

Remaking Sirius

The Power of a Community in the Face of Change

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At first glance, the Brutalist Sirius apartment building (1975-80), surrounded by the intensive development of Sydney's CBD, gives little indication of the layers of change that lay beneath it, nor the battles fought to protect it. The Housing Commission building, perched above Sydney Cove in The Rocks, was borne directly out of the Green Bans in the 1970s to rehouse displaced local tenants. The community is currently at battle again for heritage listing to protect it from certain demolition by developers. The continual reinvention of the Sirius site over the past 250 years provides an intimate illustration of the changing face of Sydney. While evidence reveals the original owners, the Cadigal people, used the site to prepare meals from the nearby harbour, after 1788 the prime location underwent rapid change, to convict tent site, whaling business headquarters, sandstone terrace housing, and government shipping offices after it was resumed, somewhat questionably, by the state after the outbreak of Bubonic plague in 1900. The site of Sirius presents historical and current issues of ownership, inherited possession, long abandoned rights for workers to live near their workplace, the display of wealth and the reality of poverty amidst rapid social and economic development. This paper explores the current heritage battle being fought by the broad community of Sirius, and its echo with the battles that have preceded it. It documents the process of community involvement both now and then, and suggests reasons why this site evokes such passion amongst concerned stakeholders.

Keywords — *heritage conservation; community participation; Sirius.*

INTRODUCTION

The brutalist residential tower Sirius, built on the edge of Sydney Harbour in The Rocks in the late 1970s, reflects much of the story of the city itself. The background of the site brings forth a pattern of residents being removed, at times forcibly, in the name of progress, real estate and urban development.

Fierce attempts by the community to protect the community of The Rocks run throughout the history of the site. Stretching from the original indigenous inhabitation of the headland, to early European colonial settlement, to the first commercial wharves of the new city and the housing of its workers, and later Government ordered slum-clearance programmes to the recent relentless battle for the protection of homes and communities, Sirius provides repeated illustration of communities sidelined during planning processes and with little opportunity for input and consultation.

The extent to which communities should be included in heritage conservation decision-making processes falls within the large body of literature on community participation and urban studies. The move in the 1970s to incorporate public

participation into urban planning was followed by a conservative restriction of community participation in the 1980s, and a second resurgence of community involvement in the late 1990s. In 1969 Sherry Arnstein's seminal article graded eight levels of citizen participation from non-participation or tokenism, through to real citizen power and control, calling out the 'power-holders' in governments and their agencies for all the power to flow onto all participants (Arnstein 1969). Arnstein's ladder remains pivotal in discussions surrounding to what extent public participation efforts are merely tokenistic and lack meaningful opportunities for genuine community input. Later work by Sandercock also recognised that public participation usually serves explicit management purposes highlighting the dominance of the 'haves' rather than the 'have nots' in planning (Sandercock 1986).

The case for involving communities in decisions surrounding heritage conservation is a strong one. Communities are the local experts and there for the long haul, well after the experts have moved on (Johnston & Buckley 2001: 88). There is, according to Perlgut, two key rationales for including the public in the decision making process. Firstly, it is ethical. In a democratic society, those whose environments are at stake should be included in the decision making process which will affect them directly. Secondly, it is pragmatic. By genuinely including communities in the decision making process, those communities will in turn be increasingly willing to assist in the process and support the outcomes (Perlgu 1987: 1). As concluded by Nowlan and Nowlan "if planners will not involve the citizens, citizens will involve themselves" (D. Nowlan & N. Nowlan 1970).

As so in the case of Sirius, where planning decisions have not been genuinely inclusive of communities, the strategies then employed by those communities can, and often do, have the power to effect change. The work of Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow and Doug McAdam on 'contentious politics' identifies types of strategies that have proven most effective in bringing about change by communities (McAdam et al. 2001). These strategies included the participation of diverse 'actors', the use of technology to mobilise, leadership ability to connect with the public, and having a clear and singular goal. The strategies identified by Tilly, Tarrow and McAdam will be used to highlight those employed by the local community of The Rocks over time, providing illustration of the pattern of exclusion from official planning processes and the resulting rallying of a community to have their voices heard.

