Boxes

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XI

TOOL
**Fig. 35.1** This example of a tool chest, often referred to as a Highboy Tool Chest, is of a type commonly found in professional and amateur garages and workspaces. This particular eighteen-drawer steel chest was constructed in the 1990s by Snap-On and was in use until 2015. The chest consists of two pieces, with the lower portion resting on casters for mobility. While the chest has been retired, remnants of the previous owner’s personal items can be seen in the top of the chest (photo by Don Duprez).

**Fig. 35.2** The chest in this photo represents a wheeled, steel chest with a wooden top that was designed to be used either on its own — in which case it would be termed a ‘Lowboy’ — or as a lower portion to a two-chest ‘Highboy’ set. This particular chest was constructed during the early 2000s by Snap-On as a special commemorative racing edition (photo by Don Duprez).

Don Duprez

**Purpose**: the storage, protection, and organisation of general and specific tools to meet the needs of the specialist, master craftsman, or casual user. The boxes often contain hammers, wrenches, screwdrivers, picks, files, punches, various pliers and nippers, saws and other cutting instruments, plugs, pullers, compressors, and marking and measuring tools (Sennett 2008: 199–209).

**Construction**: while contemporary boxes and chests are generally constructed of metal or wood, they can also be formed from polymer or composite shells, or may be composed of several different materials. **Appearance**: the colours and decorations are as varied as the people who own and work out of them. Over the years each box or chest develops its own patina of grease, stains, smudges, dents, and scrapes, adding to the character of the box and making the boxes readily identifiable to their owners. Owing to this, a toolbox as an object is something that can generate deeply formed attachments in a person. **Size and mobility**: toolboxes and chests are to be found in all manner of shapes and sizes, while generally being of a square or rectangular design with a hinged lid. Toolboxes and chests can contain a battery of drawers and tiered trays, accessible from the front or from the opened top. Toolboxes tend to be highly portable, whereas tool chests tend to be large, stacked structures presenting challenges to portability. Within shop spaces, the terms tool chest and toolbox are often used interchangeably. **Habitat**: these boxes can often be found within garages, repair shops, homes, mobile facilities, and in vehicles. While there are communal toolboxes, the overwhelming majority are privately owned and maintained. **Cost**: The cost can be as little as US$20 or as great as $25,000 for a chest fully outfitted with additional cabinets and accessories (Snap-On...
Tools 2015 [<store.snapon.com>]). **Distribution and use:** these boxes are still widespread and in common use.

*Keywords: organising, collecting, protecting, storing, transporting, identifying, fixing, building, creating, surviving, behaving, reflecting, projecting, dreaming, personalising, maintaining livelihood*

**EXPLORING TOOLBOXES AND TOOL CHESTS**

**As a master mechanic, my father has turned wrenches for over fifty years.** While a child in the 1970s and 1980s, and for much of my early adult life, I spent an incredible amount of time in my father’s shop, learning to repair engines and fabricate needed parts, while constantly organising and fetching tools that resided in a massive red tool chest. Many of my earliest memories of my father are of him standing at his tool chest, producing instrument after instrument, on occasion releasing a slew of colourful language as he rummaged for a misplaced piece. When I was tall enough, I found that within the chest there resided a copious number of drawers, cabinets, nooks, cubbies, and trays. Here, every tool and component had its place.

