

*DeLorean:  
Progress Report*

DeLorean: Progress Report

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Ten colour photographs, each 59.7 x 44.5cm

Three colour photographs, each 122 x 91.5cm

Eight stainless steel body panels of a DMC-12 car, each handmade

John DeLorean was arrested on 19th October 1982 for alleged possession of 16 million dollars' worth of cocaine at the Sheraton La Reina hotel, close to Los Angeles airport. While cleared of all charges by 1984 after DeLorean was judged a victim of FBI entrapment, the incident meant the effective end of his fledgling sports-car factory in Dunmurry, outside Belfast. With substantial financial investment from the British government, and individuals such as Sammy Davis Jr and Johnny Carson, DeLorean had designed a new car, built a factory and employed over 2,600 workers, producing the DMC-12 model. Technical flaws during car production, poor sales in the United States and an upcoming criminal trial all contributed to bankruptcy and closure of the factory after less than two years of operation. Despite such obstacles, the car was considered valuable for its unusual design incorporating gull-wing doors and a stainless steel body, later becoming a popular icon of the 1980s, functioning as a time machine in the movie *Back to the Future*. Today, many enthusiasts worldwide maintain and drive the vehicle.

The incidents and events around DeLorean's enterprise and demise attracted an amount of media attention and were well known. He appeared in magazines such as *Playboy*, *Time* and *People*, frequently portrayed as the maverick entrepreneur. Of many publications about his life and business, one might note that *The Sunday Times* published a book for its readers containing the entire FBI surveillance transcripts of his cocaine entrapment. Cinema Verité director D.A. Pennebaker's 1981 documentary film *DeLorean* detailed moments from the boardroom to the factory floor. DeLorean died in 2005, and recently it was announced that an upcoming movie based on his life was to be produced: 'It's almost like an updated *Citizen Kane* story of the great American entrepreneurial hero and how it all went wrong.'<sup>1</sup>

To further an understanding of this legacy, research was undertaken on rumours regarding the last chapter of DeLorean's venture. I took a particular interest in comprehending how the actual production of the car

wound down. As per usual with bankruptcy, a public auction took place in Dunmurry in May 1984 where the entire inventory of the factory was sold off. Much of this material was exported to the United States. Läßple, a Carlow-based subcontractor, was responsible for making the stainless steel panels that form the exterior body of the car.<sup>2</sup> They decided to recover some of their losses as a result of DeLorean's bankruptcy, and sold all the tools and panels that were used in their contracted work. Scrap dealers arrived with trucks in Carlow and cleared away a two-acre site full of stainless steel panels and massive sections of cast iron tooling, which were used to stamp out the panels for the car and essentially functioned as the shape-givers to the DMC-12.<sup>3</sup>

After numerous phone calls and visits to scrap dealers throughout the island, I was surprised that despite the volume of material their businesses deal with, many remembered the DeLorean material. Large metal sections, some weighing up to 25 tonnes, passed through their yards. They in turn exported the metal to furnaces around Europe, where it was melted down and recycled, to begin use in another place or circumstance, as another structure or function. I encountered an unverified rumour claiming some body panels were reused in the Carlow area to construct pig troughs on a local farm. At Galway Metal in Oranmore, I saw a large door on a workshop, constructed from stainless steel sheets once destined to become part of a DeLorean. At Haulbowline Industries, a scrapyards outside Cork City, I heard that twelve large pieces of the tooling were purchased by a company called Emerald Fisheries, who took them by boat to Kilkieran Bay in Co. Galway. There, in an inlet off the Atlantic Ocean, they sunk the tooling to the bottom of the sea-bed, using them as anchors to hold in place fish cages for salmon farming.<sup>4</sup> A journey around these various sites had first been made by Gordon Novel, a self-described 'counter-intelligence expert' whose name has been associated with several controversial conspiracy theories in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Armed with hidden tape recorders, Novel travelled throughout Ireland and Europe in 1984 in an unsuccessful attempt to recover the tooling, then export and

reuse it as part of a proposed new DeLorean manufacturing plant in Ohio. By the time he arrived in Galway, the pieces were already submerged underwater, and he hired divers to examine their condition on the sea-bed.

