

## **IMAGINED VILLAGES: REINVENTING AUSTRALIAN HISTORIC TOWNS AS TOURIST FANTASIES**

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### **Abstract**

There is a recent trend for the rebranding of small rural towns as 'villages'. Often taking their cue from film and television, these towns are re-imagined as 'old world' relics which offer a quaint ambience and a range of leisure opportunities for visitors from nearby cities. This represents a reversal of images of villages as stagnating and insular. The branding of rural towns as villages is often reinforced by comprehensive marketing campaigns and physical works which I term 'villagification'. This might include cobblestoned surfaces, new uses for old buildings, new structures disguised as old, decorative themes based on Europe and large numbers of cafes, boutique accommodation and tourist shops. Whilst, this process may encourage employment and other economic benefits, it also has social implications relating to identity, displacement and authenticity.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s Donald Getz developed the concept of Tourist Shopping Villages to describe developments in a number of Canadian small towns. He defined Tourist Shopping Villages as:

small towns and villages that base their tourist appeal on retailing, often in a pleasant setting marked by historical or natural amenities. They are found along touring routes, in destination areas and near urban centres, but are markedly different from urban business and shopping districts in terms of their small scale, speciality retailing and distinct ambience (Getz, 1993: 15).

Similar developments have occurred around the world, and though still under-researched, they have become a common part of the rural landscape (Frost, 2006B; Timothy, 2005). Indeed, such is the perception of the success of the village concept in regenerating small rural towns, it has now become a widespread public policy tool. In Australia, local and state governments now actively market and develop small rural towns as villages.

These processes may be termed ‘Villagefication’. As shown in Figure 1, a wide range of physical modifications may be made to towns. These function as signifiers, demonstrating that the town is now both a village and a tourist space.

**Figure 1: Village Signifiers**

Signage	Archaic fonts, for example Old English Lettering. Use of supposed ‘old-fashioned’ spellings, for example ‘Ye Olde Shoppe’. Use of rustic materials in signage, such as stone and weathered wood.
Paving	Pedestrian areas paved in cobblestones or similar.
Faux 19 <sup>th</sup> Century architectural features	Stone bridges, replica gas streetlights, rotundas, sundials and clocktowers.
European references	Buildings and streetscapes suggest European style. Generally Old English Village, but in some cases may have ethnic overtones, such as French, German or Italian.
Businesses	Preponderance of tourism-related businesses, including cafes and food shops. Common use of specialised nomenclature describing people and businesses as small and specialised. Examples include ‘artisans’ (particularly applied to food producers), ‘provenders’, ‘baristas’.
Parks	Creation of Village Greens. Street plantings in ‘Cottage Garden’ style, heavy use of European Deciduous trees.

Destination marketing campaigns emphasise the village. Initially the promotion of villages focussed on their function as a venue for tourism shopping. An example of this may be seen in a 2003 Tourism Victoria campaign for the villages of the goldfields:

Fool’s gold abounds in the villages around Ballarat and Bendigo. There’s plenty to distract the modern fossicker in the diggings only 90 minutes from Melbourne: crockery, glass wear

[sic], antique jewellery, furniture, books, or your own definition of gold. Once you're on the trail, you'll find plenty that glitters (Tourism Victoria, 2003).

However, recent marketing campaigns have tended to emphasise the intangible experience, promising adventure, mystery and rejuvenation rather than just the tangible facilities and shopping. This is well demonstrated in the following excerpts from a 2006 booklet for the town of Yackandandah:

Have you ever stopped and wondered where it all went? Where the peace and serenity of our picturesque 19<sup>th</sup> century villages disappeared? Our small National Trust town, set among the hills of North East Victoria is everything you can imagine about an early pioneering village – this is where it all stops and our story begins (Indigo Shire 2006: 3).

... and so, the stories of our past are conjured up before our eyes as echoes from a bygone age, and told through the beautifully preserved streetscape of our secluded, historic village (Indigo Shire 2006: 6).

