

ON THE WINGS OF AN EAGLE

Linda Carr takes in the view from Bunjil's Lookout in Maude and speaks with members of the planning group responsible for creating the iconic structure



Photograph courtesy of Golden Plains Shire



Once upon a time a community not far from Geelong had an idea to erect a viewing platform on the ridge that overlooks their wonderful valley – a good spot to stand guard for fires and to keep an eye over the happenings in the vast expanse below. Just like the Wedge-tailed eagles who have soared high here for millennia, gliding on the thermals, inspiring all who have walked below.

A good thought, a practical thought – and when passionate and proud people come together, magic weaves its course and ideas begin to take flight. Flights of fancy, some may have thought, but not when you have the courage to spread your wings and see what happens. This is the story of how Bunjil's Lookout landed at Maude.

Around 2013 the Maude, She Oaks and Steiglitz Community Planning Group was seeking support from the 150-odd residents to apply for council funding to build the viewing platform. The site of the proposed platform was the grounds of the former schools which had serviced the community from 1874 to 1989. The 'wedgies' had been constant companions of the pupils and it was natural that they became the school's emblem. A metal

motif of a wedge-tail eagle in full flight still stands in the former school grounds.

Murray Satchell, a former principal of the school, was part of the planning group. By chance architects Dr Fiona Gray and Catherine Schurmann were two residents approached to join. As the group met and discussed ideas, the desire for something that was not only functional but also very elegant began to emerge. Such a splendid view deserved a structure that complemented its beauty and impact. The balance of a functional viewing platform with a physical acknowledgement of the eagle and the First Nations' creation story was organic, almost foretold.

"We were discussing the design, how to make the platform of this place," says Catherine. "The eagle became an obvious thing. It's like the structure is about to take off, to take flight."

"An Elder from the Wathaurong group shared their creation story of Bunjil with us," adds Fiona.

From the start the community around Maude strongly supported the concept. An architectural model was displayed in the Bannockburn Library and the resonance of the Wedge-tailed eagle in the local consciousness was powerful. Significantly,



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Jack Broadman from the CFA was also on-board with the design. "People fell in love with it," beams Fiona. "They really cared," Catherine echoes with delight. "They were engaged for the whole process. They have always wanted to share the amazing view they have."

The Bunjil creation story is at its most compelling in the Lookout's posts, carved by sculptor Viktor Cebergs from Site Specific Art. Steeped in rich Maori culture and with artworks erected around the world, Viktor sees the Bunjil Lookout as a continuation of his 1990's work with the Reconciliation Council. This time he collaborated with Wadawurrung Elder, Uncle Bryon Powell, on the design of the lookout carvings.

"For me it was about reconciliation art, not First Nations' art," says Viktor, whose passion is very evident. "I wondered if I was the right person to do the posts but Uncle Bryon told me to work on my drawings and come back to him. We worked on it together."

For Uncle Bryon the story-telling was the critical element of the work.

"It needed an artist who has empathy

with country and culture and understands what we are trying to say in our stories and what our beliefs are," he explains. "The design was great and I never impose on an artist."

The carvings on the posts are deliberately not realistic images of eagles and the other birds of the creation story.

"This was all about capturing the spirit of the animal which they truly felt each animal had," says Viktor. "Capturing its essence, bird spirits, a sort of 'animal-person'. I thought it would be disrespectful to make it realistic."

The Sugar Gum posts are carved on one side – in the vertical – and recall other totem art found in the Pacific region. They were intentionally left unpainted and only the figure sections are stained and sealed. Each one faces the others as if caught in some form of deep communion around a campfire.

"Only the heart, face and breasts of the figures have some colour and the hatching on some of the posts is the local Ballarat triangle-cross hatching that was used on possum skin coats," adds Viktor.

Long before construction commenced,



Uncle Bryon walked the site and was astonished at what he found.

"I went to the site and it was really strange. I was walking around and there were hundreds of artefacts lying on the ground. Suddenly a Wedge-tailed eagle came up the escarpment and flew about six feet over my head off into the distance," he says. "All the artefacts being there meant that my old people met there, sat there



The Pool House @ 13th Beach
Nic Stephens Photography

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working, watching the valley, watching the eagles."

The Wedge-tailed eagles made their presence known again in full force at the opening ceremony in 2015. While Uncle Bryon was conducting the smoking ceremony with a tarnook (wooden bowl) that he and Viktor had cut from a eucalypt not far from the lookout, two adult eagles with two of their young flew over the assembled dignitaries. It was a magical moment.

"It was like they were looking down on us saying 'Yeah, this is good'," adds Uncle Bryon.

In keeping with Kulin nation tradition, Uncle Bryon buried the remains of the smoking ceremony at the head of the lookout, on the very edge of the ridge. He was supportive of this project and agreed

Bunjil's story should be shared. So what does he hope that non-indigenous visitors will gain from visiting the lookout?

"I would like them to have an understanding of another creation story of how this environment came to be and not to poo poo it or put it off as a fairy tale. Education is important, if you tell people the stories they will remember."

Viktor has similar thoughts. "Not many sites with sculptures become meeting places. This is a meeting place. It was a great project and there is still a need for all of us to work together. With the guidance of First Nations people, we can educate the wider community about the rich culture that has been present in Australia for more than 65,000 years."

Bunjil's Lookout is located at 1795 Steiglitz Road, Maude

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