

# How To Think Outside, Around, In Between, and Beyond the Box

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*Boxes: A Field Guide*, edited by Susanne Bauer, Martina Schlünder, and Maria Rentetzi. Mattering Press, 628pp., 143 color illus. £50 deluxe hardcover, £35 paperback, free online (web, PDF, epub and Kindle).

It's impossible to overestimate how completely ubiquitous boxes are in our twenty-first century Western consumerist lives. Everything from takeout trays to online orders is sent and received while encased in a cubed corrugated exterior. Boxes are basically the stuff that encases other stuff as it moves from one place to another. Consequently, the cardboard box has become a symbol of stuff—how we acquire it, how we transport it, how we store it, how we discard it—and has been since its very invention.

The cardboard box is a nineteenth-century innovation, thanks to the ever-growing mass production of paper in American paper mills at that time. In 1871, Albert Jones of New York filed a patent for the “improvement in paper for packing,” and the term “corrugated” was part of the paper's description. The most efficient iteration of the classic cardboard box, however, is credited to American lithographer Robert Gair who, a few years

later, developed a system for storing cardboard boxes flat, and could print boxes that served as advertisements as well as a means to move paper. By the early twentieth century, a plethora of factories in the northeastern United States employed tens of thousands of workers—primarily women who were paid much less than their male counterparts—to make and box the manufactured paper boxes.

For decades, these sorts of boxes have been the things used to move other things—offering a transience and non-permanence to the items inside of it. Over the last century, however, the cardboard box has become more than just a token that connotes items schlepped via U-haul or received via Amazon Prime. Poignantly, as the cardboard box came to be associated with the economic success and commercial consumerism of late-stage capitalism, it has also become a visceral symbol of homelessness and income inequality. In the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, cardboard boxes even double as hospital beds and coffins.

In short, boxes are ubiquitous, functional, and necessary. While iconic, the cardboard box is but one example of all things “box.” This begs the questions: What makes a box, well, a box? How does history treat boxes? And why do boxes matter?

**B**oxes are deceptively simple objects. Four walls, six sides, one opening.

But boxes are so much more than their archetype. Beyond their materiality, boxes are metaphors, allegories, and symbols. A box is a material expression of boundaries and boundedness—it's a technology for establishing and maintaining categories, and a tool for sorting. Once we think about the box outside of its cardboard, it's easy to see that the world is made up of boxes all the way down, and has been for humankind's entire evolutionary history. From metaphor to material, humankind has used containers of some sort for the past 200,000-400,000 years.

In *Boxes: A Field Guide*, editors Susanne Bauer, Martina Schlünder, and Maria Rentetzi organize a fascinating and complex reading of boxes as intricate, social texts. Boxes, they argue, are performative objects. Boxes have the power to create epistemologies; boxes catalog taxonomies. In short, they argue, boxes are how intellectual traditions, especially Western ones, have understood and defined themselves. And, running parallel to all the epistemic history of boxes are hundreds of thousands of years of humans using boxes for a plethora of purposes.

*Boxes: A Field Guide* is a multi-author collected volume that features 39 specific box-informed essays. Examples are drawn from the history of science (e.g., petri dishes) to contemporary sociology (e.g., managing drinking water in Taiwanese households) to science studies (technology's black boxes) to consumerism (big box stores), and of course the enduring mythology of boxes (Pandora). The authors and editors are clear in their purpose—they envision *Boxes: A Field Guide* to be a new, foundational text for studies in material culture, and bring considerable intellectual heft to the anthology from a plethora of disciplines.

The earliest archaeological examples of “boxes”—“storage,” really—trace back to the

Pleistocene-age layers of Qesem Cave in Israel. Somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 years ago, early *Homo sapiens* or Neanderthals appear to have saved marrow-rich bones in their outer layers of skin and flesh to keep the marrow more or less fresh. (The archaeological context isn't clear at this point about which species was doing the storing.) The marrow was saved in a skin and flesh “box”—popular press dubbed the discovery “Stone Age Tupperware”—and was created with the purpose of putting something in the container to use later.

Fast-forward hundreds of thousands of years through any number of egalitarian and complex societies, and we find that just about any sort of social organization fundamentally depends on storage. Storage of resources (food) of course, but also of intangible capital like knowledge and cultural mythos. All of these require boxes of different sizes and shapes, materials and metaphors.

This anthology is a herculean undertaking in no small part because it's looking to “unbox” and “re-box” the human condition. (Boxes are everywhere and always have been and, it turns out, may not even be evolutionarily limited to humankind.) Occasionally, there's a feeling of being overwhelmed in *Boxes* by the mass manufacture and scope of boxes and their ephemera—that there are so many boxes and so many ways to think about them—that the prospect of imposing some sort of order is daunting to the reader. And this where, at times, the anthology becomes incredibly esoteric. (To use a box analogy, there are points where it feels like looking at a living room strewn with toys before they're neatly put into their toybox.) But the collection is well-grounded in theory, history, and philosophy and always manages to come back to the box in question. Rest assured, readers will never look at boxes the same way again.

