Chapter 19

The Loud Fences Campaign: Grass-Roots Activism, Heritage and the Cultural Landscape

Jacqueline Z. Wilson and Keir Reeves

The meaning of historic, or cultural, landscape resides in both its aesthetic qualities and the memories and experiences it embodies. Historic landscape is a complex of interwoven expressions of ideas, ideals, ideologies and aspirations, of layered and contested narratives, of shifting community identity. The connotations of a landscape are often highly personal, while simultaneously reflecting broad public values and sensibilities. This is especially true in the case of revered institutions of the sort that combine a key role in community history, a consciously profound aesthetic quality, and a central place in the community’s spiritual life.

Wherever it is present, the Roman Catholic Church has long held a deeply significant place in the cultural landscape, in local history-making and in the urban aesthetic. Everywhere the Church is strong in terms of numbers of the faithful, its ‘penetration’ of the social environment makes it highly visible, highly potent as a social agent and centrally important to the local social memory, even among non-Catholic and secular populations. The Church embodies tacit narratives of moral and spiritual guidance and of participation in and shaping of the growth of communities’ civic historical identity – a dynamic relational status that exemplifies what has been termed ‘authorized heritage discourse’.

This notion of heritage as officially sanctioned practice bound up with the community’s defining narratives reveals something of a paradox. The very aspects by which it contributes to social stability and identity also render it vulnerable to the socially disruptive effects of any contestation of those narratives, especially when that contestation is revealed in ways that resonate with people’s personal connection with the collective historical consciousness. This chapter addresses some of the processes involved, and the issues that arise, when such disruptive histories become public fare.

Histories

In late May of 2015, in the rural city of Ballarat, Victoria, a number of ribbons of various colours appeared overnight on the fence enclosing the former St Alipius Catholic Boys’ School. The ribbons were placed there by a group of local women who wished to express their support for those who had suffered sexual abuse at the hands of school staff up until its closure in 1976. The school was one of a number of Ballarat institutions named in the
Australian Government’s Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013–2017) as having harboured and actively facilitated a group of highly predatory paedophile priests serving the Ballarat Diocese and members of the Christian Brothers who taught at schools in the area. The ribbons were the first visible manifestation of what their installers dubbed the ‘Loud Fence’ campaign.

The school buildings, which now serve as a parish hall and kindergarten, are located alongside St Alipius Catholic Church, a neo-Gothic basalt edifice that towers above the surrounding residential area on the main approach road into Ballarat from the east. St Alipius school was the first of many sites across Ballarat to be adorned with a damning array of ribbons. Institutions run by or directly associated with the Catholic Church had fared especially badly in the Royal Commission, and most of the other Loud Fences installed across the city appeared at Catholic churches, schools and sites of supposed care such as former orphanages. But there was undeniably a certain apposite symbolism in the happenstance of St Alipius being selected for such highly visible public shaming by the Loud Fence campaign’s opening salvo. This church has a long and especially intimate relationship with the town’s history, and hence with both its sectarian make-up and its secular ‘heritage’ identity.

The construction of St Alipius’ current building began in the mid 1850s and evolved over many decades, reaching completion in the 1920s. Its imposing form has been a landmark on the main entry route to Ballarat’s central business district (CBD) for almost a century. But St Alipius had its beginnings at the start of the Gold Rush in the early 1850s as a ‘tent’ church. It has the distinction of representing the first institutional Roman Catholic presence in an area that was transformed by gold discoveries into a major regional centre and eventually the State’s largest rural city.

Ballarat’s Gold Rush narrative is in many ways typical of frontier communities whose growth is driven mainly by the hope of fast wealth. Migrants from other Australian colonies and from overseas flooded into the area in their thousands, and with them came a variety of clergy who saw a pressing need for the dispensing of spiritual guidance to a disparate and rough-hewn itinerant population. And as the Gold Rush demographic had a preponderance of Irish people, the Roman Catholic presence in the area was, unsurprisingly, large.