PRE 1788: TALLAWOLADAH

The arrival of Europeans into Sydney Harbour in January 1788 saw the first round of what was to become a pattern of eviction of the residents of The Rocks. The Gadigal people of the Eora nation had inhabited the foreshore for thousands of years, known as Tallawoladah. Campsites had been established along the shores of the harbour, particularly during the warmer months when fish and shellfish were the primary part of the local diet. The indigenous population was rapidly overwhelmed and overtaken by the new settlement, with the colony being established on the prime harbour front land. Governor Philip's usurpation of Sydney Cove with its reliable water source and grassy hillsides had, according to Inga Clendinnen, "excluded the original Australians from reliably accessible water and good hunting grounds", and by July of 1788, Philip knew they were "much distressed for food", too weak and anxious to fight for a share of the fish the British were now catching with large nets (Clendinnen 2005: 87).

The western side of Sydney Cove, which had been densely covered with trees and shrubs, was largely cleared to make way for rows of tents running down to the shore. The convicts in the tents on the western shoreline came to call the wild hillside "The Rocks" and the name stuck. Soon they were creating their own town there, building "little edifices", one- and two-roomed huts of split soft cabbage trees, woven wattles and clay with stubby thatched roofs and no eaves (Karskens 1999: 75).

The small houses stood amongst dead and dying trees, jagged stumps and muddy footpaths. The lines these small huts formed on the rocky ledges were the rough precursor of later streets: first footpaths, then tracks, later officially named Cumberland and Gloucester Streets (Karskens 1999 28). Communities of convicts made their own neighbourhoods in

places like The Rocks by the earliest years of the nineteenth century. Many of the houses were not built according to the regulations of the colony, but to the needs and preferences of the people. In 1790 the second fleet arrived into the harbour, including three store ships, and the first shop in Sydney soon opened its doors in The Rocks. Residents set up smith workshops and bakeries, while others established hotels and shops. Labourers moved between employees around the town and in the settlements up and down the waterways of the colony.

THE 1800S: BUNKER'S HILL

The small early huts along Cumberland Street typically had floors of stone or dirt. Windows had panels of woven wattle and doors hung on leather straps, with many reports of thatch roofs catching fire and the downpours of Sydney rains dissolving the soft clay walls. Most were starting to be replaced with more substantial homes, with people building out of local sandstone, much of it quarried from their own backyards. Houses of wealthier residents featured glazed multi-paned windows, hearths and chimneys of stone or brick, and doors with locks and keys, which swung on iron hinges. As land values continued to rise, houses were increasingly semi-detached and some had upper storeys added. Public markets opened at the foot of The Rocks, and it became a great local gathering place. On market days the produce arrived by boat from further up the river, and butchers and bakers sold supplies to locals (Karskens 1999: 172).

The earliest maps of The Rocks name the Sirius site as Bunker's Hill. Captain Ebenezer (Eber) Bunker (1761-1836) was rewarded in 1803 with a town grant of land for services to Governor King, and Bunker House stood on the site of what is now Sirius, surrounded by elegant terraces, and survived until the major demolitions in the area in 1912. The northern apartments of the present Sirius building sit on land that was granted to Captain Henry Waterhouse, who leased his land to Robert Campbell, developer of Cumberland Place, designed by Francis Greenway, where wealthy middle class people built fashionable mansions and townhouses.

Bligh's arrival as Governor of the colony in 1806 saw him attempt to sweep away what had grown in Sydney and reclaim the land surrounding Sydney Cove for the crown. Householders were ordered to vacate their houses so they could be demolished. These orders, coupled with the introduction of tighter rules for rural landowners forbidding many of them to build on their land, led to Bligh's eventual arrest and removal from office in January 1808. The soldiers and officers supported the townspeople in ousting Bligh, who feared losing all they had built and accumulated. They had succeeded in protecting what they saw as the right to the land they had taken and the homes they had built, the right to make a decent material life, and for some, the freedom to pursue wealth (Karskens 2010: 188).

