Ford boxes and urban space in Ireland
By Owen O'Doherty and Lisa Godson

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.

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.

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.