Toolboxes and tool chests are meant to be used, often under harsh conditions where they are subjected to heat, dirt, and chemicals. They are a mainstay of auto mechanics and are understood to be a fundamental fixture in the shop and a central part of the workday. Nearly every morning my father and his employees would gather at their respective chests and go over the day’s tasks, gathering their thoughts while preparing the tools they expected to use. Throughout the day they would return to their chests to gather, clean, and take different tools, and at times, to eat their lunches. At night the tools scattered about the workspace would find their way to the waiting benches to be cleaned, polished, and placed carefully in their respective nests to be ready for the next day’s tasks. Just as the day begins at the chest, so it ends with the last tool put away and its drawer clicking into place.
When I could see into the top of the chest while standing on stacked blocks of wood, I found that I had become drawn into the workflow whenever I was near the work areas. Along with getting supplies of oil and rags, and sanding oil spills, I was asked more and more often to ferry tools from the chest to the waiting hands of my father sticking out from beneath the cars. After some time I became responsible for returning to the bench tools that I had either used or had collected from around the workspace. I would wipe them down and then watch my father place them in the chest. Eventually I was entrusted to return tools to their proper space within the chest. Through a process of trial and error and reprimand, I learned my way through the different drawers and trays and became familiar with the quirks of the different sections, the dents and scrapes, the smells of grease and oil in certain drawers, and the overall logic and purpose of the chest’s organisation. Principal tools, such as the collections of metric and imperial spanners, were easily accessible in the middle set of drawers. These middle drawers were bracketed by screwdrivers and pry bars located just above the spanners and hammers below. Fine tools and specialty items lay in the smaller drawers closest to the top of the chest, while pneumatic tools and larger, heavier items filled out the lowest sections, thereby providing stability. Depending on the job at hand, one could start with aggressive tools from the lower section of the chest, or for finer work, more delicate tools from the very top. In either case a person is able to work through the chest as they choose to access and use their tools independently or in conjunction with one another.

In addition to matters of function and workflow, toolboxes and tool chests can certainly be addressed by their physical characteristics and aesthetics. Tolpin’s (1998) work approaches these subjects from the perspective of the end user and presents the reader with a wide array of styles and forms of antique and contemporary toolboxes and chests. Christopher Schwarz has written extensively on these topics concerning tool chests for the joiner and cabinetmaker (2011 and 2015). Additionally, notable woodworker Paul Sellers has addressed the topic of historical and contemporary toolbox aesthetics and function through promotional YouTube videos (2014) and through his online site (2015). Within these studies, it can also be seen that tool boxes and chests range from the simple and unadorned, such as a shop-made joiner’s wooden tool chest, to the elegant and extravagant, such as the nineteenth-century woodworking tool chest of
Duncan Phyfe, or the tool cabinet of H. O. Studley (Tolpin 1998: 16, 76–78). In consideration of these points, one may see that for some people their toolbox is both a source of self-expression and a castle that safeguards their tools and livelihood, while others may see the box simply as a means of transport and storage, and as an organisation solution.

What follows is intended to expand upon the idea of the toolbox as a physical container and system of tool organisation. Here, the toolbox can be further examined or understood as an expression or extension of the individual craftsperson. Moreover, toolboxes and their status and representation reveal a nexus of moral and ethical understanding and behaviour about how individuals are expected to conduct themselves as professionals, and how they interact with one another.

THE TOOLBOX AND THE SELF

In addition to my own hands-on experiences, the years of working with my father permitted me an opportunity to observe and explore different toolboxes and chests as I found myself in the shops of those of my father’s friends and relatives who were also tradesmen. They included mechanics, machinists, fabricators, welders, joiners, carpenters, and cabinetmakers. While there are certainly women who fill these roles and use toolboxes, the vast majority of those I have observed over the years have been men. My limited observations of women working with toolboxes revealed to me that men and women interact with the boxes and chests, and ascribe value to their chests and tools, in a similar manner. By value I mean to suggest that individuals develop deep-seated personal attachment, or affect, to their tools and to their toolboxes and chests. I experienced a similar degree of affect when learning my way through my father’s tool chest and becoming accustomed to its nuanced details. The chest became something familiar to me and it became a trusted point of organisation in the shop and in my work experiences. From an even more personal standpoint, the character of the chest stood as a reminder of my father’s years of experience and his identity as a professional mechanic.

