

Odd Bedfellows: Cranbrook and Ford's Utopian Village

By [EDWARD ROTHSTEIN](#)

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BLOOMFIELD HILLS, Mich. - Above the library's fireplace in Cranbrook House - a grand Elizabethan-style manor in this wealthy town outside Detroit - is a wood-carved Gothic image that pays homage to the spirits governing this remarkable estate. A bishop is the carving's central figure; seemingly divine figures approach him bearing offerings. But look closely and these figures are seen as human, humble craftsmen carrying tools: a metalsmith, a glass blower, a bookbinder, a weaver and, nearest the center, an architect said to resemble the designer of this home, Albert Kahn.



Carlos Osorio/Associated Press

Cranbrook House in Bloomfield Hills was designed by Albert Kahn.

The strange thing is that around 1907-8, when Kahn built Cranbrook House to look as if it had been in place for centuries, he was also beginning talks with Henry Ford to build his company's Highland Park factory in Detroit. That automobile factory became one of the most extraordinary structures ever built for industry - four stories high and 865 feet long, with 50,000 square feet of glass windows. Known as the Crystal Palace, it was, by 1913, responsible for producing half the automobiles sold in the United States. Within its walls, modern industry was transformed by Ford's invention of the assembly line.

But what would have drawn Kahn, an architect identified with the Arts and Crafts movement, which combined a spiritual devotion to the crafts with an antipathy to the Industrial Revolution, to build a factory that came to embody that revolution for the 20th century? Moreover, what could Henry Ford, who had no patience for intellectuals and artists, and whom Edmund Wilson

once called "the despot of Dearborn," have in common with the newspaper magnate George Gough Booth and his wife, Ellen Warren Scripps Booth, who built Cranbrook and over the decades turned their farmland into an almost fantastical estate on which cohabit elementary and high schools, art and science museums, and a distinguished training program in the arts? Strange bedfellows, perhaps, an accident of wealthy people seeking renowned architects for their favored projects.

But there is something more going on here, something that sheds light on an earlier world far different from our own. In their idiosyncratic ways, both Ford and the Booths created fantasy villages of a kind, defining their utopian visions. And these visions overlapped.

Ford, for example, might have been an industrialist, but as Steven Watts shows, in his recent book "The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century," he was also a devotee of craft, endlessly tinkering and revising designs for machinery. He collected machinery, too, including machinery that was knit into daily life: cars, of course, but also clocks, vacuum cleaners, kitchen appliances. Ford was a populist. He did not want to make cars for the wealthy; he wanted them to be available to the lower and middle classes. He also saw a moral component to this enterprise. "We want to make men in this factory as well as automobiles," he once said.

At Cranbrook, Booth and his wife would have agreed about the importance of craft and simplicity, and also agreed about the moral component. The Arts and Crafts movement, they believed, united the arts and sciences while returning them to the needs and tastes of the people. They were literally religious in their devotion.

Not far from their home, they built Christ Church Cranbrook, an almost stupefyingly grand Gothic revival parish church full of references to the movement. On the outside are carved the figures of Wilbur Wright, Copernicus and Leonardo da Vinci; on the inside, a stained glass window celebrates Clara Barton, Louisa May Alcott and Mary Cassatt. By 1925 the architect Eliel Saarinen was hired to reflect Booth's spiritual, Arts and Crafts-inspired vision, turning Cranbrook's 300-some acres into an institutional tribute. Even school dining halls become striking paeans to the art of design.

There is something at once nostalgic and forward looking in the feel of Cranbrook. It embraces a world in many ways pre-industrial. Earlier styles are invoked by the buildings and their inscriptions. But there is also something utopian in this looking back, a sense that in the devotion to craft could be found an opening to future possibilities.

The arenas of concern are different with Ford, but some impulses are similar. Though Ford, as Watts shows, created new forms of advertising and salesmanship, and though the popularization of the automobile literally transformed the American city, there was romance in Ford's imagination, a desire to ground the future in the fast-vanishing past.

Ford became an avid collector, and the Henry Ford Museum is now a tribute to Americana whose spiritual heart is the period when Ford first perfected the Model T; it is Americana on the cusp of mechanization. Bicycles, stoves and bureaus are a short walk away from steam engines and tractors. The two worlds coexist. In Ford's paradoxical vision, the machine seems to open a way to preserve the lost past.

Nothing makes this more clear than when in the late 1920's Ford began to construct his Greenfield Village. Housed on more than 90 acres, it is a historical village in which history is less important than Ford's fantasy of old craft and new machine creating an ideal America. It is an almost surreal miscellany. A house belonging to Robert Frost was relocated not far from a reconstruction of the Dearborn schoolhouse in which Ford was taught to read; Model T's run on immaculate roads, right past the Wright brothers' Cycle Shop; a working machine shop is next to handmade artifacts. Periods and styles, reproductions and relocations, are all strangely tossed together in service of Ford's ideal.

Ford and Booth would not have seen eye to eye, and Booth's aesthetic project was far more serious, but in their devotion to craft, and their nostalgia for a world about to past, they created homages to worlds they would like to see take shape. Neither dreamer defined the world to come, but there is something startling and even inspiring about the attempt, particularly when so few now try anything similar.