

Megalomania

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Fordlandia, Brazil

PHOTOGRAPHS

Dan Dubowitz

TEXT

Joe Jackson





Preface

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The new capital of Burma, in which few citizens live. The Holy Land theme park of Florida, where Christ is crucified daily as clicking shutters keep score. A publishing mogul's self-tribute, where his identity fades in the sound of breaking waves.

Such are the works of man – a special kind of man – whose spirit is preserved, like amber, in his creations. The question remains for the rest of us: how to translate such mad grandiosity?

The megalomaniac prefers power over friendship, fear over love, Bertrand Russell observed. Such madness would not matter if it were a private one. But Russell saw the problem in the wake of global war: "To this type belong many lunatics and most of the great men of history."

The self-delusional image *is* the man. But how does that image function when no checks exist? How does it boomerang back upon the individual?

We consider seven sites – seven chapters – seven psyches. Fordlandia is the first in a project examining the modern growth of such imposing new worlds – supposed utopias built in the image of their makers, rather than responding to a greater social need. Megalomania as an impulse may be as old as Caligula, but it has attained new meaning in a world where astronomical riches are held by the vainglorious few.

A rational society would not have considered such "projects of the will." But they rise outside of time, take form despite calls for common sense, shape the world by their presence…

And in the end, the ruins never change.

Megalomania:

Delusions of grandeur or self-importance,

esp. resulting from mental illness;

a passion for grandiose schemes; lust for power.

Oxford English Dictionary

Fordlandia, Brazil

THE INDUSTRIALIST

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Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me.

Captain Ahab

Why *shouldn't* the jungle bend to his will? The laws of physics had; the laws of time and motion. He'd proven, at least in his mind, that anything was possible given adequate time, effort, and capital. The past, and its limitations, did not apply to him. "History is bunk," he proclaimed: "It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today." When warned that *something* in the Amazon resisted the industrialization of Nature, he scoffed, "I am looking for a lot of men who have an infinite capacity to not know what can't be done."

Henry Ford was not the first industrialist to try to shape the wilderness in his image. But he was the most famous. While others influenced the masses through a filter of politics or philanthropy, Ford took the direct route, head on. He thought he could end the looming global war single-handedly and chartered a ship to Europe; he would arrive the savior, a balm for the world's ills. Once it became obvious that his presence was not enough, he refused to believe his senses. He was an undeniable force of good – the world press and his minions had said as much innumerable times – and such a force, like God, should have no limitations. Surely an equal force of evil must be standing in his way. And so he blamed the Jews.

Now, in the Amazon, Nature would be the nemesis.

Such are the wiles of megalomania, transforming thought and will into grand theatricality. Folly germinates in such mulch, a symptom Plato recognized millennia ago. Too much power is dangerous, he lamented in *The Republic*; moderation disappears, replaced by injustice or disorder. A man's soul falls prey to folly, "the worst of diseases." His past good works will crumble, and "all his power will vanish from him."

So it was with Ford, though in the beginning he had good reason to challenge the Amazon. By the first decades of the 20th century, the United States had become the world's Number One consumer of rubber, swallowing 70 percent of the world's production in its sprawling auto industry. In 1914 alone, Detroit consumed 1.8 million tires; of these, Ford's factories used 1.25 million. Rubber was the oil of today, the strategic resource over which corporations and governments schemed, native peoples in South America, Asia and Africa were exterminated, and Western entrepreneurs and mercenaries dreamed, fought and died. From 1498 to 1913, every "ball" of black rubber seen by Western eyes came from the Amazon basin; it was *caoutchouc* to the Indians, *borracha* to the Portuguese who ruled Brazil. In the lucrative rubber markets of London and Paris, wild rubber was known as "fine hard Pará," "India-rubber," and *gutta-percha*, but all knew the meaning of "black gold."