## Boxes are deceptively simple objects. Four walls, six sides, one opening.

Two examples from *Boxes* that stand out as non-obvious ways that societies are organized around boxes are “The Green Minna,” a carriage “box” used to carry police detainees in Imperial Berlin, and Prussian census boxes from the mid- to late-nineteenth century that were custom-made to move census records and then to be broken down and recycled.

“The Green Minna was used to transport arrestees to and from police headquarters,” historian Eric Engstrom describes. The fleet employed from two to nine wooden horse-drawn vehicles between 1866 and 1890, transporting between five and ten thousand detainees per month—thus cutting down on the number of arrestees who attempted to escape police custody on foot. The painted green boxes offered an element of social performance—as detainees were loaded and unloaded—and a clear moral demarcation between society’s offenders and those who detainees were accused of offending. The Green Minna was often followed by another “storage” box for the arrestee—a cell.

Outside of boxes associated with policing, societies have also long depended on boxes to organize themselves and their bureaucracies from census gathering to voting. As such, Prussian census boxes, historian Christine von Oertzen explains, were transient objects used to transport census cards from one place to another. As bureaucracies across nineteenth-century Europe became enamored with the idea of data collection, “the daunting mass of loose paper slips needed to be moved,” von Oertzen explains, and the Prussian solution was a box “custom-made to hold between

two and four stacks of 2,500 counting cards, the boxes allowed the enumeration material to be apportioned into manageable units.” These boxes were made of wood to very particular specifications and were produced every three years to be “discarded, demolished, and recycled” when they were no longer needed to transport records.

It turns out that societies box more than just people and data—ideas, knowledge systems, and entire epistemologies are built out of various boxes. Boxes show up repeatedly in the history of science as necessary for collecting, first as cabinets of curiosities and several hundred years later as the means by which collected specimens are sent back to museums or through which contemporary collections of archaeological material are stored. “Boxes and containers were integral to the construction and organisation of knowledge in early modern collecting practice,” as outlined by historian Stephanie Bowry in her description of the Augsburg Art Cabinet, one such seventeenth-century art and curiosity cabinet.

Historian Tanja Hammel profiles the plethora of various boxes that form a meta-collection in the Archives of Life at the Natural History Museum in Basel, Switzerland. These boxes are made of either wood or cardboard, and varied in size and shape considerably. Most were reused (“previously contained goods such as sugar, soap, cigarettes, photo glass plates, etc.”) thus emphasizing the constant circulation of boxes or “parcels” as Hammel terms the items—the specimens going to the natural history museum were not the first things that these boxes stored and transported. “Parcels are companions, and have life forces,” Hammel argues. “One such force... render[s] visible their human companions who have hitherto been neglected because of their belonging to subordinate social

groups—whether this subordination was based on ethnicity, gender, or social class.” We can read boxes, then, as a potentially equalizing force.

But *Boxes: A Field Guide* isn’t simply a historical survey of the ways that boxes have been made and used. Drawing on contemporary sociological studies, *Boxes* dives into the world of shipping containers, cargo transportation, and hurricane relief, to

name a few. Boxes are deployed in times of hurricane crises, and provide the logistical backbone of twenty-first century late-stage capitalism. While impossible to chronicle each example presented in the anthology, every single one prods audiences to expand what “counts” as a “box” and how they’re being used to store, transport, and organize. Excavate each box carefully and we inevitably find axes of power and privilege.

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It’s impossible to write about boxes without the ancient Greek myth of Pandora. (As editor Maria Rentetzi notes in her chapter, Pandora’s “box” was actually a jar.) In Hesiod’s *Theogonia*, Pandora is the first human female made of earth and water; she is given a precious *pyxis* (a “box”) by the gods and told to never look inside. Of course, Pandora opens the *pyxis* and a myriad of evils swarm out to make their ways into the world. Only hope is left at the bottom.

The myth of Pandora has been told and retold over millennia—details and descriptions vary but the purpose of the box

remains intractable. It stores the troubles of the world until it does not. It is a physical means to separate good from bad (hope remains in the box, after all) and has become a bit of cultural shorthand. To which, Pandora’s box lives beyond its myth.

As *Boxes: A Field Guide* points out, the world is full of boxes and always has been. From Pandora to the Pleistocene, from cardboard to cabinets of curiosities, boxes require us to consider how we categorize the world and what we make of it.

Never mind thinking outside the box—it’s impossible, it turns out, to think without it. ◻