In one key aspect, however, Ballarat was not typical. In 1854, three years into the Rush, the town became the venue of a revolt among miners against the authoritarian colonial government’s iniquitous imposition of miners’ licence fees. This led to the so-called ‘Eureka Rebellion’, named for the eastern-Ballarat district in which its violent culmination was acted
out. It remains the only armed mass revolt against government in Australian history, and the only one that resulted in anything like a pitched battle between government forces and white civilians. Somewhere between twenty-two and forty miners and six government soldiers and police were killed when a government force charged the rebels’ loosely fortified encampment – dignified in contemporary accounts as a ‘stockade’, but in fact barely justifying the term – at Eureka. This event became known as the ‘Eureka massacre’.4

As the rebellion has been widely interpreted ever since as a seminal moment in the development of Australian democracy, Ballarat holds it dear. And it forms a highly important component of the city’s and the region’s cultural memory. It is of significance, therefore, that many of the rebels were Irish or of Irish background, especially among those most involved in the militant group mown down at Eureka.5 Many worshipped at St Alipius. And the priest at St Alipius, Father Smyth, was highly active in promoting the miners’ cause as a delegate on their behalf to government offices, in visiting the diggers at the Eureka site prior to the massacre,6 and in secretly harbouring the rebellion’s fugitive leader, Peter Lalor, after the event when Lalor had a substantial price on his head.7

In a city whose social memory and community identity are intimately bound up with both local and national history, the role of St Alipius’ parishioners and clergy in the rebellion cemented the church’s standing as an icon in the cultural landscape. And given the church’s prominence as the tallest structure by far in the unprepossessing East Ballarat neighbourhood, it cannot help but maintain an equally significant place in the physical landscape. In this it very much accords with the Gold Rush legacy that largely defined Ballarat’s urban environment. In the decade after the first gold strike, the town underwent a building boom that transformed the skyline on both grand and domestic scales. In the CBD especially, grand emporiums, banks, hospitals and institutions of administration and governance were erected by a wealthy and aspirational municipality. At the same time, miners were graduating from tents to serviceable weatherboard cottages of simple design which still abound in all but the newest or most affluent residential areas.

To this day, however, Ballarat’s architecture includes very few buildings of more than two or three storeys, other than the ornate Victorian clock-tower of the town hall, similarly styled ornamental edifices topping the railway station and former post office and, importantly, the castellated bell-towers, spires and high-peaked gables of the city’s neo-Gothic churches. Indeed, the city’s churches are consistently the tallest and most visually prominent structures across the urban centre. Given the public aesthetic sensibility that favours ‘neo-Gothic’ edifices wherever they are found,8 the city’s churches are widely
regarded as among the most pleasing to the eye. Such a judgement may also be extended to other Church institutions in the area, such as St Patrick’s (secondary) College and the former orphanage Nazareth House, both of which, although not ‘Gothic’, could easily be characterized as stately.

Given the visual, social and historical significance of St Alipius, the revelation of its complicity in the crimes and abuses investigated by the Royal Commission was deeply disturbing for many in the community. If the Loud Fence ribbons had been confined to St Alipius, they might have been seen as little more than an isolated expression of anger (mis)directed at an educational institution that was now defunct anyway. But it was clear, long before the first Loud Ribbons made their overnight appearance, that the Catholic Church, in Ballarat and abroad, was deeply tainted. For the Loud Fence campaigners, St Alipius was just the beginning. St Patrick’s Cathedral, the city’s largest church and Mother Church to the Ballarat Diocese, St Patrick’s College and Nazareth House were also identified in the Royal Commission, along with St Alipius, as venues of egregious, long-term abuse of children in their care. All became targets of the Loud Fence campaign.

Gold Rush diggers tend to form itinerant populations, and Ballarat was no exception. But the area’s readily accessible gold deposits were sufficiently plentiful to ensure that a significant number of miners stayed on even after the first boom had levelled off. Many went into other businesses. The town prospered. And with the descendants of the Gold Rush Irish bolstering the numbers of practising Catholics significantly above the State average, Ballarat acquired and maintains a reputation as being, statistically and culturally, very much a ‘Catholic town’. This status was bolstered by the fact that its largest church, St Patrick’s Cathedral, was the first consecrated cathedral in Australia. For the image of the Church to be tarnished as it has strikes at a core aspect of community identity.

Shame

To understand the effect on the community of the Church’s fall from grace, it is important to consider its dual social nature as both sectarian and secular.