The best rubber came from *Hevea brasiliensis*, a 60-foot, silver-trunked giant found deep in the Amazon forest, and the best *Hevea*, reportedly, came from somewhere near Santarem, a river port 500 miles up the Amazon from the Atlantic. It was there that in 1876 the Victorian wanderer Henry Wickham smuggled 70,000 rubber seeds, with that theft handing to the British Empire the world monopoly in natural rubber. The British Empire controlled the price from their endless rubber plantations in the Far East, near Singapore. Now Ford wanted to close that circle, returning to the origin to create his own rubber empire.

Everything Ford did was expressed in Promethean terms. His 1913 implementation of the moving assembly line made "Fordism" the most imitated business model on earth.

High output, low prices and high wages would change mankind; he had "invented the modern industrial age," he liked to say. Few saw reason to quibble. From 1919 to 1926, his River Rouge factory in Dearborn, Michigan, grew to include 93 buildings, 75,000 employees, and spit out 4,000 cars per day. "Henry Ford has brought the hand of God and the hand of Man closer together at River Rouge than they have ever been brought in any other undertaking," declared *Industrial Management* in 1922. Many throughout the world agreed.

Fordlandia would be his tropical River Rouge. In 1927, seeking to sidestep the British rubber monopoly, Ford bought 2.5 million acres of riverfront property 60 miles south of Santarem on the Rio Tapajos; on a swath of land almost as big as Connecticut, he tried to establish his own private source of "Pará fine." His workers cleared 7,000 acres of forest, while the head office in Michigan shipped in houses, a hospital, a school, a sawmill and machine shop, and other facilities. The sawmill processed the clear-cut hardwoods, and young rubber trees were planted six inches apart on the denuded hills. An "American Villa" was built overlooking the town for the Michigan-bred managers, complete with a tree-lined street, white cottages, private club and pool. It was as if a Midwestern town had sprouted suddenly in the middle of Amazonia.

In describing his project, Ford asserted he would transform the world's rubber industry and save Brazil's economy in a single stroke; he would civilize the wilderness, a task that would stretch through the generations to his sons and grandsons. To dramatize the venture, he planned to drop from the clouds like a god, flying into Amazonia aboard his friend Charles Lindbergh's famous *Spirit of St. Louis*. In 1928, Lindbergh planned a 9,000-mile tour of Latin America in *Spirit*, and was more than willing to take Ford along. A Midwestern bungalow was built for Ford's use, with all the comforts of home. Lindbergh made the trip – but Ford never came.

Perhaps by then he'd glimpsed the future, for even by that early date the jungle proved more unforgiving than he'd imagined. For centuries, fortune hunters plied

their way up the muddy waters; most came to grief, and if they left anything behind, it was a monument to failed ambition and greed. In the 1870s, expatriate Confederates came looking to found a new cotton empire. Malaria and yellow fever found them first, and they died by the score. In 1872, British and American investors began building the Madeira-Mamoré Railroad in hopes of transporting Bolivian rubber 230 miles to the shipping routes of the eastern Amazon. Ten thousand workers died in the attempt, more than any other construction project in modern times; in five years, only five miles of track were laid. Investors called the region "a welter of putrefaction, where men die like flies." Locals called it the Railroad of Death. Poets dubbed it the Green Hell.

Now it was Henry Ford's turn. By the first year, Fordlandia was headed for ruin. Tempers flared between the Amazon workers and their Yankee bosses over the use of alcohol; in 1928, 2,000 of the original 3,000 workers walked away or were fired. The provincial governor levied new taxes; the cultivation of rubber seedlings was "perplexing and discouraging." Two riots exploded in the 1930s, one over working conditions, the second over lingering prejudice between Brazilians and immigrant blacks from Barbados. No sooner did the canopy of young rubber trees close overhead than *Microcyclus ulei*, the South American leaf blight, spread through the plantation, stripping the trees of their leaves. A plague of insects advanced from the forest, including legions of caterpillars with red stripes and mandibles strong enough to draw blood.