There's nothing like kicking the leaves as you walk along the creek banks – releasing the autumn freshness as you go ... and so, the warmth and friendliness of your hosts waits your arrival as you embark upon an adventure in this pretty, 19<sup>th</sup> century, pioneering village (Indigo Shire 2006: 20).

Getz's Tourist Shopping Villages have now multiplied into what I term *Imagined Villages*. To describe them as imagined is appropriate in three ways. First, these towns are being deliberately reconstructed as villages through strategic planning and marketing. To borrow a term from Disney, they are being *imagined*. Second, the concept of a village has little place in the history of regions of recent settlement such as Australia. What is being developed is imagined very much in European terms and has little connection to the cultural heritage and identity of what have historically been known as towns. Third, the modern concept of village life is highly influenced by popular culture, particularly film and television. This promotes an attractive image of villages as places to escape from the negativities of modernity.

## **THE OLD MODEL: VILLAGES AS A PLACE TO LEAVE**

For the last two centuries villages have commonly been characterised as places to leave. Providing fewer economic and social opportunities, they have functioned as a push factor in migration. The consequences of this long term drift have been to present villages in a negative light relative to cities.

An instructive example of this is the case of East Anglia, a rural area comprising the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex in England. In the mid nineteenth century this region was regarded as the heartland of English wheat-farming, both prosperous and innovative. However, from the 1870s onwards, increased world production dramatically pushed wheat prices down. The agricultural labourers in their villages suffered as wages fell. An 1892 study found their conditions the worst in England, for 'the men could not be worst paid, worse lodged or worse fed anywhere. Many of them do not see butcher meat once a week' (Graham, 1892: 27). Accordingly many left for the cities, higher wages, more constant employment and more to eat.

Those who left (and this is typical in migration) were the youngest, the brightest and the most skilled. In East Anglia it was recorded that:

'Only boys, girls and old folks are left' is a general complaint of the farmers ... The best and most intelligent labourers are the first to leave and the remnant work as if they have no interest in their task (Graham, 1892: 20 & 26).

The novelist Henry Rider Haggard was also a farmer and he kept a detailed diary of life on his farm in Norfolk. He complained of his situation:

The population of our village is waning, and that really skilled farm hands, men who can plough, thatch, drain and milk, are becoming more and more difficult to find (Rider Haggard, 1899: 74).

Later in the year, he complained further that:

All my best hands, those who can be trusted to plough or thatch, are over fifty years of age. The pick of the young men crowd to the towns (Rider Haggard, 1899: 338).

This drift from villages to the cities occurred in a wide range of countries. As cities grew in vibrancy and creativity, villages gained a reputation for being stagnant, old-fashioned and insular. In popular culture, the inhabitants of villages were superstitious and backwards, little more than yokels. The nineteenth century saw the romanticisation of the countryside as the picturesque (De Botton, 2002; Schama, 1995). However, this imagining focussed on fields, trees and mountains. People and villages tended to be ignored. People looked at landscapes rather than populated them. Buildings were more likely to be ruins than inhabited (Cresswell, 2004).

## **THE NEW MODEL: VILLAGES AS A PLACE TO RETURN TO**

As cities grew and the pace of modern life became more hectic and stressful, there was a trend to look backwards at the past with nostalgia (Howard, 2003; Timothy and Boyd, 2003). Modern urban-dwellers wondered what life had been like in the villages which their ancestors had left. A process of imagining village life as simpler, better and more authentic than that of the modern city began. A range of influences both pandered to and reinforced this nostalgia for the village. One of the most important image-shapers was film.

The seminal cinematic fantasy of the village is *The Quiet Man* made in 1952. It tells the story of Sean Thornton (John Wayne), who quits boxing and Pittsburg for Ireland. He returns to the village which he left as a young boy and buys his late mother's cottage. He wants a quiet life in which he can recreate his childhood, symbolically represented by his replanting of his mother's rose garden. When he falls in love with Mary Kate (Maureen O'Hara) he becomes enmeshed in a bewildering array of matrimonial traditions including matchmakers, courting protocols and dowries (MacHale, 2004; McBride, 2003).

