

failure

Transmissao Fordlandia

RADIOEE set to highlight conditions at present-day Fordlandia, Henry Ford's failed jungle city in the Brazilian Amazon.

Jason Zasky | Sep 06, 2017



Publicity photo courtesy of Agustina Woodgate. Used by permission.

On September 16-17, RADIOEE—which “hosts nomadic, multilingual, online radio broadcast events on mobility topics”—will broadcast live from Fordlandia, the former plantation city that Henry Ford established in 1927 in hopes it would provide a reliable supply of rubber for his motorcar empire. As you may know, Ford’s attempt to colonize and industrialize the area was a failure, and the city—found alongside the Tapajós River, a tributary of the Amazon—was abandoned less than two decades later, the land sold back to the Brazilian government at a loss of tens of millions of dollars.

In recent years, however, Fordlandia has experienced something of a rebirth, and it is now populated by approximately two-thousand people, who have slowly resettled the abandoned homes and buildings. In fact, one of the goals of the RADIOEE broadcast (10 am to 10 pm - 3GMT) is to highlight present conditions at the site via “interviews on local culture and music, soundscapes of the overnight jungle, and live performances by local artists and musicians,” including featured performances by Brazilian sound artists Veronique Isabelle, Gabi Marthino, and Angelo Madson.

After the live broadcast at radioee.net is over, RADIOEE plans to leave behind a sound exhibition in the old Ford Factory, as well as all of the equipment necessary to re-activate Fordlandia’s now-defunct FM radio station, which was a big loss to the local community when it went off the air.

In the following *Failure* Interview, event co-producers Stephanie Sherman and Agustina Woodgate discuss the inspiration for Transmissão Fordlandia, as well as the challenges of traveling deep into the Amazon jungle and broadcasting from the site.

Before we talk about Transmissão Fordlandia, tell me about RADIOEE.

Stephanie Sherman: RADIOEE stands for Radio Espacio Estation—or Radio Space Station in English—and hosts broadcast events three times per year from different locations on mobility topics. We are an Internet station—we partner with local stations to co-broadcast—and most of our broadcasts are on the move in some way. For instance, we’ve done a broadcast from a 16-person bicycle, and another from a boat. We are interested in mobility themes like transportation and migration, and a lot of our topics consider how climate fits into the movement of people around the globe.

Agustina Woodgate: Radio is considered somewhat of an old medium, so for us to host an online radio station that is also nomadic is bringing this medium to the present but in a new shape.

What are some of the technical challenges of doing a broadcast while on the move?

Agustina: [laughs] The list is really long.

Stephanie: Power is always a huge question. Accessing the Internet is always a huge question too.

Agustina: To give you a hint, with the broadcast from a 16-person bicycle there were no cords involved because we were pedaling and moving. The bicycle was the [radio] station and we were picking up and dropping off our guests at different locations, yet we needed our bicycle complete because we were using the power of our guests, who were pedaling in order to move.

For Internet, we have our own router that we use wherever we go, except in places like the jungle, where we are learning about satellite Internet, which is a new challenge for us.

Stephanie: We’ve started to use solar powered batteries, which have been tremendously effective, and that is a key source of power. But the jungle adventure is a new threshold of challenge for us.

One other fun challenge is keeping a good, healthy multi-lingual balance. Transmissão Fordlandia will be in Spanish, English, and Portuguese, and we are always challenged to keep the station compelling for our listeners who might not speak all the languages. So there is a bit of language-learning and word play and thinking about how different languages connect and fit together. That is something we are always aware of.

Where did the idea for Transmissão Fordlandia come from?

Stephanie: I'm doing a Ph.D. in design at the University of California (San Diego), and I started thinking a lot about mobility as a topic for my Ph.D. after moving to California and being utterly appalled at how inefficient the highway system is and the way everyday life is organized around the automobile. That inspired a whole series of thinking around:

- How did this happen?
- How did the American landscape get to be shaped by the automobile?
- And how did the automobile take over to the extent that it did?

That led me to Henry Ford, who is a hero of the American landscape but in some ways a villain, if you want to use those polarizing ways of thinking about him.

The more I looked into Henry Ford, the more I found his legacy incredibly complex. You have the \$5 a day wage, which builds an American middle class, and at the same time the brutal practices of the assembly line.

The other thing I started thinking about was cinema and the cultural ways of communicating that Ford utilized to make the automobile catch on in the American imagination. He was making newsreels before movies, he had a Ford radio hour every Sunday, and he was supporting concerts at locations all over the country.