In the mid-1930s, while Henry Ford still prayed for success, a German journalist visited Fordlandia. The Germans had endured a rubber embargo during World War I and were very interested in the mechanized struggles of the industrialist Adolf Hitler admired. "A new and titanic fight between nature and modern man is beginning," wrote the reporter, but by then the die was cast. In 1945, after spending (in today's terms) a third of a billion dollars on his dream of empire, Ford sold out to the Brazilian government for $500,000. He never admitted as much, but Nature had won.

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Fordlandia still stands on the river, a barely-inhabited ghost town. One chugs up the Tapajos in a small riverboat, an eighteen-hour trip of slow water and unchanging greenery. You round the bend and there it is, the 150-foot water tower rising from the canopy, at the time of its construction the tallest manmade structure in the Amazon. Decades of rain have stripped the cursive Ford logo from the surface of the 150,000-gallon tank. The titanic legs and supports are rusted and bare.

The desolation of this place becomes apparent immediately. As late as 2008, the dusty streets were empty save for a few families and their children; Zebu cattle imported from India for their mosquito resistance wandered the lanes. The American Villa stood atop the hill, but the only inhabitants were fruit bats and tarantulas. The state-of-the-art hospital shipped from Michigan was deserted; broken bottles and patient records littered the floor. An abandoned machine shop housed a 1940s-era ambulance, up on blocks. A riverside warehouse built to hold huge sheets of processed rubber held coffins instead.

Lately life has returned, though nothing close to what had been. The cemetery is well-tended, watched over by a former hitman who mourns the lives he took in the nearby goldfields. The population has crept up to nearly 2,000, though where these people come from and how they make a living is a mystery. Perhaps they work in the burgeoning soybean plantations or vast cattle ranches that speckle the jungle, both created by clear-cutting tens of thousands of acres of forest trees. Some of the houses in the American Villa have been remodeled, given a coat of bright paint, the windows refitted with glass panes and bug screens. Yet in others, the mold still creeps throughout. The forest reaches in the empty windows like the guilt felt by the hitman for his dead.

In recent years, more children can be seen on the streets, and a school has started again. A teacher there recently wrote to the Ford Company, asking them to reinstate the old hospital. Ford reportedly refused, and added: "We pay no tribute to failure."

The echoes of mortality reach through the years. Consider the photos: the massive water tower, factories, pump station – all rising from the river or earth like the ruined monument in Shelley's *Ozymandias*: "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Occasional figures are dwarfed by this landscape. All fades to a vanishing point of endless river and sky.

There is an old saying in the Amazon, one often uttered with a cynical tilt of the head. *Deus é grande, mas o mato é maior*: "God is great, but the forest is greater." God sees the truth in the wilderness, but sometimes forgets, Brazilians add. But the jungle never forgets – and like it did to Ford and his works, it always takes revenge.