A series of photographs taken in 2009 document sites involved in this chain of handling. These images detail the contemporary condition of factories once involved in the production and assembly of the car, sites of scrapyards that collected and handled the remaining metal tooling, the boat that transported them and the fish farm where they were recycled into anchors at the bottom of the sea. The order of the images and accompanying captions seek and suggest evidence of a DeLorean heritage in these places. In this sense, the proverbial 'needle in the haystack' is an appropriate consideration; when viewing the photographs, it becomes apparent each site has since been shaped by other, more dominant economic realities. These changes have eroded any obvious DeLorean association. Both portrayed factories now have a different function, yet their austere facades reveal little in regards to what might be produced there: a scrapyard in Dublin's docklands is now a building site, and a fish farm lies fallow as a result of European Union regulations that have stifled growth in the industry. As a result, the sequence itself acts as a provisional model, an attempt to represent an interlinked economy long disappeared.

Work in the future could continue to document and articulate more places and objects that are linked to this industrial saga. For example, it might be useful to visit the location of metal recycling plants or steel mills operational in the 1980s throughout Europe, with DeLorean in mind. It might also be relevant to consider other tangents that might be evoked by each photograph. When looking at an image of Sir John Rogerson's Quay in Dublin, former site of the Hammond Lane scrapyard, one might wonder whether its owners, the music band U2, will ever have the opportunity to build their proposed skyscraper at the location; their scheme might fade away as easily as the history of DeLorean on the site. The Severn

Princess, the boat that dropped the tooling into the Atlantic, once functioned as a ferry across the Severn. A web of context here could include Bob Dylan. He was photographed in the rain, with his sunglasses on, waiting for the Princess to arrive and take him across the river from England to Wales in May 1966.<sup>6</sup> Through understanding what one 'wants' in an image, these anecdotes might be the histories of most relevance when looking at images of the Severn Princess or Rogerson's Quay. This openness to overtures of historical moment might initially suggest a kind of futility or foolish chase in arriving at these scenes too late, trying to find out what might have once occurred there. Yet, to understand where and what the materiality of DeLorean might be, it is useful to think of these locations and narratives as part of a flexible assemblage of history. DeLorean might not simply be an object of 1980s consumerism or an obsolete manufacturing process. By viewing the various scenarios touched and evoked by its presence in the world, a more encompassing view could consider DeLorean as a medium, as a very literal mode of transport (or as Hollywood would have you believe, a time machine) between seemingly disparate sites and events.<sup>7</sup>

Layers of time and circumstance of site are more visually apparent in a collection of photographs that detail the current location of the DeLorean tooling. A series of reconnaissance dives were performed around Kilkieran Bay in July 2009. Of a reported twelve presses, three can still be seen above the surface of the sea-bed. These structures weigh between four and six tonnes, and are situated at distances of 18 and 22 metres beneath the water's surface. Seaweed, crabs, starfish and a lobster all inhabit the area in and around the tooling.<sup>8</sup> The photographs of this underwater scene, taken by industrial deep-sea divers, hold visual puns of sorts. In considering these discarded objects – taken from one scenario and made useful and meaningful in another – occasional shapes appear that seem somewhat similar to the shape of the DMC-12, but now with crustaceans as the passengers. They appear inside cavities and underneath the straight lines of the tooling profiles.<sup>9</sup> As a hybrid between

industry and environment, these images might be considered an evocation of the picturesque: a place of nature shaped by the action of man.<sup>10</sup>

The chase and study of the relative materiality of the past and its image today can often result in somewhat absurd situations. An initial plan at the outset of this search was to find and recover the tooling and create one more DeLorean car from their shapes. Some negotiations, a barge with a crane, and a day's work would pull the tooling to the surface. But at what cost? A lobster's home and ecosystem is destroyed in the process, along with the burden of investing into and re-activating the entire chain of handling and economy. Rather than shaping such a revival, the tooling might be left there, as a premature ruin of a manufacturing process that was ultimately never concluded but never completely eliminated, either. Here, a makeshift proposal to work in the shadows of this history might be of worth, rather than unscrambling all that has already occurred. In Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, Neil McKenzie recently moved into a vacant industrial unit at the edge of the town. Using traditional handforming metalwork techniques, he has set about making a wooden mould in the shape of a DeLorean car and forming out of stainless steel grade 304 a bootleg version of the exterior body panels. Crimping, wheeling, welding and hammering out the shapes, his work has been labour-intensive, producing by hand what was once made through industrial means by the tooling now in Kilkieran Bay. This transposition points towards a kind of contingency in putting elements of this history to work, literally, in a speculative form. Will this version of the DMC-12 be entirely remade? How can art 're-enact' an entrepreneurial act such as DeLorean's? What forms of objecthood can be established through the transmission of historical and economic knowledge?