Then you have Ford's international projects, and in the case of Fordlandia, it was a debacle. In all the ways that Ford was such a success in capturing the American imagination he was a total failure at instantiating a Ford-ist culture and production cycle in Brazil.

This happened at every level, from his inability to get a factory producing and his inability to get workers to believe in his kind of company and become productive workers. There was a lot of indigenous resistance on the labor front, but also the utopian community that Ford dreamed of in Fordlandia was anything but that. He also failed to organize nature in way that would produce to his liking.

So the Fordlandia story became more and more interesting the more we looked at it. There is a great book, of course, by Greg Grandin, called [Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City](#) (Metropolitan Books), and that is the seminal text; it's an excellent study of all of the complexities of the place.

For readers who aren't familiar with Fordlandia, tell me a little about it.

Stephanie: Fordlandia was established to create a steady supply of rubber for Ford. Henry Ford's dream was a total, vertically-integrated production system; he wanted to have control of the production of every part that would go into his automobiles. In some ways, Fordlandia was the final challenge in that quest because rubber was the last thing that he didn't have control over.

So Ford bought this plot of land on the Tapajós. He had never been there and we can presume that the Brazilians were looking to re-activate international and foreign investment because they had had a few Dutch and English rubber barons who had moved their rubber supplies to Asia. Ford was also trying to break a rubber monopoly at the time; rubber was very expensive and the purchase of the Brazilian land [by itself] started to bring down the cost of rubber.

He also had all sorts of ideas about how to bring the American lifestyle to Fordlandia. The idea was that the natives and indigenous tappers would be tamed and would learn to enjoy American conveniences. And certainly there was a missionary dimension.

Obviously it wasn't all horrible. From accounts, there was a lot of appreciation of the hospital in Fordlandia, which was designed by Albert Kahn and very well received. On the other hand, Ford's intervention in the Amazon certainly precipitated many of the tropical diseases that became rampant once there was an attempt to farm and implement agriculture in the region.

How do you get to Fordlandia?

Agustina: We will take a seven-hour flight direct to Belem. From Belem we travel to a smaller airport which is close to the rainforest. From there we are meeting with all the rest of the team—local curators—and taking a ten-hour boat [ride] to Fordlandia, It's a three day trip.

If you visit Fordlandia today, what do you see?

Stephanie: Our understanding is that many of the structures that Ford constructed are still there; some are abandoned or fix-ups and many have broken windows. Ford built small houses that were in an American style, many of which—from what we hear—now have people living in them. There is also a pharmacy and a local bar, which is a place that a lot of people hang out.

From what we understand Fordlandia is a stopover point—though a not very frequent stopover point—on the Tapajós, so if you are traveling and saying, "Let's spend the night somewhere," you might stop in Fordlandia.

Agustina: There is also a posada there—an informal posada, because it's not a very touristy place. But the posada can host very adventurous tourists, and that is where we will be staying for the ten days we will be there.

What will listeners hear when they listen to Transmissão Fordlandia?

Agustina: The main topic will be the relationship between transportation and agriculture. Fordlandia's history and past will help contextualize the location but it's important to focus on what Fordlandia is today—the present and the future of Fordlandia and territories like it. The population has been growing pretty fast in the past ten years so some key questions are:

apexart

- What is bringing people back to Fordlandia?
- Why is the population growing?
- What is the economy today in Fordlandia?

Today the industry there is agriculture. Right behind Fordlandia is the [so-called] Soy Highway, and the Amazon of today is very much focused on the export of soybeans. Human transportation along the Amazon is not a Brazilian priority as [compared to] the soy industry and the metal industry, so those are the kinds of conversations we are going to be establishing.

What impact will this project have on the former FM radio station there?

Agustina: Fordlandia used to have a radio station that closed two years ago. It was one of their only channels [to the outside world], so when we started talking with the community there, very quickly we determined that we would be leaving them with all of the equipment necessary to operate an FM station. They already have the licensing permit so we will simply re-activate the station.

Is radio a good medium for exploring the past, present, and future of failed spaces like Fordlandia?

Stephanie: Radio is an excellent medium for engaging the complexities of fallen spaces. In truth, failed spaces are very rarely totally abandoned; they are often populated by animals, plants, and some people. There is often visual work on these places, but radio is a means for engaging what's alive there—the presence and history as it exists and persists in stories and soundscapes. This is what excites us—to go deep into these places with others, and to build connections between locals through the process. Radio lets our listeners around the world be intimate with these places in a way that the visual sometimes cannot produce. And the live element is enchanting.

<http://failuremag.com/article/transmissao-fordlandia>