Immigration to the colony rose dramatically after the end of transportation in 1840, which led to an increased demand for housing. The Rocks became a place where many new immigrants settled upon arrival. The large yards of Bunker's Hill began to be subdivided and rows of small, plain terrace houses began to appear, often with the larger original house remaining in the rear. Maps show by 1880 two rows of tiny terraces had been constructed at 4-18 Cumberland Street and directly in front of them at 5-17 Gloucester Street (Dove 1880).

The area quickly became one of two classes – the rich in their large homes, with labourers and the working class down below. When eventually the wealthy abandoned the crowded city for larger homes in the new suburbs, the shift began from owner-occupancy towards a population made up of tenants. By 1856 the City Assessment books listed the 18 houses of the Sirius site as being owned by seven landlords, none of who lived in the houses (City of Sydney 1856). Cumberland Street was by this time a long street of 151 houses, with almost equal numbers of stone and brick construction. While some solid buildings were appearing, the majority had only three rooms. The area took on the shape and space that was to remain for the next 50 years. In 1861, those 18 houses were home to a hairdresser, clerk, boot maker, cab driver, grocer and engine driver. There was a ladies' school and several boarding houses (Sands Directory 1861). By the 1870s attention began to focus on Sydney's sanitary state, and much of this was aimed at the congested parts of the city like The Rocks where working people lived. In 1877 the City of Sydney Improvement Act was passed, giving the state power to pull

down substandard or dangerous buildings deemed “unfit for human habitation” (Karskens 1999: 188).

THE 1900S: THE ROCKS RESUMPTION

The tenanted area of The Rocks appears to have changed little throughout the 1800s. A picture of life during the period was well painted by James Mathers (1852-1911), a Scottish missionary. Mathers regularly visited many of the houses on the block on Cumberland Street. In Number 36 Mrs Tibbets rented her eight-roomed house from Mr Cohen, who also owned the three neighbouring houses. As was common in The Rocks at the time, Mrs Tibbets ran her home as a boarding house, renting out rooms to whole families. The missionary recorded his visit to Mrs Tibbets in his journal on 2 July 1901:

“She is a poor deserted woman with one son who is out of employment. The poor woman has her rooms rented to poor families who is unable to pay the rent of a house. For example, there lives in one of the rooms a woman with 7 in family, and another above her with the same. She can seldom get her rent out of them” (Mathers).

The bubonic plague, brought to Sydney by fleas on rats, hit epidemic levels in 1900.

The Rocks reportedly had only five victims, but its slum reputation meant that people assumed it was a central breeding ground for the disease. The City of Sydney, having already passed the *City of Sydney Improvement Act*, swooped on the area. The City Improvement Advisory Board was established in 1901, and the Crown resumed the foreshore land in The Rocks from private ownership in an effort to control the spread of the outbreak. The streets were quarantined, stores closed and shopkeepers sent broke.

As has been suggested by Shirley Fitzgerald, many of the houses were not slums. Despite the claims of the importance of slum clearance to eradicate the plague, for some years prior to 1901 a government committee had been considering a proposal to build a bridge across to the North Shore. In 1902, the government adopted plans for a harbour bridge designed by Norman Selfe and despite this design not being built, it was clear that the government’s resumptions of housing in The Rocks was driven by more than health concerns (Fitzgerald 1992: 220).

The resumption of the prime land meant residents became tenants of the state. The dissatisfaction of the tenants with their new landlord was evident – public meetings allowed the residents to express their opinion and newspapers reported on the deliberate dereliction of the houses making them barely fit for habitation, at the same time as raising the rents. In 1903 a deputation from the unions was introduced to the NSW Premier Thomas Waddell to air the grievances of the tenants of The Rocks. They demanded improvements be made to the houses and rents be lowered.

To avoid spending money maintaining their own buildings, the government conceived the idea of making tenants responsible for the maintenance of the dwellings in which they lived, leading to a campaign in opposition. The ranks apparently swelled quickly, and “it was not long before the whole of the tenants were ranged in one line, and refused emphatically and point blank to sign the new tenancy agreements” (The Daily Telegraph 1902). The Sydney Harbour Trust responded by giving all tenants notice to vacate their premises.