*The Quiet Man* was directed by John Ford. Born in the USA of Irish immigrants, Ford was immensely proud of his Irish heritage. He first started planning for *The Quiet Man* in the 1930s, but he decided that in order to provide an authentic feel he wanted to make it on location in Ireland (MacHale, 2004; McBride, 2003). Such a proposition was unheard of in Hollywood at the time. Movies were made on backlots or studio ranches. For films set in Europe, most studios had a standing village set on their backlots. With minor alterations, set dressers could make this effectively represent any culture (Ramírez, 2004). To make a film overseas would make it so expensive it could not make a profit.

It was not until after World War Two that Hollywood began to make movies overseas. An increasingly sophisticated audience, plus the increasing competition from television, made backlot filming look tired and old fashioned. European currency restrictions encouraged studios to spend film revenue shooting movies in Europe (Sklar, 1995). Even then, Ford was only able to gain support for filming in Ireland after agreeing to shoot half the film (mostly interiors) in Hollywood and to film a commercial western first (MacHale, 2004).

Ford's use of Irish locations made his film a great success. It was mostly shot in and around the village of Cong in Galway on the west coast, utilising streetscapes, picture postcard farms and

rugged mountain and coastal landscapes. The overwhelming image is of a place frozen in time, centered on a romanticised fairytale village. The other-worldliness of the village is represented through recurring images of transport. Thornton arrives by steam train, but must travel the last few miles into the village by horse and buggy. In the village, no resident owns a car – Thornton travels by horse, buggy and bicycle. This is the 1950s, but seemingly the village belongs to an earlier century.

After some initial wariness, Thornton is accepted by the community. Village life revolves around the pub, which sports an eclectic mix of eccentrics who engage in prodigious drinking and singing of folksongs. The village is essentially harmonious, there appears to be no political or social divisions and even the Catholic priest and Anglican vicar are the best of friends. Thornton never reflects on what forced his mother to leave the village nor on Ireland's troubled history (the studio's fear of British censorship led to the latter omission, though Ford partly got around this by song references to the mistreatment of Irish convicts in Australia).

The intrinsic appeal of *The Quiet Man* continues to attract tourists to the village of Cong fifty years after the film was released. A guidebook (MacHale), which includes photos and detailed maps of locations was published in 2000, with revised editions in 2001 and 2004. The Quiet Man Cottage Museum opened in 1996. Housed in a replica of Sean Thornton's cottage it contains photos and artefacts from the film (Quiet Man Cottage Museum, 2006). Guided tours are conducted of the movie's locations throughout the village (Quiet Man Experience, 2006).

## **AN 'ARCHITECTURE OF REASSURANCE'**

The isolated village stumbled upon by a newcomer from the city has become a constant in film and television. Many of the images from *The Quiet Man* were replayed in films such as *Local Hero* (1983), but it was not until the 1990s that the great boom in village comedy-dramas occurred. Of particular prominence were television series like *Heartbeat* (1992 to the present), *Seachange* (1998-2000) and *Ballykissangel* (1996-2001).

To understand this increasing appeal of the imagined village, it is instructive to make some comparisons with Disneyland. Marling (1997) credits Disneyland's great success in the 1950s with what she terms an *architecture of reassurance*. She argues that Disneyland was strategically designed as a closed world, where visitors could easily slip into the fantasies portrayed and forget about their outside cares. This design incorporated not only buildings, but the use of archaic transport: steam trains, buggies, streetcars (rather than motor vehicles), street performers and themed components (called *worlds*) linked by a central fairytale castle. The single entry point (thus ensuring a shared experience) was through Main Street USA. While neither a village or a world, Main Street presented the imagined world of the Mid-West *before* World War One, essentially modelled on Walt Disney's Missouri childhood memories.

