

# 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 (Tattie 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 (Tattie 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 emblemize 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



**A. Skinner's Well.** Dug by Joe Skinner for clean water in the absence of city plumbing (Clairmont 1971) Skinner's Well was used by the entire neighborhood, and became a site of community exchange. A column - its height matching the depth of the well - marks the well's location and stands as a point of orientation.



**B. Barrington Street.** This was the main artery through the town. By re-establishing Barrington Street's extents with ground-over it again becomes a spine by which former residents can identify the location of demolished homes. The Africville Museum has undertaken GPS location of former homes from city maps. As they locate these homes, residents inform the museum of other homes not identified on official maps (Miller 2016).



**C. Bedford Basin Baptismal.** Baptisms, where congregants dressed in white robes, were community events in Africville. The Seaview Baptist Church looked out over Bedford Basin and people from Halifax would come by to watch the baptisms performed on the shores of the Basin (Tatnie 2010). In order to erase all traces of the foundations of Africville, Halifax introduced massive amounts of fill to the land, erasing the original shoreline. Bedford Basin Baptismal occupies a remaining stretch of original shoreline and places a permanent baptismal stone where ceremonies could be performed today.



**D. School House Pavilion.** In 1953 the city tore down the one-room school house in which the neighborhood had educated its children. They were brought into the all-white city school system where they were subject to arbitrary disciplining and evaluation based on the color of their skin (Tatnie 2010).



Positioned on the site of the old school house, School House Pavilion retains a lost civic space for the community. Every year the residents of Africville and their families reunite at the town. The pavilion will provide an infrastructure for this and other community gatherings.

**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, lilac bushes, and berry bushes still thrive amid the overgrowth. Backyard Gardens restores these plantings, clearing out the weeds and wild growth to recover domestic spaces within the urban park.

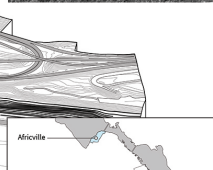
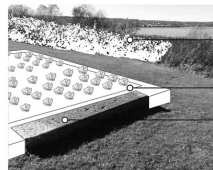
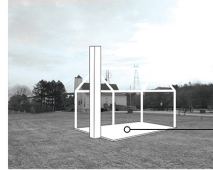
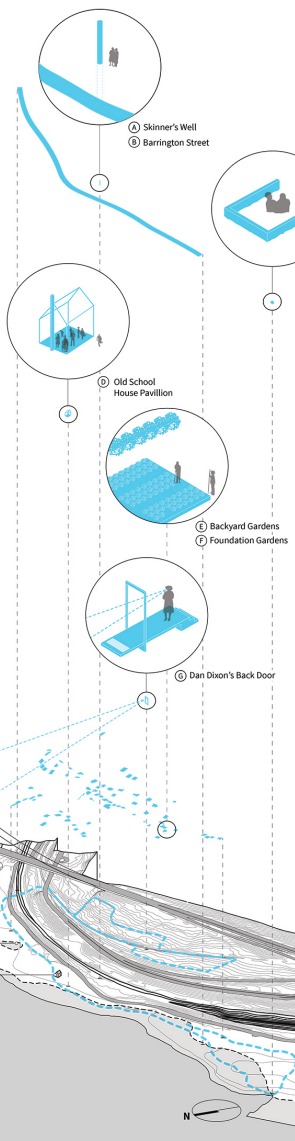
**F. Foundation Gardens.** Converting the sites of former foundations to community gardens - with priority given to Africville community members - this intervention becomes a tool for community outreach as well as food source.



**G. Dan Dixon's Back Door.** In 1968 Canadian photographer, Ted Grant, visited Africville to document the community events taking place there. The photo at left, "View from Dan Dixon's back door" captures his view of Bedford Basin over his garden of roses and Seaview Church in the distance. "Dan Dixon's Back Door" restores the armature for this view at the location from where the photo was taken, positioning a lone door-frame in the landscape. From this vantage aspects of the view are still preserved - the church, the Basin, the horizon - while the original photo - etched in acrylic beyond the door's threshold - provides a register against which to read the landscape's transformation.



**H. Africville Museum (reconstructed Seaview Baptist Church).**



**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 an abattoir, prison, infectious disease hospital, shipping port, hazardous waste disposal, rail line, and city dump. 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 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 (Wilson 2008). A 2003 report by United Nations cited the relocation of Africville's residents and the degra-

deration of their land as racist urban practice and recommended reparations (Tatnie 2010). In the decades since residents of the neighborhood have gathered at the site for yearly reunions and advocated for recognition and reparation. In 2011 the city provided funds and land supporting the establishment of a museum housed in a replica of the Seaview Baptist Church, originally bulldozed on a Sunday morning in 1968 (Hietson 2008). Within the Africville community today conflict remains about responses to the relocation of its residents: ranging from a desire to forget to insistence on nothing short of complete community restoration (Tatnie 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 relegating the site to history. They host activities like witnessing a forgotten view or a restored domestic garden, working a community garden, receiving baptismal rites, 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 restoring; anchoring debate and advocacy. The sketches anticipate dialogue between stakeholders, allies, and researchers in future symposia on the topic of developing 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.

**References**  
Bailey, L. B. (2013). *Walking meanings of heritage landscapes: the politics of redevelopment in Halifax, Nova Scotia*. Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe Canadien, 57(1), 65-77.  
Clairmont, D. H., & Magill, D. H. (2013). *Africville restoration report*. Dalhousie University, Institute of Public Affairs.  
Clairmont, D. H., & Lefkowitz, R. S. (2002). *The spirit of Africville* (2nd ed., ed. Martin, R.S., Frances Park).  
Duncan, J. S. (2006). In Duncan, N. S.G. *Landscape of longing: The politics of the aesthetic in an American suburb*. New York: Routledge.  
S. Miller, personal communication, October 30, 2016.  
Wilson, J. J. J. (2008). *Reading Africville: a geography of racism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.  
Restoration Africville Group, D., MacKenzie, S., National Film Board, N. C., Canada, B. C. and Africville: Issues for the Future (2003). *West 50th Street University District* (2003). Montreal: National Film Board of Canada.  
Tatnie, J. (2010). *The Hermit of Africville: The life of Eddie Carver*. East Leamington, N.S.: Potteryfield Press.