After an initial flurry of house demolitions, things proceeded slowly. By 1911, 264 houses had been demolished and only 108 erected. The tenants remained on the block on Cumberland Street until the houses were finally demolished in 1912. By that year, some 7000 people had been unhoused in the City of Sydney, and until 1916 there was no form of compensation for tenants, which most residents were. The objections from owners were generally meek and requesting postponement rather than a stay of demolition. Tenants who pleaded with the demolition teams not to proceed were ignored (Karskens 1999: 191).

By 1912, The Rocks gained a reputation as the heartland of Sydney ‘low life’ (Fitzgerald 1992: 213). The area was sensationalized as being full of undesirables: foreign sailors arriving in Sydney, drinking in the pubs and brawling in the alleys. The area became less residential as warehouses and other commercial buildings moved in and the population declined. In the years to follow, the reputation of The Rocks as a disreputable neighbourhood stuck. There was not a focus on rebuilding The Rocks to the same extent as neighbouring Millers Point. The clearance provided both space for industry and a site for a southern approach to the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The Housing Board of NSW was constituted in 1912 under the provisions of the Housing Act (No. 7, 1912). Prior to the outbreak of WWII, more than 30 brick tenement houses were built to rehouse the waterside workers left homeless by the post-Plague slum-clearance in Cumberland and Gloucester Streets. By 1920, the block on Cumberland Street was the site of the Government Shipping Offices and Rowans Ltd Bonded and Free Stores. But the local community did not disappear. Residents became tenants of successive state government bodies and the continual change of landlord fostered the community by giving people security of tenure and fixed rents for the first time. Instead of moving every couple of years, as had been the case previously, families stayed in one house over many years, even passing the leases onto their children. Children grew up surrounded by their extended families and felt they belonged in these houses and in The Rocks.

THE 1970S: THE BATTLE FOR THE ROCKS

The 1950s and 1960s saw extensive public housing developments in Sydney, mainly aimed at low-income workers and those not in the paid workforce. The Housing Commission was the major developer of housing during the period.

When the NSW Labour Government called for expressions of interest for the redevelopment of 19 acres of land within The Rocks in 1963, the successful proposal comprised of seventeen high-rise towers (Blackmore 1988: 129). The scheme did not proceed following the election of the Liberal Party led by Robert Askin in 1965, and was replaced with the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Scheme in 1970. The new plan included the relocation of all public housing residents to other suburbs, and all properties within The Rocks were transferred to the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority (SCRA).

When the plans were unveiled for The Rocks they caused a strong reaction from the newly formed Rocks Residents’ Action Group (RRAG). The group was already familiar with the SCRA as their new landlords. It had been an unhappy relationship from the start, according to head of the RRAG Nita McRae, who in a 1975 interview lamented “this new mob came in, raised our rents 200 or 300 percent, and wouldn’t make any repairs. When we asked, they told us ‘if you don’t like it, move out...’” (Roddewig 1978: 20). It was a familiar story.

The RRAG held several protest meetings and distributed petitions. They also sent countless letters to the State Government voicing their dissatisfaction with the redevelopment proposal. The group not only managed to gain the attention of the media and the bureaucrats, but in late 1971, the RRAG approached the NSW Builders Labourers’ Federation (BLF) and gained what was to be game-changing support.

The basis of the agreement between the BLF and the RRAG was that no demolition would take place, and there would be no new construction, without the approval of the RRAG. The Rocks became the third BLF green ban (after Kelly’s Bush and a second at Eastlakes), and the first ban in a lower-class, inner-city neighbourhood (Roddewig 1978: 22). The housing needs of hundreds of low-income public housing tenants were at stake, as was a significant part of Sydney’s heritage.

And so the Battle for The Rocks began. It was a battle for the provision of low and middle-income earners to reside in the area, but it also came to symbolize a greater battle, for better planning and for decent urban conditions. As BLF Secretary Jack Munday asked, “what is the use of winning a 35-hour work week, higher wages and better conditions if we’re going to choke to death in cities that are devoid of parks and where streets never see the sun?” (The Canberra Times 1974). At a protest in October 1973 to protect the terraces of Playfair Street, which the state government was determined

to demolish using non-union labour, 58 people were arrested, including Jack Munday.