Fordlandia, Brazil

P. 13 American Manager's Villa

P. 15 Power House

P. 17 Cemetry

P. 19 Canteen

P. 21 Hospital

P. 23 Power Factor

P. 25 Sleeping Child

P. 27 Pump House

P. 29 Water Tower

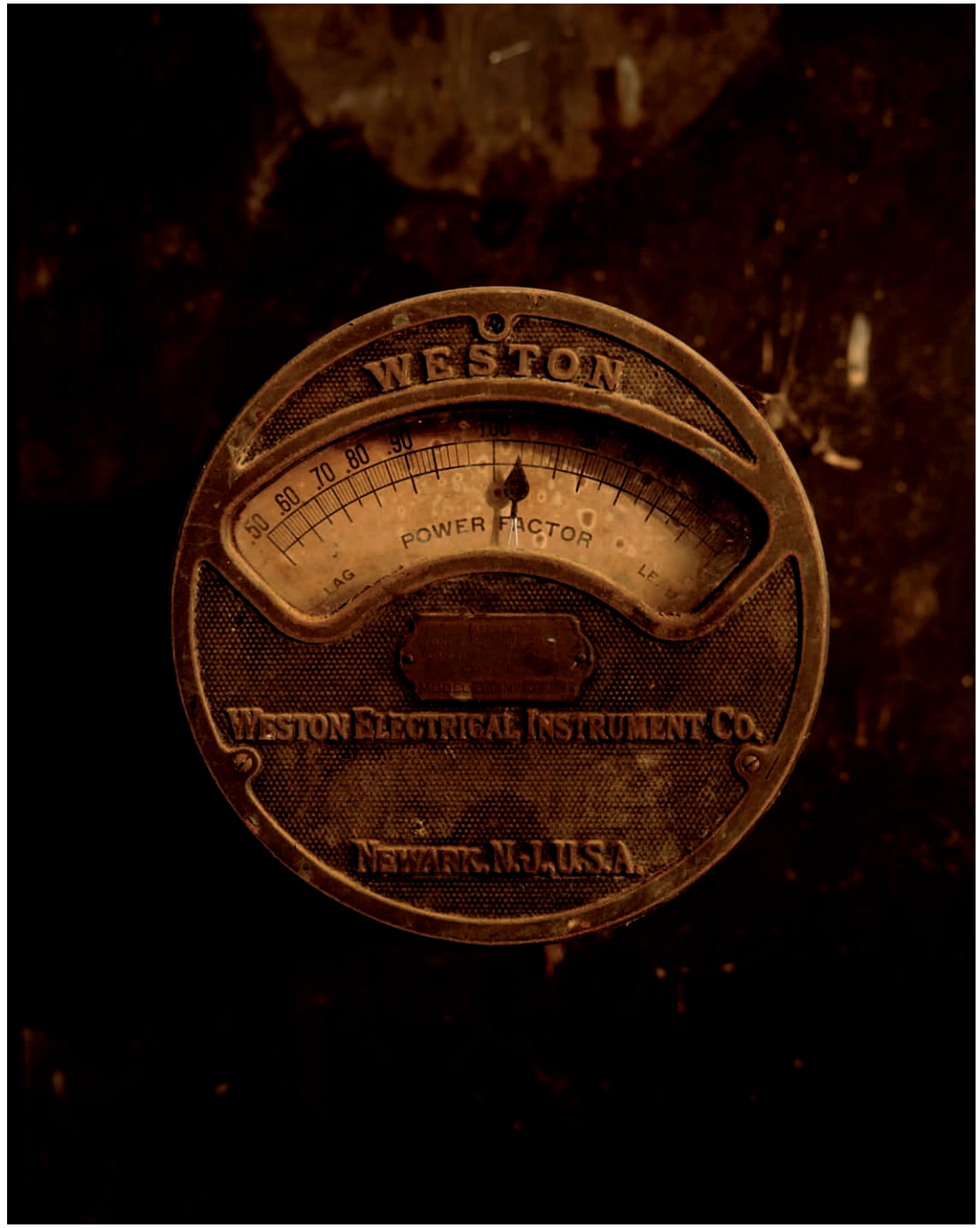











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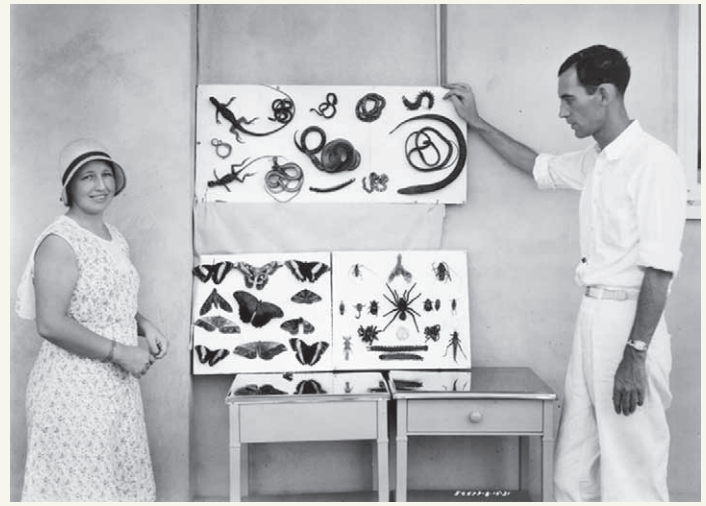




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