This document will be revised accordingly, as further information, circumstance and points of view come to light.

Sean Lynch

## Footnotes

1 *Variety Magazine*, 8th June 2009.

2 It is worth noting the ethos behind using stainless steel. The American automobile industry – of which DeLorean had been a part, during a long tenure with General Motors – had long been accused of ‘planned obsolescence’. This effectively meant that each car was designed to be replaced in a few years with a newer model. An idea to produce a car with a material that would never rust meant, in DeLorean’s eyes, the DMC-12 could last forever.

3 While official records are now lost, 30 to 40 dies were sold as scrap for around £80,000–90,000. At the British Steel Corporation plant in Sheffield, an estimated 3,000 tonnes of material were melted down. Source: former Lämpfle employee Michael O’Leary in an unpublished interview with John Dore, 2008.

4 Kilkieran Bay, located north of Galway Bay, has a large area of open water, many islands and rocky inlets, with deeper-than-average water depths and protection from prevailing winds and currents. Emerald Fisheries set up several fish farms in the area in the 1980s, and imported from Japan a new kind of fish farm structure, called the Bridgestone Cage. These cages are seven-sided, 50 metres across and could accommodate up to 100,000 fish in relatively low stocking densities. They required a heavy anchoring system to keep them in place.

5 Novel first gained prominence in the United States as an alleged CIA agent in 1963, with purported connections to conspirators in the JFK assassination plot. Following involvement in the Watergate and Waco investigations, Novel has recently been active with Free Energy Suppression research. He claims special interest groups related to the oil industry have blocked advanced technology that can give plentiful amounts of cheap energy.

6 Dylan was on the start of his controversial 1966 UK tour, when he started playing electrical guitar to the horror of folk music audiences. Martin Scorsese’s film *No Direction Home* about Dylan’s life used the photograph as its promotional image. Shortly after he passed through, the Severn Bridge was opened and replaced the ferry service.

7 On tour in 1978 to impress potential investors, the first prototype DeLorean was photographed in front of the 35-storey-high Westin Bonaventure hotel in downtown Los Angeles. The hotel, built by architect and developer John Portman and opened in 1976, later became a subject of Fredric Jameson’s musings on the nature of postmodern space. He wrote that the hotel, with its difficult-to-find entrances and its large central lobby full of escalators and elevators, spatially disorients visitors in a manner that has ‘finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to map cognitively its position in a mappable external world’. Observing the DMC-12 parked in front of the Bonaventure and continuing a line of tangential thinking, one is tempted to consider the car’s presence and its many referentialities in a similar manner. Source: Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London, New York, 1998), p. 16.

8 The rest of the tooling was not visible in July 2009, but remains on-site underneath the sea-bed. It is likely that winter storms from the Atlantic might expose their surfaces from time to time. Each press has a chain linking it to the fish cage above. Visible tooling has provided shelter and an attachment surface for a variety of plants and animals. A lobster (*Homarus gammarus*) has made his home in a casting cavity. A nocturnal animal, it typically seeks a sheltered hide-out as a permanent home. Similarly, many common edible crabs (*Cancer pagurus*) can be seen, along with swimming crabs (*Liocarcinus puber*) and green crabs (*Carcinus maenas*). Extensive and varied beds of red calcareous algae (known locally as 'coral') are present, along with other forms of seaweed. Sea cucumber (*Neopentactyla mixta*) is also plentiful. Dives and a site synopsis were completed by John and Mark Costello. Further work needs to be undertaken to identify which body parts were manufactured from the visible tooling (i.e. door panels, front or rear fenders). This is a difficult task, given the overgrowth on each press. Meanwhile, Läßle's headquarters in Heilbronn, Germany, no longer hold any records related to its work in Carlow for DeLorean.