To this last point, when addressing matters of value and attachment, the boxes and chests can be understood as being an extension of the owner, reflecting their personalities through personal aesthetics and perspectives. Russell
Belk’s (1988) work offers an analysis of objects which suggests that possessions are critical to the formation and sense of self. Belk asserts that possessions can serve as a means of establishing, developing, and stabilising one’s identity. This is further developed in Tian and Belk’s article, ‘Extended Self and Possessions in the Workplace’ (2005), which explores the notion that objects can serve as narratives of the self. In their examination of workplace possessions, personal items from home are seen to assist in a person’s understanding of themselves in the workplace. Through this construction and stabilisation of self, people are better able to manage the boundaries of their personal and work lives (Tian and Belk 2005: 299–304). Aaron Ahuvia has critiqued Belk’s notion of the core self and the extended self by suggesting that analysis of person-object relations should also account for strong and weak relations to items and possessions. Ahuvia has further argued that by accounting for these variations, examinations of the extended self will be able to provide a better understanding of how people demarcate, compromise, and synthesise identity solutions through objects (2005: 181).

In the case of many auto mechanics, it is not uncommon to find the lids of their tool chests plastered with product decals, humorous and at times crass messages or comic strips, and idealised images of favourite cars, events, places, or people, real or imagined. By these adornments, the top of the toolbox is transformed into a colourful stage of personal expression. In my father’s case, the top of the chest held several pictures of his key racing victories and important moments at the racetrack spanning decades. In addition to the photos and small plaques of racing events, good luck charms, such as a tiny pink haired troll doll that had been strapped to the roll cage of a past racing car, and smaller work-related promotional items, were tucked into the different compartments in the top. These items speak to the ideas of Belk and Tian in that they impart an image of the person’s attitudes, intent, hopes, passions, and desires: in essence, a balanced representation of their work lives and their lives outside the shop. What they choose to place here is a part of how they see themselves and how they may want to see themselves, while adding to the presentation of themselves to others.

In reference to Ahuvia’s points, the lid of the boxes or chests offer only so much space on which to display things, and it can be argued that items selected for display in such a visible spot hold strong social or professional meaning for
the person. In opposition to this, product decals can hold significantly weaker meaning. This is not to say that they are without merit, as these decals and badges display brand loyalties or reflect ideas of quality products from the viewpoint of the mechanic, but they may not hold the same degree of meaning or significance to the chest owner as personal objects.

While the owner influences the presentation, persona, or character of the chest, so the chest influences an understanding of the self within the owner. Returning to Belk (1988), people seek identity through items and objects in order to project who they understand themselves to be and how they wish to be understood by others. In the case of mechanics, the chest becomes an essential item in representing the self as a mechanic and becomes a part of what a person’s idea of being a mechanic is, just as a uniform or tools denote the mechanic’s professionalism and knowledge.

These points of relationship between an individual and their tools, chests, and the formation of identity are reinforced through Christopher Schwarz’s (2011) examination of a traditional joiner’s chest. Here, Schwarz suggests that the acquisition, organisation, and care of tools create an opportunity for a person to develop and master the essential skills that will serve to empower themselves through craft. By extension, the chest is associated with the owner’s independence, their self-empowerment, and a decoupling of the self from a culture of mass production, all characteristics Schwarz sees as essential to his vision and definition of the anarchist craftsman.

This process of connection and involvement in the relationship of the craftsman and the chest is also marked by the dynamic license to express their ideas and be creative in their work. In this sense, the toolbox is laden with potentialities of what can be imagined, constructed, and brought to fruition. In all of this, the toolbox stands as an intersection of a person’s past, their future, their experiences, expressions, their abilities and potential, their dreams and aspirations, freedom, and the personal derivations of what constitutes professionalism and visions of practising their respective crafts.

In consideration of these perspectives, approaching toolboxes and tool chests from beyond the physical qualities of the box has permitted an opportunity to observe these objects as a nexus of the personal and the social. As an extension of the self, the toolbox assists in defining and shaping images
of how one perceives the self and how that self is perceived by others. It also represents a merging of boundaries between private lives and the social through the things people choose to display. Furthermore, these points are tied to a projection of what a tradesman or craftsman is supposed to be and what they are able to do.