The green ban proved to be the undoing of the SCRA scheme. It allowed time for residents and other supporters and professionals to become interested and mobilized and resulted in a review of the scheme, commissioned in 1974. Fortunately, the delay coincided with the idea of participatory planning largely derived from the USA. In 1972, residents recruited a small group of concerned architects and academics and published 'The People's Plan' for The Rocks', arguing that the residents should be allowed to stay in the area and that the heritage of the existing buildings must be respected (The Rocks Peoples' Plan Committee 1975). Munday called the Plan true democracy: "prepared by architects, town planners and sociologists on the basis of what the people want for their own community" (Macdonald 1973: 35). The public voice was finally heard and the conservative State Government and SCRA were forced to respond. This was a fight that had been won against massive odds.

It was agreed the green ban would be lifted for the site on the proviso that residents were rehoused in quality accommodation at low, affordable rents. In response to The People's Plan, the Housing Commission proposed the Sirius Apartments for the site on Cumberland Street to rehouse displaced residents. Designed by Tao Gofers and named after Governor Phillip's Sydney bound First Fleet vessel, the design comprised of 79 apartments including four bedroom family units, three, two and one-bedroom units and nineteen one-bedroom units specifically designed for aged tenants. A 52 year lease for the site was signed and the state government made a promise that the residents would never again lose their homes (Dunn et al. 2017: 8).

The Sirius proposal was presented to stakeholders and accepted by both the RRAG and the BLF, who in turn agreed to lift the green ban to allow for the demolition of the existing buildings in order to allow for construction. The tenants of surrounding terraces were asked to vacate and the construction of the Sirius Apartments to began. Despite wide criticism, the first tenants of the new housing block happily moved in in early 1980, coming largely from nearby demolished terraces. According to the Sirius launch brochure produced by the Housing Commission in 1980, "our involvement is a direct result of the demands by the then 'Rocks Residents' Group' and the application of a Green Ban on the area by the Builders Labourers' Federation to prevent any construction work whatever in the area" (Housing Commission of New South Wales 1980: 1). The Green Ban in The Rocks had undoubtedly changed both the neighbourhood and the city, giving way to the construction of Sirius, which went on to become a community. That community was to be entirely displaced only 37 years later.

2000s: THE BATTLE FOR SIRIUS

In March 2014, the NSW State Government announced its decision to sell off hundreds of Sydney's public housing properties at Millers Point, Dawes Point and The Rocks, including plans to sell the Sirius building to developers as a site for luxury apartments. The sale of Sirius was reported widely in local and international press and led to broad debate about the legacy of this building and what it represents. Soon after, concerned architects, heritage experts, and residents founded Save Our Sirius in an effort to protect the building and the community that lived there.

In July 2016, the NSW Minister for Environment and Heritage Mark Speakman announced that Sirius would not be listed on the State Heritage Register despite the recommendation of his own department – the Office of Environment and Heritage - of the aesthetic and rarity values of the building. The Office oversees the heritage register and in doing so provides exemplar buildings with the required statutory protection under the NSW Heritage Act. Required to make a decision within two weeks under the Act, the decision took six months. The Minister chose to reject the listing on the grounds of financial hardship:

"I am not listing it because whatever its heritage value, even at its highest that value is greatly outweighed by what would be a huge loss of extra funds from the sale of the site, funds the government intends to use to build social housing

for families in great need" (NSW Office of Environment and Heritage 2016).

The Minister also commented that the building is "not at all in harmony with the harbour and heritage that surrounds it" (Saulwick 2016). Defending the NSW State Government's decision to reject the State Heritage Register listing nomination, Dominic Perrottet, the Minister for Finance, Services and Property, described Sirius as being "about as sexy as the car park at my local supermarket" (Sydney Morning Herald, 2016). There was widespread opposition to the Minister's decision, including that of Clive Lucas, president of the National Trust (NSW) calling the decision the most recent in "damaging Sydneysiders 'sense of place' in pursuit of money" (Saulwick 2016). Despite the broad opposition, the Housing Commission began the process of rehousing the residents of Sirius. Again, the community galvanised to fight to protect their homes. The Save Our Sirius campaign gained momentum and utilised multiple strategies to gain public attention in the effort to protect Sirius. In September 2016 over 2000 people attended a rally, and Jack Munday, who spoke on behalf of Unions NSW, placed a green ban on the site.

