FORDLANDIA

FORDLANDIA: Inside Henry Ford's failed utopian city in the Amazon

By Drew Reed, The Guardian From Business Insider

In 1928, northern Brazil was captivated by an enticing bit of news.

The region’s residents were about to receive a new visitor, a man who came with the promise of reviving their ailing economy and introducing them to a whole new way of life – Henry Ford.

Local papers began raving about their future neighbor.

Speculation ran wild: some columnists opined that Ford would be building a new railroad to the coast, or a new factory for his cars. Above all, they just wanted to know when he would be arriving.

Officially, Ford’s interest in Brazil was a business venture: the monopoly on Sri Lankan rubber maintained by Britain was driving up costs for his new Model A cars, so he wanted to find a cheap source of latex that would allow the Ford Motor Company to produce its own tires, to cut costs.

But Ford’s vision ran much deeper. His goal was not simply to ship latex back to the company’s Dearborn HQ – it was to build his vision of the ideal city. A city that would fuse the same concepts that Ford had championed throughout his career, and bring a better future to a forgotten part of the planet. And that city would bear his name: Fordlandia.

It is difficult to overstate the reputation Henry Ford had built for himself by that time – whether in Brazil, America, or anywhere else on the planet.

In his day, Ford’s name was every bit as evocative of the glimmering promise of technological revolution as Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg – perhaps even more so.

Within a decade of its founding in Dearborn, Michigan in 1903, the Ford Motor Company had revolutionized car production by introducing the assembly line – isolating tasks within the complex process of car assembly, allowing new models of his flagship vehicle, the Model T, to be cranked out faster than ever before, making the company a global success.

Yet Ford’s greatest innovation was arguably not mechanical, but social. He took pride in the fair treatment of his staff, and in 1914, to great fanfare, he proclaimed that all Ford workers would receive a daily salary of $5 (the equivalent of $120 (£90) today).

Ford believed fair treatment would make his workers more responsible citizens and, in the process, solidify a client base for manufacturers. The Rev Samuel Marquis, one the heads of Ford’s employee relations office, once proclaimed that Ford’s cars were “the by-products of his real business, which is the making of men”.

But some of Ford’s social ideas were highly sinister – most notoriously his anti-semitism, which featured prominently in a newspaper he himself printed, the Dearborn Independent.

He became increasingly convinced that his role in advancing society had to go beyond the factory floor, and encompass entire cities. While he succeeded in bringing some of his smaller urban planning concepts to life, his much larger project, a massive manufacturing city to be built in northern Alabama – 75 miles long, with power supplied by damming the Tennessee river – never got off the ground.

Eventually, Ford settled on a location for his ideal city that was a good deal further south than Alabama: the Amazon.

‘A work of civilization’

By the 1920s, the Amazon basin lay in shambles. At the end of the previous century, the region had benefited from a monopoly on global rubber production, skyrocketing demands, and easy transportation via the navigable waters of the Amazon river.

Cities along the river had swelled with new residents seeking their fortunes, and had lined their streets with opulent new buildings. Belem, at the mouth of the river, became the busiest port in Brazil; upriver, Manaus became world famous for its decadent Amazon Theatre.

But the cultivation of rubber trees could not be standardised; placing them too close together exposed them to blight and parasites. And though these trees only grew natively in Brazil, it wasn’t long before enterprising botanists decided they would try planting them in other tropical regions, where they had no natural parasites.

The British began growing rubber in Sri Lanka, after a rubber tree’s seeds were famously smuggled out of Brazil. And by the beginning of the century, this produce was vastly outperforming Brazil’s rubber crop. The Amazon basin, heavily dependent on proceeds from rubber sales, was devastated.

Fresh off the failure of his Alabama development, Ford grew fascinated with the economically ravaged Amazon as a potential site for a reboot of his utopian aspirations. He had reportedly first become interested by the area after hearing ex-president Theodore Roosevelt, a personal friend, tell of his journey down the river. Increasing rubber prices gave a practical aspect to his dream.

In his utopian mind, Ford’s plan for growing rubber in the Amazon was (as one state department official later described it) a “work of civilization”. He believed the values that had made his company a success would build character anywhere else on the planet. In 1928, he went as far as to announce: “We are not going to South America to make money, but to help develop that wonderful and fertile land.”

But the move also represented a certain disenchantment with his home country, and a desire to start from scratch in the blank slate of the Amazon jungle. “The force of industrial capitalism [Ford] helped to unleash,” writes Greg Grandin in his definitive history of Fordlandia, “was undermining the world he hoped to restore.”

By 1927, the economic justification for Ford’s proposed incursion into Brazil had become less convincing. Britain’s stranglehold on global rubber began to diminish, and his advisers suggested he would be better off purchasing rubber from local suppliers in Brazil. But Ford soon sent two of his most trusted men to reach an agreement with Brazilian authorities.

The deal with the Brazilian state of Para was not exactly beneficial for Ford. He received rights to commercially operate a 5,625 sq mile tract of land on the Tapajós river, a tributary of the Amazon, for a total of $125,000. It was later revealed that Ford’s men had given him something of a raw deal; by law, he could have obtained that land for next to nothing.

Nevertheless, Ford now had all he needed to bring his ideals to life in the middle of the jungle. As Grandin notes: “Ford had the right to run Fordlandia as a separate state.”

Ford’s uphill battle

The site of Fordlandia had been chosen on top of a rise, to protect it from flooding. But this meant it was far enough inland that the cargo vessel chosen to haul construction materials could not pass through the rocky waters of the Tapajós until the rainy season. A crew assembled at the future site of the city in late 1928, angered by a rotting food supply, and revolted against its leadership.