THE TOOLBOX AS A POINT OF ETHICAL CONDUCT

Along the top of my father's chest, among the different racing associations, product decals, and pictures of his own racing cars, was one large bumper sticker that for decades displayed a caricature of a mechanic with the statement, 'Don’t Ask to Borrow My Tools, It's How I Make My Living!'. This is a statement that I often saw repeated on the tops of tool chests of my father's friends and associates. In one shop, a sign on the lid simply stated, 'NO, you may not borrow my tools!'. When I asked my father about these statements, he explained that they were meant to be seen by customers and potentially by other mechanics too. He went on to tell me that everyone in the shops has stories of tools being borrowed and not returned, or outright stolen. And while the sharing of tools does go on between individuals, it was best to mitigate or simply avoid any troublesome situations or conflicts by not consistently loaning tools.

As the bumper sticker on my father's chest suggests, tools are the means by which mechanics are able to accomplish their tasks and are then able to provide for themselves and their families. Missing tools represent a potential loss of income by limiting what tasks they can address. Moreover, tools are usually collected over the course of a person's career and represent significant time and financial investments. Along with immediate out-of-pocket expenses, the acquisition and replacement of tools can result in the tradesman incurring significant debt to tool vendors. During my last visit to my father's shop in 2014, the course of one discussion with a few mechanics revealed that one of their co-workers had amassed a $40,000 debt to the tool vendor. Another man was known to sell his tool chest every year and purchase a new one, at times going into debt, in order to constantly upgrade. For many, the idea of replacing their toolbox every year borders on the absurd. However, it could be argued that the purchase of a new chest may also speak to the man's personal understanding of a
professional and modern image of the mechanic, and of the self as a mechanic. While the chests and tools are an integral part of the self and public images of the self, these degrees of financial debt also generate additional forms of affect in that the tools must be used to pay for themselves while meeting the owner’s professional goals.

Within these different situations, emphases, perspectives, and investments, the importance of their tools and the tool chests as carefully protected loci of a worker’s livelihood further reveals degrees of affect and expectations of ethical conduct. These expectations of ethical conduct can be understood to emanate from social conventions and interactions, and through personal experiences and perspectives. In ‘Between Reproduction and Freedom: Morality, Value, and Radical Cultural Change’ (2007), Joel Robbins explores the ethical foundations and issues raised by James Laidlaw (2002) concerning individual moral freedom of choice as described by Kant, and the reproduction of social mores and norms posed by Durkheim. In the case of toolboxes, it can be argued that both positions are at play. The message regarding a request to borrow tools expresses an expectation others will acknowledge: the importance of the tools to their owner, and that they (the borrowers) will conduct themselves accordingly. As a shared sentiment, the message reveals social expectations of behaviour within the shop, where activity is governed by social and collective rules, principles, and guidelines (Keller and Dixon Keller 1996: 126). To violate this expectation raises questions of an individual’s respect for other’s property and matters of ownership.

From a personal perspective, each individual brings with them a self-formulated moral foundation drawn from life experience that informs their respective views of property, ownership, and behaviour. Here, moral codes are synthesised between the moral expectations of the social and the inner moral dialogue of the individual, further refining what can be understood through Foucault’s term, a ‘technology of the self’ (1990). In turn, this synthesis then becomes observable through interactions and attitudes in the workplace. These points concerning tools, access and control, concerns of costs, and moral perspectives and expectations not only further establish the importance of the protection and maintenance of the tool chest but also suggest that we can perceive the toolbox or tool chest as a locus of ethical conduct.
While subjective, the practice of these ethics, and the chest as a point of contention, can be observed in matters of access to tools within the chest. While there are garages and shops that operate with an understanding of shared tool resources, the vast majority of mechanics own their own tools and chests. As noted earlier, there is a tendency to discourage people from asking to borrow tools, and to limit who can have access to the tools. Returning to my father’s shop, there were rules concerning tool use for those who were allowed to access his tool chest. If a tool was borrowed, it was expected that when returning the tool, it would be left on the bench to the left of the chest or, if the chest was closed, on top of the chest. This was done so that the tool could be accounted for at the end of the day, and so the owner of the tool could return it to its proper place. Additionally, by accounting for the tool and returning the tool themselves, the owner knows exactly where the tool is, and doesn’t accidentally purchase a replacement. In these situations, there is a system of trust in place. Those borrowing tools from the chest are aware of their responsibility to return items, while the owner trusts the person with access to the chest to account for their actions. If this relationship is violated and that trust is broken, the dynamics of the shop can change dramatically, leading in some cases to the breaking of professional and personal relationships.