9 In a precedent to this scene, a television advertisement produced for the car in 1981 featured a DMC-12 beside the ocean. As its gull-wing doors opened upwards, the car slowly dissolves into an image of a seagull flying in the sky.

10 This underwater scene does not simply serve as an allegory of the catastrophe and fallout of the DeLorean venture; instead, it is unmediated evidence of it. Much heated discussion revolved around the status of the metal tooling. DeLorean claimed they were scrapped as part of continuing opposition from the British Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, which opposed continued government funding for his car company in war-torn Northern Ireland. After his acquittal, he wrote: 'We have recently learned that when it looked like DMC might come out of bankruptcy and rise from the ashes, the British government ordered the 12 million dollars' worth of body dies destroyed, dies essential for manufacturing the DeLorean motor car... The destruction of tooling of a car out of production less than 10 years is against the law in most Western countries. When the British government instructed the firm holding the DMC body dies to destroy them, the company refused on the basis that such a malicious act violated their country's laws. Our understanding is that only after the British government supplied them with a letter freeing them from any legal liability did they finally comply... Why is the British government doing this to me?' Source: John Z. DeLorean with Ted Schwarz, *DeLorean* (Michigan, 1985), p.338. The scrap dealers of Ireland had a different opinion. Michael Byron, a general manager of Hammond Lane Metal Company, said: 'Anybody could have bought them from us if they had made an offer... They (the dies) were a bloody nuisance'; 'Good Christ, not at all... I could have started the DeLorean Motor Company here if I was foolish enough,' said Paddy Walsh, owner of the Galway Metal Company. Source: *Detroit Free Press*, 20th October 1985.

Image Captions:

1

The Montupet factory, Dunmurry, Belfast

Former location of the DeLorean Motor Company and site of production of the DMC-12 model between 1981-2.

Former site of the Läßle factory, Carlow

Opened in 1974, the company fabricated body parts for cars, including stainless steel sections for the DMC-12's body. Operations terminated here in 2007 due to high labour costs.

2

After bankruptcy of the DeLorean Motor Company, Läßle initiated the disposal of all tooling and body panels used in their contracted work.

Material was dispersed to several scrap yards in 1984.

Galway Metal Company, Oranmore, Galway

Since 1969, scrap metal has been processed onsite and primarily exported. Tooling and panels were most likely sent to Spain or Portugal to be recycled.

Former site of the Hammond Lane Metal Company, Dublin

A scrap yard functioned at Rogerson's Quay between 1980-96, before the company relocated. Material from Läßle was exported to Sheffield and Kent to be melted down.

Haulbowline Industries, Passage West, Cork

Established in 1935 at the Victoria Dry Dock, the company now exports non-ferrous metals and animal feed.

3

#### The Severn Princess, Chepstow

Operated as a car ferry between 1959-66. The subsequent opening of the Severn Bridge made the boat's route obsolete and it was later sold to fisherman in the west of Ireland. Sometime in 1984 the boat collected twelve pieces of DeLorean tooling, large metal sections used to stamp out the shape of the car, from Haulbowline Industries in Cork and transported them to Galway. Found wrecked and abandoned, committed preservationists returned the boat to Chepstow in 1999 where it now awaits restoration.

#### Former site of Emerald Fisheries

A commercial fish farm, located in Kilkieran Bay, Galway from 1984-2001. The company reused the heavy cast iron, attaching chains and sinking them into the seabed as anchors to hold in place a large fish cage on the surface. The farm can be seen out to sea on the left of the panoramic photograph. It is now abandoned.

4

Of twelve tooling presses present, three remain visible above the surface of the seabed. Two can be found 18 metres below the water surface at 53.29938N & 9.76344W. Another is visible 22 metres to the north at 53.30130N & 9.76483W. The remainder have sunk down into soft mud over the last twenty five years. Gushes into the bay from the Atlantic Ocean have kept silt at a minimum, and an ecosystem has grown around, over and under the metal. Seaweed forms a kind of patina over its surface while several species of crabs now reside in various casting cavities and hollow spaces of the tooling.