The Save our Sirius Foundation and other local residents' groups mounted a fundraising campaign to raise \$50,000 to challenge Minister Speakman's rejection of the Heritage Council's recommendation to list Sirius. Tao Gofers hosted twenty tours to almost 1500 people, both to raise money for the upcoming legal campaign and to allow access to the interiors. Family and Community Services responded by blocking the windows with black plastic and limiting access to a maximum of five people at a time (Dunn et al. 2017: 83). Funds and public awareness were also raised through crowd funding, the 'This is Sirius' art show, Friday Night Sirius gatherings in the courtyards, and an active traditional and social media presence.

The Environmental Defenders' Office, on behalf of the Millers Point Community Association, officially challenged the decision in the Land and Environment Court NSW. At the hearing in early April 2017, Justice Simon Molesworth found the Minister did in fact fall into error "by misdirecting himself as to the proper meaning of the words 'would cause undue financial hardship to the owner' in section s32(1)(d) of *the Heritage Act*" (Millers Point Community Assoc. Incorporated v. Property NSW (2017) NSWLEC 92: 5). As such, the decision by the Minister to not list Sirius was declared invalid and on 25 July 2017 the Minister was ordered to make a decision according to law to either direct or not to direct the listing of Sirius on the Register (Millers Point Community Assoc. Incorporated v. Property NSW (2017) NSWLEC 92: 7). Taking on the NSW State Government, the residents of The Rocks had again won against significant odds. Adding Sirius to its 2018 watch list, the World Monuments Fund called on the NSW State Government to 'respect the recommendation of its heritage experts and allow its citizens to maintain an important social legacy' (World Monuments Fund, 2018).

That victory was to be short-lived, however, when on 25 October 2017 then Minister for Heritage Gabrielle Upton announced the decision to not direct the listing of Sirius on the State Heritage Register. The Minister's stated reasons for the decision included the divergence between the Heritage Council recommendation on aesthetic and rarity values, and the 'response to public notification'. According to the submission report, a total of 25 submissions were made regarding adding Sirius to the State Heritage Register.¹ Of those submissions, only four opposed the listing.² That these four submissions effectively outweighed the opinion of the state government's own Office of Environment and Heritage, the Heritage Council, hundreds of community members and Residents Groups (whose petitions are routinely counted as one submission, as in the case of Sirius), the AIA, local councils, DOCOMOMO and Tao Gofers speaks to the authenticity of the invitation for the public to comment.

1 The Summary of Submissions (Attachment D, Part 1) released by Office of Environment and Heritage under GIPA775.

2 The four submissions opposing the listing on the State Heritage Register were made by: NSW Land and Housing Corporation, Government Property NSW (both departments of the NSW State Government), Intrasia Oxley Pty Ltd (the Singapore based investment fund), and Urban Taskforce (representing developers and equity financiers).

CONCLUSION

The site of the Sirius Apartments in The Rocks has long been a battleground of ownership and tenancy rights. Over many generations the communities of working class tenants have been forced to fight authorities for better conditions and treatment, and the right to remain in their homes. As was the case in the 1900s and again in the 1970s, the community has fought the latest battle for Sirius themselves.

The opportunity for community and broader public to have input into the decision making process appears to be tokenistic at best (Arnstein 1969), and, as noted by Nowlan and Nowlan “if planners will not involve the citizens, citizens will involve themselves” (D. Nowlan & N. Nowlan 1970). The latest battle for the protection of Sirius and its residents garnered support from the broader community of unions, academics, architects, lawyers, conservationists and the media.

The broad range of strategies employed by the community, and Save Our Sirius in particular, answer to all of those identified by Tilly et al, possibly with the exception of ‘a clear and singular goal’. The dual aspects of saving the architecture of Sirius and saving the community of Sirius may have complicated the campaign. While each of the strategies were powerful and had a significant impact on the state government’s plans for the sale and redevelopment of the site, the battle continues. In January 2018, Save Our Sirius has revealed plans for a bid to purchase and redevelop Sirius as affordable housing. The same week, the last tenant was removed from her home and relocated.

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