In the USA of the Cold War it was reassuring for Americans to be transported back to an earlier, safer and better time. The recent imagining of villages follows the same path. Immersed in the architecture and ambience of an earlier time, visitors to villages feel reassured. Like visitors to Disneyland, they can be cocooned from the real world while in the village.

## THE DISSENTING VILLAGER

However visitors have impacts. Once again *The Quiet Man* provides some insights. Thornton is more than a visitor. He has come to stay in the village. Nowadays, we would call him an *amenity migrant* (in Australia he would be called a *Seachanger* after the television show). Amenity migrants seek lifestyle rather than economic benefits. They mentally construct the place they are migrating to as a refuge, an escape, a dream. They finance their migration using capital accumulated elsewhere, they do not expect to earn much in their new world, but rather to utilise their savings to live their dream (Moss, 2006).

Thornton has made his money in the US. He does not want, nor need, to work. He plants roses rather than potatoes. His capital upsets the local economy. He can easily afford to buy his mother's cottage at well over market price, thereby causing property inflation. He cannot contain his disdain at the community's focus on money. He cannot see that he is relatively wealthy, in comparison the villagers have to struggle to live in a commercial economy. He is even more dismissive of local culture and as the film progresses he is more vocal in his criticism of tradition.

Thornton is one person, the modern villages attract thousands which may provoke community resistance to being used as the city's playground. Until recently the Yorkshire village of Goathland attracted about 200,000 visitors a year, most of whom were hikers. In 1992 the television series *Heartbeat* began production in the village. By 1993 visitation had risen to 480,000 in the year, with the newcomers being a different type of tourist – mainly day-trippers on coach tours. By 1995 there were 1.2 million visitors. Faced with such changes, residents began to organise to limit tourism (Beeton, 2006; Tooke and Baker, 1996).

In the small Californian town of Locke resistance preceded development as the local community enlisted the aid of academic Dean MacCannell:

A group of elderly retired Chinese farm labourers who asked me how they might fight against the plans of a land developer and the State of California to turn their entire town into a "living museum", a "monument" recognizing the "important contribution of Asian Americans to California agriculture". So far, they have succeeded in their resistance (MacCannell, 1999: xxvi).

In Australia, rural community attitudes to increasing tourism have been characterised as mixed or ambivalent rather than stridently negative (see for example Griffiths, 1987). This may be partly due to the heterogeneous nature of these communities and partly to the lack of fora for dissent. For example, in contrast to North America, Australia has no tradition of town meetings and town-based local government.

If anything, policy-makers believed that rural communities understood and accepted the benefits of tourism. They were taken completely by surprise by a sustained outburst of dissent in the summer of 2004/5. The inhabitants of a number of small coastal towns gained extensive media coverage by calls for measures to restrict or penalise tourists. These proposals included an entry tax on overseas tourists, higher property taxes on second home owners and a visitors only toll charge on the major coastal route. Taking their cue from the television series, one group called themselves the 'Sea Change Task Force' (Frost and Lawrence, 2006). While these protestors came across as self-interested and inarticulate, they represented growing frustration with the loss of amenity and status within small towns which were now rapidly changing.

## AN IMAGINED HERITAGE

In addition to increased numbers of visitors, villagefication involves a reimagining of heritage and identity. A major part of the villagefication process is the physical reordering of a townscape, including moving structures and creating features taken from other time periods or cultures. Such

a process may lead to an inauthentic pastiche promoted and, over time, accepted as heritage. The result may be a distorted representation of the past characterised by invention and sanitisation (Timothy and Boyd, 2003: 247-253).

This jumbling of physical structures is partly inspired by the success of *outdoor museums* and *pioneer villages*. Well intentioned attempts to save historic buildings, these became very popular in the 1960s with the growth in interest in *living history* (Young, 2006). However, they have increasingly attracted criticism for 'inconsistent standards of conservation and curatorship', 'taking buildings out of their local setting' and interpretation which has been described as 'edutainment' and 'fakelore' (Stratton, 1996: 156). In Australia they have been noted as lacking specificity in the time period represented (Young, 2006). However, their success has validated plans for re-landscaping and 'improving' actual towns. The two following case studies illustrate how the physical structure of towns may be changed.