Materials didn’t arrive at Fordlandia until early 1929. Construction finally began under the command of the Norwegian-born Einar Oxholm, who oversaw the laying out of Fordlandia’s basic street grid.

The city was built with a separate neighborhood, the Vila Americana, for the American staff who worked there. Grandin points out that this development was separated from the areas intended for Brazilian workers. “It was offset a bit, similar to the relationship of suburbia to a city,” he says. The Vila Americana had the best view of the city, and was the only section with running water; while the Brazilian workers made do with water supplied by wells.

The city would come to feature modern hospitals, schools, generators and a sawmill. By the end of 1930, its landmark structure was complete: a water tower, utilitarian beacon of modernity for Ford’s “civilizing” project.

But it still faced an uphill battle. Clearing the jungle was excruciating work, and despite Ford’s famously high wages, labor of the kind needed for the project was in short supply. Amazon wood, which Ford had initially hoped to sell at a profit until rubber could be produced in the territory, proved useless.

The local press, initially friendly, turned on Ford and his project. Meanwhile, Ford’s desire that the city remain alcohol-free proved all but impossible to enforce. Oxholm didn’t last long as manager – the city would go through several managers in its first two years.

Just when things appeared to be settling down in Fordlandia, violence broke out again on 20 December 1930. At the worker’s cafe, in which skilled workers were separated from manual laborers, an argument between supervisor Kaj Ostenfeld and Manuel Caetano, a brick mason working at the city, quickly escalated. Workers rallied behind Caetano, vandalizing the city, destroying generators, manufacturing equipment, and even their own homes.

Fordlandia’s managerial staff managed to escape by ship; they were eventually able to subdue the violence, but only by appealing to Pan Am air magnate Juan Trippe to assist them by flying in Brazilian military personnel on one of his planes.

After this low point, Fordlandia faced a turning point. Ford finally found a successful manager in Archibald Johnston, who turned the city around after the riot: paving the roads, finishing much of the city’s much needed housing, and beginning work on access roads to connect Fordlandia with the massive territory Ford had acquired inland from the river.

It was perhaps under Johnston that Fordlandia came closest to Ford’s original ideal. He succeeded in bringing many of the amenities typical of American towns into the heart of the Amazon basin. The centerpiece was an entertainment facility that screened Hollywood films and also held dances. Health and education facilities were also improved. Johnson saw to it that many of Ford’s behavioral edicts were put into place, including a strict diet (though the alcohol provision still remained hard to enforce), and an emphasis on gardening.

But one problem remained: Fordlandia was not producing any rubber. Jungle foliage continued to be cleared, but efforts to plant rubber trees yielded discouraging results. The few trees that took root were quickly beset by blight.

To combat this, Ford brought in expert botanist James R Weir, who infuriated Johnston by insisting on a number of extravagant planting methods, and then, in 1936, demanding the construction of a second plant within Ford’s territory, called Belterra. Weir unceremoniously departed from Fordlandia a year later, without informing any staff of his intention to never return.

Despite having outlived their economic rationale, Fordlandia and Belterranonetheless persisted for nearly a decade. As Ford’s car manufacturing operation became increasingly involved in the second world war effort, his holding in Brazil filled with American military personnel.

By the time the war ended, Henry Ford was in poor health. Management of the company fell to his grandson Henry Ford II, who promptly cut into the company’s ballooning costs by selling underperforming assets. Fordlandia was first on the chopping block.

Ford II sold it back to Brazil for a fraction of what his grandfather had originally paid. The moment news of the sale reached Fordlandia, its American residents headed home, leaving its Brazilian residents wondering what had hit them.

A quiet death

In contrast to the excitement generated around its creation, Fordlandia’s death was a quiet one. Equipment from the sawmill and generator was left to the elements and vandals over the years, rusting in the thick Amazon air. The iconic water tower still stands, though it no longer holds any water, and the Ford logo proudly painted on it has long since faded.

In the past decade, however, Fordlandia has enjoyed something of a renaissance. Part of that is cultural: its history has been revisited in news articles, documentaries and even in music – Icelandic minimalist composer Johann Johannsson released an album in 2008 inspired by the city. After the population languished at less than 100 over several decades, it has rebounded to around 3,000 people in recent years.

“Today, most residents don’t care very much about Fordlandia’s history,” says Christiane von Schwind, producer of a short documentary about the city. “If the population is rising, I’m sure it has to do with economic reasons rather than the history or ‘spirit’ of Fordlandia.”

Yet there are those who still remember their time in Fordlandia. In a 2008 film about the city, former resident Charles Townsend returns to the town with members of his family. Seeing one of the schools, he runs ahead of the camera, eager to chat with some of the children.

“Who here was born in Fordlandia?” he asks the children in an easygoing Portuguese; they respond with cheers. “I was born in Fordlandia too!” he replies.

Those children don’t have the good fortune of attending a modern school, the way Fordlandia’s first residents did. But in a way they are better off. Fordlandia was created as the brainchild of one of the world’s most ambitious industrialists, and it failed. Perhaps it will do better as just an average town.

IMAGES:

henry ford The man himself. en.wikipedia.org

840 By 1940, the plant employed 400 people. The collections of Henry Ford

1115 To attract workers to Fordlandia, Ford offered a range of services – including an 18-hole golf course and dance hall. The collections of Henry Ford

Screen Shot 2016 08 19 at 2.19.43 PM

A map of Fordlandia's location in Brazil. The Guardian

For more on this story go to: <http://www.businessinsider.com/fordlandia-inside-henry-fords-failed-utopian-city-in-the-amazon-2016-8?utm_source=feedburner&amp%3Butm_medium=referral&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+businessinsider+%28Business+Insider%29>