Like all Christian denominations, the Roman Catholic Church is centrally concerned with redemption. This, nominally at least, is also the prime focus of its adherents. As such, it has a long tradition of providing comfort, succour and hope for believers. But there is another side to this role, which can be explained in terms of Erving Goffman’s conceptualization of ‘stigma’ and which provides clues to the significance and meaning of the Loud Fences.
Goffman, essentially concerned with ‘the management of spoiled identity’, speaks of stigma as comprising three main types: ‘abominations of the body’, that is, deformities or other socially intolerable physical defects; ‘blemishes of individual character’, comprising failings of moral, social or mental integrity; and ‘the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion’. Goffman’s thesis rests essentially on an assumption that stigma, so defined, is a perceived attribute imposed by society as a whole, or by relevant sections of society. Its defining features in any specific case are the product of shared societal values and standards (whether these be fair or otherwise). However, we suggest that in certain situations, stigma can be conferred upon individuals by bodies or institutions – ‘stigmatizing authorities’ – that act under a consensual mandate. This is the case with the Church.

For members of the Church, there is an implied potential stigma that lurks in the background: Goffman’s ‘blemishes of individual character’. This is consequent upon straying or deviating from the teachings of the Church, disloyalty to the Church, rebellion against it – whether in deed or mere thought – or, at its most basic, the mere act or thought of sinning. Further, the Church, by virtue of its traditional exclusiveness and – in the eyes of many believers – its monopoly on the ‘true’ path to salvation, has also long acted as an arbiter of ‘tribal stigma’ – in effect shaming and ostracizing not only those who were not born into the faith, but those who have ‘lapsed’.

For most of the faithful, such stigmatization remains very much in the background. The Church is seen as essentially benevolent, an upright moral and spiritual arbiter. And its authority – for instance, in matters of ritual requirements pertaining to atonement – is welcomed for the guidance is confers. For some, however, its stigmatizing authority is experienced as intensely and unjustly punitive and profoundly perverse.

The victims of historical child abuse at the hands of priests and other representatives of the Church have testified, time after time, to the abiding sense of self-loathing and shame their abusers inflicted upon them. This was done not only through the primary acts of abuse, but by accompanying that abuse with warnings and imprecations based on the authority vested in them as stalwarts of the Church. Victims had imposed on them a sense that their stigma would be immeasurably compounded if they betrayed the Church by complaining. (And those who did complain were, almost universally, not believed.) In this way, the process of stigmatization was completed, encompassing imputations of ‘blemished character’, ‘tribal stigma’ and even ‘abominations of the body’. The latter came about from victims subjectively feeling physically defiled in ways that set them irrevocably apart from
other, ‘normal’ members of society and from the purportedly benevolent care of the Church itself.

Goffman speaks of a ‘virtual social identity’ based upon the unspoken ‘demands’ and ‘expectations’ society places upon its members. These become explicit only under certain circumstances, most especially when those expectation are not met.13 We have been concerned to this point with stigma as a quality, or status, of individual persons. But there is in principle no reason for the concept to be limited in this way. An organization or institution may be equally well suited to receiving social censure commensurate with stigma. The Catholic Church and its various institutions has traditionally had a ‘virtual social identity’ in terms of the assumed moral uprightness of their representatives and the integrity of their administrators. As has become clear over the course of the recent inquiries, those expectations have, most emphatically, not been met. It follows, then, that the Church itself stands stigmatized.

The ribbons that appeared first in their dozens on the St Alipius fence, then in their hundreds on other fences across Ballarat, and then in tens of thousands across Australia and the World, can be interpreted as signifiers of the stigma suffered by each victim. In the process the ribbons complete the process begun in the various legal forums over the past decade; they revisit the stigma imposed on each individual victim back onto the physical body of the Church. Each ribbon stands as a tangible, highly visible marker of moral outrage, a cry of ‘Shame!’.

Heritage
Not all those who see the ribbons, nor all those who install them, are followers of the Catholic faith. And a number of other, non-Catholic institutions named in the Royal Commission have also been adorned. Some ribbons have also been installed at sites which themselves have no involvement in the abuses but have chosen to express their support for the campaign. It is here that the Church’s secular identity in the community must be considered and the significance of the Loud Fences understood, in terms of the links between historical institutions, the public historical sensibility and the abstract and fluid notion of ‘heritage’.