## **BEECHWORTH**

In the historic gold-mining town of Beechworth, Commonwealth funds were granted to restore a precinct containing five granite government buildings built between 1856 and 1858. With this restoration, there has been a strong marketing focus on this precinct as the iconic attraction within the town (and in part this was because a nearsighted condition of the funding was that the precinct would charge entry fees). As part of this redevelopment, the fencing and car parks surrounding the government buildings has been removed and replaced by a large open lawn, part of which has been named the 'Village Green'.

Until this redevelopment Beechworth had never contained a village green. Nor indeed had any of the surrounding towns (and I am unaware of any Australian town which was laid out with a village green). The concept is entirely imported from England (where some villages have greens, but many do not). The Beechworth site was a police reserve or paddock for 150 years. Nor has Beechworth ever been characterised as a village until now. That it has five substantial stone government buildings signifies its historic role as a major administrative town. Furthermore, the new village green has been planted with European deciduous trees. However, the public gardens at Beechworth are noted as excellent intact examples of nineteenth century design. In keeping with that design, Beechworth's gardens are dominated by Californian and Australian conifers. At the village green, twenty-first century designers have ignored that tradition.

## **GLENROWAN**

Nearby Glenrowan is the site of the last stand of the nineteenth century bushranger Ned Kelly. Immensely popular in Australia, Ned Kelly has been widely celebrated in art, literature and film, and Glenrowan has accordingly become a tourist destination (Frost, 2006A). Strung out along its main street, Glenrowan features many modern tourist shops and few old buildings. It hardly conforms to the popular image of a village. In 2006 work began on a beautification project. The area around the last stand site was levelled and planted with trees and lawns. Adjacent to where Kelly was captured, a rustic stone bridge was built as the centrepiece of the development. Kelly's parents were Irish and the new 'old' bridge is evocative of Irish countryside.

However, once the work commenced, protests arose. The site had been recently heritage protected by the Commonwealth Government. This was invoked to have the new project suspended and its future remains uncertain. It is significant that this project was implemented to improve the visitor experience and attract more tourists. It aimed to do this by replacing what remained of a historic site with a reimagined landscape, a park with village accoutrements. In short, the logic was – the site was historic and history is best represented by the old country village.

## CONCLUSION

The modern trend towards imagining country towns as villages represents an important reversal in the way we see the rural landscape. Rather than repugnant, declining places, villages have come to be viewed as attractive and vibrant playgrounds for nearby cities. The benefits have included the preservation of heritage buildings, new businesses, employment and an inflow of new residents. The village has become symbolic of successful rural regeneration.

However, such changes also bring costs. The reimagining of villages has been based on popular culture sources, particularly films. Accordingly, villagefication has looked to popular images for marketing and physical works. The resulting pastiche may include elements taken out of context from other cultures. The contemporary imagining of villages draws heavily on nineteenth century images of Europe. Nor is this an exact reproduction. What is thought of as being a typical village scenario has often been distorted through the lens of popular culture. *The Quiet Man* provides an instructive example. It is a romanticised view of an Irish village, skilfully and convincingly constructed by an American filmmaker. A powerful and popular film it sets the image of what a quaint village should be.

In Australia, the imaginary village has major implications for the preservation of cultural heritage and identity in rural communities. Though highly attractive, the village is a foreign cultural importation, with little relevance to the heritage of towns. Yet it creates a paradox. Reimagining a town as a village stimulates tourism numbers and expenditures. It creates an economic benefit. Existing heritage buildings and streetscapes may be rebranded and repackaged as villages, revitalising declining towns. This may lead to two sets of problems. First, there is the potential for increased host-community tensions. There is much scope for further research into how the decisions to create villages are being made and most importantly who is making them. Second, the material creation of villages may lead to changes to real heritage structures and sites. As illustrated by the cases of Beechworth and Glenrowan, there is pressure for major reconstructions of even protected areas.

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