The situation above is predicated upon access having been granted to the chest; however, in some cases tools are borrowed and returned without permission. Additionally, the theft of tools is a serious matter, although difficult to prove without clearly identifiable tradesmen’s marks of ownership. Theft and loss greatly inhibit a worker’s capabilities and generate missed opportunities while also potentially affecting the performance and production of an entire facility or programme. The few times that I have witnessed a person being confronted for taking a tool without permission, the wrongdoer was engaged in conversation in a manner which allowed everyone around to witness the confrontation. Not only did this directly address the issue, it also made everyone else in the shop aware that the person who had borrowed the tools was someone whose trust was in question, that they did not respect the boundaries of ownership, and that they did not respect the owner. Going beyond distrust, extreme situations can result in the offender becoming ostracised in the shop. Finally, if a tool is known to have been stolen, and not simply lost, a conversation can emerge for
the purpose of making others aware of the situation and that they should be aware of where their own tools are and who has access to them.

Just as theft by someone in the shop is an issue, outside theft is also a major concern. In the early 1980s, a mechanic who worked in the same neighbourhood as my father had his shop broken into and his tool chest stolen. The next morning, he stopped by my father’s shop after speaking with the police and asked us to watch out for anyone selling any tools bearing his machinist’s mark. He was understandably distraught and, while insured, was worried about getting work done while he waited to replace everything. That weekend he went to a car boot sale at the local fairgrounds and was lucky enough to find someone selling the bulk of his tools. He contacted the authorities and his property was returned to him. While some things were missing, he was relieved that he was able to return to work to some degree. Much of this was discussed while he visited my father, and it was a topic my parents continued to talk about during the week. My father was happy to hear about the recovery, but he was concerned that people were breaking into shops in the area. He remarked that the thieves had taken his friend’s way of making a living away from him, and that he was incredibly lucky to get back what he did. As a precaution, my father began to take a greater interest in the security of everything related to the shop, and his distrust of strangers wandering into the shop increased.

Looking at this situation, the theft of the chest is in clear conflict with the ethical underpinnings of the law. It also violates the ideas formed by the community as a whole and by individuals within the community regarding ownership and access to a person’s property, and what the chest means to someone’s livelihood. Within this view of their livelihood, the time invested in collecting the tools and the financial investment must also be accounted for. In addition to these points, the theft also speaks to the issues identified in this essay related to matters of identity. Just as a chest can serve as an extension of the self, the loss of a chest can issue challenges to the person’s identity. The theft prohibited the man from fulfilling the occupational duties that marked him as a mechanic. Moreover, theft of the chest took away personal items and images in the chest that represented his past and future, further stripping away a part of the attached identity.

As an outcome of these perspectives, the toolbox and tool chest can be understood to be something much more than a means of tool storage. Through
the personalisation of the toolbox and chest, an extension of the self emerges to reflect personalised images of what, in this case, mechanics should be and how they should be perceived, as well as reflections of the person’s past and future aspirations. In addition to this, how individuals and groups interact and engage with one another is of particular importance when addressing access to tools and tool chests. In sum, looking beyond the physical, the objects become a sounding board of the self, while situated as a nexus of interaction and a means of reflecting on the moral and ethical foundations and expectations of the social and the personal.

REFERENCES

FIG. 36.1 The surgeon’s chest from the surgeon’s cabin in the Mary Rose, the Mary Rose Museum, Portsmouth