It has been argued elsewhere that heritage is ‘practised’ as a necessary means of meeting the community’s need for identity.14 Given that point, it follows that a community that is invested heavily in its heritage, and the social and material signifiers that affirm it,
may well find itself confronted by a kind of collective cognitive dissonance in the face of a sudden disruption to the familiar, essentially static embodiments of that heritage.

It would be an overstatement to say that the Loud Fences created any significant degree of public reaction in Ballarat, beyond a strong tendency for the numbers of ribbons at certain prominent institutions to grow exponentially, with significant numbers being installed by non-stakeholders in support. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the campaign was profoundly encouraging and empowering for many abuse survivors.15 And some of the city’s non-stakeholder residents found the ribbons unsettling, whether for their disruption of the familiar landscape, or for what they signified as unavoidable visual reminders of the revelations that emerged from the Royal Commission and other sources. As ‘performative icons’ of disruptive histories, the ribbons’ direct effect on the public’s sense of their city’s heritage is difficult to assess. The campaign itself was diligently covered by the local news media, and its viral uptake onto the national then world stage duly received broader coverage.16 This in itself implies a judgement on the part of those whose job it is to gauge public interest that the campaign was, at the least, newsworthy. But however perceived by the wider public, there is no doubt that the campaign’s potency as a stigmatizing agent, and hence a potential disrupter of established heritage narratives, was readily apprehended by the institutions that received its attention.

Institutional responses to the appearance of the ribbons was varied. Some attempted to reject the campaign outright, only to find that the campaigners were more persistent than they had reckoned on. Ribbons tended to reappear overnight, as often as they were removed. Publicity consequent upon such ‘dialogic’ exchanges was sufficiently negative to provide an incentive for institutions to deal directly with the campaigners for the sake of public relations.17 Others – and this applied to some of the Roman Catholic sites – tolerated, and even embraced, the Loud Fence cause. The Bishop of Ballarat made a show of installing his own ribbon among the hundreds of others decorating the fence around St Patrick’s Cathedral. This overt mea culpa was welcomed by the campaigners and other stakeholders and certainly constituted a positive public relations exercise.18 (At this writing, over two years since the first installation, the ribbons remain in their hundreds at both St Alipius and St Patrick’s Cathedral.) St Patrick’s College hosted the ribbons for some months, before announcing that they were to be ‘respectfully’ removed in a ceremony attended by Loud Fence campaign leaders.19 Nazareth House, on the other hand, allowed the ribbons to remain for several months but then suddenly removed them, notably without consultation with or
acknowledgement of the campaigners. This action provoked something of a social media storm, as did, too, the instances of outright rejection.\textsuperscript{20}

Across this spectrum of apparently disparate responses, ranging as they do from abrupt and censorious rejection, through prevarication and/or grudging, partial or temporary acceptance to wholehearted embrace, a common denominator is discernible. Every site subjected to the Loud Fence campaign has a long-established status as a significant historical entity within the cultural landscape – an established ‘heritage identity’ in the community. Each had to deal, in its own way, with a highly obvious visual ‘intrusion’ upon its ’storefront’:

The visual irony of using brightly coloured ribbons, adorning the often sombre peripheral built fabric of a venerable institution, to signify deeds dark enough to permanently blight the lives of many of their victims, seems to contradict the inherent gravitas of the ‘classic’, or establishment, heritage site. In each case, the institution’s mission becomes one of somehow restoring its own narrative in the face of the contradicting one, for the narrative embodied in the establishment heritage entity is presumed to be – is in effect \textit{required} to be – safe, uncontroversial, unchanging and unwavering in its affirmation of community values and identity.\textsuperscript{21}

Thus, whatever any given institution’s response, all ‘stand as attempts of one sort or another to reclaim, re-appropriate and/or assimilate the Loud Fence performance into their own “traditional” heritage identity’.\textsuperscript{22} As Laurajane Smith notes, this may be seen as an imperative intrinsic to the ‘authorized heritage’ paradigm: ‘Not only are certain values [that are] embedded in the [authorized heritage discourse] perpetuated, but dissonance is itself regulated and arbitrated by the values and ideologies embedded in the [discourse].’\textsuperscript{23}

To return briefly to Goffman and stigma, it is worth noting that he identifies, as a key imperative of the stigmatized entity, the steps taken to gain and maintain control of information regarding the stigma. As he puts it, ‘Control of identity information has a special bearing on relationships’.\textsuperscript{24} As the Church and other institutions such as schools have strong incentives to preserve positive relationships – centrally in the form of social and moral trust – with their respective ‘clientele’ plus the public at large, the various responses to their unwanted inclusion in the Loud Fences campaign are clearly attempts to regain ‘control of identity information’.

