

A Walk In Africville: Visibility Strategies in Contested Heritage Landscapes

JAMES C. FORREN

Dalhousie University

A Walk in Africville adopts strategies to counterbalance visibility asymmetry in contested heritage landscapes. Contested heritage troubles the North American landscape where people have lost land rights on the basis of ethnicity, skin color, and economic or political status. A walk in Africville pilots new methodologies which blur the boundary between past and present, creating activity in contemporary landscapes that is historically situated.

CONTEXT

Africville is a community hailing from black British Loyalists, colonial slaves, early Jamaican immigrants, and other early immigrants to Canada of largely African descent. The land - in what is today Halifax, Nova Scotia - was settled by British Loyalists over 200 years ago. However, during Halifax's industrialization and modernization this land was degraded by the location of an abattoir, prison, infectious disease hospital, shipping port, hazardous waste disposal, rail line, and city dump in its environs. Also during this period Africville was denied basic city services like sewer, water, electricity, plowing, garbage, and building permitting. Despite these prejudices the community developed kinship and economic ties, skilled trades, education,

and their own civic infrastructure. Ignoring these advancements, during the 1960s the City of Halifax relocated Africville's residents under a campaign of 'integration,' developing the land for a shipping port and highway. A 2003 report by United Nations cited the historic activities of Halifax as racist and recommended reparations (Tattrie 2010).

In the decades since, the residents have gathered at the site for yearly reunions and advocated for recognition and reparation. In 2011 the city provided funds, land, and the establishment of a museum housed in a replica of a church bulldozed on a Sunday morning in 1968 (Nelson 2008). Within Africville today there is conflict about the battle for legacy ranging from forgetting to complete community restoration (Tattrie 2010). The proposals here straddle these responses, facilitating discourse without ascribing to any particular path.

METHODOLOGY

The proposals were developed through historical research and conversations with the Executive Director of the Africville Museum. They recognize events, experiences, and place with operative interventions. They host activities like witnessing a forgotten view or

a restored domestic garden, working a productive garden, receiving baptismal rites, or gathering for annual community reunions; situating lived experiences in a historical context without relegating the site to history. By amplifying Africville's visibility in the social imagination of the city they disrupt contemporary efforts to minimize or erase the Africville story.

CONCLUSION

The proposals here, however, are place holders. Sketched from the imagination of an outsider with no story to tell of the place, they serve simply to set up a conversation about walking, remembering, and restoring. They anchor debate and advocacy and anticipate dialogue between stakeholders, allies, and researchers in future symposia on the topic of developing the Africville Walk. They emblematize visceral strategies for heritage visibility to broaden the social imagination and the platform for our conversations within it. And point to the opportunity for the techniques of planning, landscape, and architecture to vocalize and visualize the stories of a community previously disenfranchised by these same tools.

A WALK IN AFRICVILLE

VISIBILITY STRATEGIES IN CONTESTED HERITAGE LANDSCAPES

Timeline:

- 1782: Early settlement.
- 1835: First church built.
- 1954: Africville Museum established.
- 1962: Africville Museum opened.
- 1966: Africville Museum opened.
- 1968: 1968 shoreline.
- 1972: Africville petition to Halifax.
- 1987: Africville petition to Halifax.
- 2011: Africville land settlement possible.
- 2015: Africville land settlement possible.
- 2016: Africville land settlement possible.

Landmarks and Features:

- A. Skinner's Well:** Dug by Joe Skinner for clean water in the absence of city plumbing. (Caption: 1971)
- B. Barrington Street:** The main artery through the town. (Caption: 1971)
- C. Bedford Basin Baptismal:** Baptismal where congregants dressed in white robes, were community events in Africville. The Seaweed Club organized the event each year. (Caption: 2010)
- D. School House Pavilion:** In 1953 the City tore down the one-room school houses in which the neighborhood had educated its children. They were brought into the all-white city school system. (Caption: 2010)
- E. Backyard Gardens:** The land up hill in Africville has grown dense with wild vegetation. However, vestiges of the gardens and plants of Africville's residents, such as apple trees, iliac bushes, and flowering shrubs, still remain. (Caption: 2010)
- F. Foundation Gardens:** Converting the sites of former foundations to community gardens - with priority given to Africville community members - this intervention becomes a tool for community outreach as well as food source. (Caption: 2010)
- G. Dan Dixon's Back Door:** In 1968 Canadian photographer, Ted Givens, took a photograph of a door opening event taking place there. The photo is left. "View from Dan Dixon's back door" captures the view of Bedford Basin over his garden of flowers and Seaweed Club. The distance to "Dan's Back Door" requires the viewer to find the lone door-frame in the landscape. From this vantage aspects of the view are still preserved - the church, the garden, and the original photo - etched in acrylic beyond the door's threshold - provides a register against which to read the landscape's transformation. (Caption: 2010)
- H. Africville Museum:** Africville's first permanent museum, Africville Museum, was established in 1954. It is located in the former Africville Baptist Church. (Caption: 2010)
- I. Africville Cemetery:** Africville Cemetery is the final resting place for many Africville residents. (Caption: 2010)
- J. Africville Land Settlement:** Africville Land Settlement is a proposed plan to return land to Africville descendants. (Caption: 2010)
- K. Africville Library:** Africville Library is a community space for Africville's residents. (Caption: 2010)
- L. Africville Museum:** Africville Museum is a community space for Africville's residents. (Caption: 2010)
- M. Africville Cemetery:** Africville Cemetery is the final resting place for many Africville residents. (Caption: 2010)
- N. Africville Land Settlement:** Africville Land Settlement is a proposed plan to return land to Africville descendants. (Caption: 2010)
- O. Africville Land Settlement:** Africville Land Settlement is a proposed plan to return land to Africville descendants. (Caption: 2010)
- P. Africville Land Settlement:** Africville Land Settlement is a proposed plan to return land to Africville descendants. (Caption: 2010)
- QR Codes:** Located along the walkway, contextualize interventions and provide further interaction.
- Backyard Garden:**
- Foundation Garden:**
- Original granite foundation:**

