only cost 60 pounds. And everybody was happy, I was happy, my wife was happy, the guests were happy, the priest was happy, everything was right.

(from: interview with DennisForde)

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 warehousing 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 stevedores, 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 subverted 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 inter-changeable as the components it contained. The point 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 in 1922, was represented by the leaders of the new state as a time of occupation and control by a foreign invader. With independence, a question was thus posed – how does a new incoming political and social hierarchy treat the spaces which they will occupy but which have been created by alien powers? How should these appropriated spaces be made their own?

The answering of this question, as the new incoming political and social hegemony came to take over spaces created under a disappearing political structure, defined how urban space would be occupied throughout Ireland in the 20th century.

Before independence, Irish urban spaces had been contested territories. For example, from the mid-19th century Dublin was at once the centre of power of a unionist administration but was itself administered by a nationalist local authority, Dublin Corporation. After independence, the city that was to become the capital of the independent Ireland was nevertheless regarded with hostility by many as a foreign city, the power base of the occupying power. (continue on page 4)





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.

(continued from page 3)

The post-independence process of appropriation came in many forms: one of the first initiatives of the state was the repainting of post boxes throughout the country from red to green, asserting a visual reminder everywhere that the public spaces they sat in were now something other than British. Much of the appropriation involved conflict as previously controlling interests ceded to the new order.

In urban development one of the most obvious areas of conflict was the conservation of historic buildings, continuing from the 1950s onwards. Here the new order, represented by private developers (albeit with strong political links), came head to head with conservation interests over the redevelopment (demolition) of old buildings in historic urban centres.

While this was a conflict that took place in cities across Europe in the 1960s, the issue in Ireland was overlaid and amplified by the rhetoric of a continuing nationalist struggle. The developers often had strong links to the republican body politic (principally the Fianna Fail party) while the conservationists were often represented by members of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, for example through the Irish Georgian Society.

Anyway, before they moved over to containers everything came into boxes. Engines 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)

During one particularly bitter battle over the demolition of a set of architecturally important Georgian houses in Dublin, Kevin Boland, the then Minister for the Environment, made an infamous speech in which he stated that those behind protests against the demolitions were 'a consortium of belted earls and their ladies' who were also 'prominently engaged in the attempt to eliminate the most fundamental component of our heritage which is the national language'.

The speech is interesting because it sets out publicly a defence framed in a language of patriotic, nationalist language, for the quite pragmatic and apolitical actions of a private developer. The speech also privileges the verbal tradition of Irish as an important site of national culture while negating the architecture and built environment of the previous two hundred years as being so much without interest that it should no longer exist.

This policy allowed a disavowal of responsibility for the future or maintenance urban space. The end result was a complete lack of an overall vision on the part of official Ireland as to how Irish cities should develop.

There was a further marking of territory in the characterising of the suburbs as an alternative

Catholic territory to the Protestant sphere of the centre. In the 1960s, a new 250-acre campus for University College Dublin, together with the relocation of St. Vincent's hospital established a counterpoint to the 'pernicious orbit' of the Protestant Trinity College and the Protestant hospitals in the city's centre.

Suburbanisation was a movement that defined the form of the majority of cities across Europe and North America in the 20th century. Its roots lay in the rise of a new consumer culture, the desire for more spacious housing and by the availability of relatively cheap, personal transport in the form of the increasing available car. However universal this phenomenon might have been, in Ireland it became framed in a localised conflict over the ideological possession in the new state. It was important that the suburbanisation, which was occurring in any case, be ideologically possessed by the ascendant hierarchy.

Even with the Ford boxes, one of the speculations as to the why they came to be so useful was the appropriation of local timber and forestry by English industry, giving a neat circularity to the appropriation of by-products of English based industry in the creation of Irish domestic space.

The development of urban Ireland post-independence has something in common with the Ford boxes in that before the spaces could be re-occupied and given their new stories, they had first to be emptied, temporarily stripped of their old use and meaning. The historic architecture of Ireland had to be de-programmed and de-politicised before it could be allowed to be preserved. Historic city centres had to be abandoned by inhabitants in a wave of suburbanisation before their old associations with political power became sufficiently distant to allow re-occupation by the new demands of a booming economy. Even a national disinterest in architecture had to be asserted before those with an interest in architecture could escape being labelled as 'belted earls'.

It is interesting to speculate where in today's conditions a continuation of the story of the Ford boxes lies. One possibility is in the by-products of the software industry, which now makes up so much of the Irish balance of trade. Certainly the existence of local software companies owe their existence to spin-offs from the US software exports passing through. With companies such as Dell, Apple, Microsoft and Google now all having their European centres located in Irish cities, it is interesting to speculate what virtual house extensions are being created in Ireland with electronic Ford boxes.