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Our concern here, however, is mainly to do with heritage and the significance of Loud Fences in that context. This immediately raises questions of definition: just what do we mean by ‘heritage’?

The type of ‘heritage’ being dealt with here is concerned primarily with the urban landscape – the material, architectural environment – which is clearly and tangibly ‘historical’. In a ‘history-minded’ city such as Ballarat, much heritage consciousness focuses on this.

In his chapter in this book, Denis Byrne speaks of the implied, ‘sub-surface’ affect intrinsic to structures and other material remnants that have witnessed deeds of loss and suffering. Byrne describes ‘a kind of underground heritage [that] results from processes of effacement – “underground” in the sense of being below or beyond the threshold of public visibility’. This hidden heritage he inhabits with the imagined victims of events that, if they were to be revealed to the collective consciousness, would give the lie to the conventional narrative that inheres to such edifices of establishment grandeur as cathedrals and educational institutions. Loud Fences, we suggest, do precisely this, in that they imbue the visible, tangible surface with equally visible and tangible invocations of the victims.

The commonly perceived ‘conventional narrative’ that Loud Fences disrupt may be regarded as ‘official’ heritage. But given that heritage is an expression of social memory, and that social memory is innately fluid, multi-stranded, contested and intangible, a function of interpretation, heritage itself is at least as much an interpretive process as it is a collection of static architectural tableaux and officially sanctioned institutional histories. Further, this dynamic quality inevitability opens up the possibility of heritage as a transformative ‘performance’ with the potential to radically – yet legitimately – undermine its official counterpart. ‘It is in the realm of performative transformation that the ribbons of the Loud Fences have their potency, and in which is revealed their own role and status as heritage entities in their own right.’ They thus begin, or contribute to, a transformation of the institution as a static bastion of ‘authorized heritage’ into one whose historical narrative is shifting, uncertain, and markedly less tangible.

Conclusion
We have considered the moral and historical potency of a grass-roots activist campaign aimed at a major regional community’s institutional icons. The campaign has been examined in the light of its significance both for stakeholders in those institutions, and for the heritage
aesthetic. In their role as signifiers of moral stigma, Loud Fences explicitly contradict the established moral authority of the institutions they target. They invert those institutions’ unspoken capacity to ‘stigmatize’ and advertise the stigma inflicted upon the institutions through official inquiries. As dissonant intrusions on the cultural landscape, the ribbons run counter to the ‘authorized heritage discourse’. In the process they draw to the built fabric’s visible surface narratives of suffering hitherto concealed by denial, shame, and communal forgetting.

In May 2017 the originator of Loud Fences announced the campaign’s official end, stating that she believed it had largely achieved its primary aim of raising awareness and supporting survivors.29 At most of Ballarat’s Loud Fence sites, the ribbons remain with no sign of imminent removal (the exception being St Patrick’s College, which with the cooperation of the Loud Fence organizers transferred them to a permanent, memorialized location within the school). It is notable, too, that there are now a number of fences here and there around Ballarat that demark nothing more than vacant public or council land, yet which display arrays of ribbons. This indicates that at some point the campaign ‘graduated’ from its site-specific shaming performance to a more generalized statement of support that implies an assumption, on the part of the installers, of broad community awareness and comprehension of the ‘message’. It is understood, in other words, that a ribbon on a fence, any fence, stands as a recognizable idiom of protest and empowerment. To what extent they will remain as accepted components of the landscape remains to be seen.

NOTES


8 Molony, *Eureka*: pp. 31-47.


12 Goffman, *Stigma*: p. 14)

13 Goffman, *Stigma*: p. 12)


John Crowley, ‘Headmaster’s Message’, St Patrick’s College website (18 March 2016). Accessed online 10 January 2017 via:


Smith, *Uses of Heritage*: p. 88]


Denis Byrne, FULL TITLE? in Paul Ashton (ed.), *What is Public History Globally?* (DETAILS?)

Denis Byrne, SHORT TITLE? [in Paul Ashton (ed.), *What is Public History Globally?*]