Methodology:

A Walk In Africville adopts strategies to counterbalance visibility asymmetry in contested heritage landscapes. Contested heritage troubles the North American landscape where people have lost land rights on the basis of ethnicity, skin color, and economic or political status. A walk in Africville pilots new methodologies which blur the boundary between past and present, creating activity in contemporary landscapes that is historically situated.

Context:

Africville is a community hailing from Black, British Loyalists, colonial slaves, early Jamaican immigrants, and other early immigrants to Canada of primarily African descent. The land – in what is today Halifax, Nova Scotia – was settled by British Loyalists over 200 years ago. However, during Halifax's industrialization and modernization this land was degraded by the location of a port, prison, and mental disease hospital, shipping port, hazardous waste disposal, rail line, and dry docks. During the 1930s, the city of Halifax denied basic city services like sewer, water, electricity, plowing, garbage, and building permitting. Despite these prejudices the community developed kinship and economic ties, skilled trades, education, and civic infrastructure. During the 1960s, ignoring these advancements – the City of Halifax relocated Africville's residents under a campaign of "integration," developing the land for a bridge, shipping port and highway (Nelson 2008). A 2003 report by United Nations cited the relocation of Africville's residents and the degradation of their land as racist urban practice and recommended reparations (Tattrie 2010).

In the decades since residents of the neighborhood have gathered at the site for yearly remembrance, advocacy, and land returns. In 2011, the Africville Museum, Africville Cemetery, and land supporting the establishment of a museum house as a replica of the Seaweed Baptist Church, originally bulldozed on a Sunday morning in 1968 (Nelson 2008). Within the Africville community today remains about responses to the relocation of its residents: ranging from a desire to forget to insistence on nothing short of complete community restoration (Tattrie 2010). The proposals here straddle this spectrum seeking to facilitate discourse without advocating a particular response or solution.

Methodology:

The proposals have been developed through historical research and consultations, with the Executive Director of the Africville Museum, Sunday Miller. They recognize events, experiences, and places by situating lived experiences in a historical context without reengaging the site to history. They host activities like witnessing a forgotten view or a restored domestic garden, working a community garden, receiving baptisms/marries, or gathering for annual community reunions. By actively amplifying Africville's visibility in the social imagination of the city the proposals disrupt contemporary efforts to minimize or erase the Africville story.

Conclusion:

These proposals are place holders, sketched from the imagination of an outsider with no story to tell of the place. They seek to initiate conversations about walking, remembering, and acting as anchored design advocacy. As they sketchies anticipate dialogue between stakeholders and researchers, and between the future symbolic and the past physical. The Africville Walk. Depicting visceral strategies for heritage visibility - broadening the social imagination - they point to the potential for techniques of planning, landscape, and architecture to vocalize and visualize stories of a community previously disenfranchised by these same tools.

Bailey, L. R. (2010). Making meaning of heritage landscapes: The politics of redevelopment in Halifax, now scotia. Canadian Geography Review, 54(1), 1-16.

Claremont, D. H., & Magli, D. W. (1975). Africville relocation report Dalhousie University, Institute of Public Affairs.

Claremont, D. H., & Magli, D. W. (1975). Africville relocation report Dalhousie University, Institute of Public Affairs.

Duncan, J. S. (2008). In Duncan N. (Ed.), *Africville* (2nd ed., Ed.). Halifax, NS: Formac Pub.

Nelson, J. J. (2008). *Revising Africville: a geography of racism*. Toronto: Buffalo: University of Toronto Press.

Reverend Africville Gray, D., MacKellar, S., National Film Board, V. C., Carvalho, B. C., and Africville: lessons for the future (1989). Mount Saint Vincent University (Vancouver) (1991). Montreal: National Film Board of Canada.

Tattrie, J. (2010). *The land of Africville: The life of Africville*. East Laversham, N.S.: Pottersfield Press.