

Submission to the
Heritage Council of NSW

by
Leichhardt Council



Notice of Intention to consider listing
of the State Heritage Register



Image of the Sirius Apartments - watercolour elevation from the Powerhouse Museum Website

Sirius Apartment Building
36-50 Cumberland St, The Rocks

Notice of Intention to consider listing of the State Heritage Register



Sirius Apartment Building 36–50 Cumberland St, The Rocks

prepared for
Leichhardt Council



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1 executive summary

Leichhardt Council commissioned Willana Associates Pty Ltd (Willana) to provide a high-level, independent, appraisal of the Heritage Council of NSW Notice of Intention to Consider the Listing on the State Heritage Register of the Sirius Apartment Building, 36 – 60 Cumberland Street, The Rocks. Willana has prepared this submission to the Heritage Council of NSW on behalf of Leichhardt Council.

Leichhardt Council acknowledges the significance of the Sirius Apartment Building to Sydney and to the State, including:

- Its important contribution to the social fabric of Miller's Point and The Rocks.
- The Sirius Apartment Building is an example of a positive social housing project, with a strong, vibrant and successful community outcome for the residents.
- Its link to the Green Bans of the 1970's, instigated by the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) led by Jack Munday, Bob Pringle and Joe Owens.
- Its distinctive architectural form as a fine example of the Brutalist architectural style by noted architect Tao Gofers, who pioneered significant innovations in social housing design in Australia.

Leichhardt Council supports the proposed Heritage Listing. However, it is the view of the Council that the Heritage Listing of the Sirius Apartment Building must not be limited to the architecture of the building, but also be related to its continued use for the purpose for which it was designed: for accessible, diverse, democratic and well-designed public housing in the heart of Sydney.

- Social housing tenants make up part of the living history that contributes to the heritage value and the character of the Millers Point and Dawes Point Village Precinct which is recognised by its listing on the State Heritage Register. Consistent with this approach, the purpose for which the Sirius Apartment Building was constructed must be recognised for its State significance because: Its important, and ongoing association with past and present residents of the Millers Point and The Rocks community. As listed in the Heritage Council of NSW draft Statement of Significance: *Many of The Rocks and Millers Point residents were the descendants of maritime workers who lived and worked in the area for generations. Sirius may also be of social significance to others in NSW who consider it an important achievement that the unique makeup of the Miller's Point and The Rocks community has been preserved for so many generations.*
- Its construction was as a direct result of the Green Bans in the 1970's.
- The building was designed by noted architect Tao Gofers who pioneered significant innovations in social housing design in Australia.

- The building's design cannot be separated from its use as public housing.

Leichhardt Council is seeking the support of the Heritage Council of NSW to preserve the use of the Sirius Apartments Building as a quality, social housing project, for future generations. In addition, to protect the living culture of The Rocks area; to maintain the diversity of residents in the area in order to ensure a successful mixed and vibrant community, into the future.

2 introduction

The Heritage Council of NSW has published its intention to consider listing the Sirius Apartment Building on the State Heritage Register. The building is identified as likely to have State level significance for associations with the Green Bans of the 1970's, together with the design by noted architect Tao Gofers who pioneered significant innovations in social housing design in Australia.

While Leichhardt Council acknowledges that the architecture of the Sirius Apartment Building is important, it's considered that its high social significance, as a successful public housing project, adjacent to the Sydney CBD, is of utmost importance to the State.

The Sirius Apartment Building was designed and constructed as an innovative public housing initiative in the heartland of Sydney. Leichhardt Council is making this submission to the Heritage Council of NSW on the basis that the Heritage Listing of the Sirius Apartment Building must be related to its continued use for the purpose for which it was designed: for accessible, diverse, democratic and well-designed public housing in the heart of Sydney.

Leichhardt Council is committed to the provision of social and affordable housing both in the Leichhardt Local Government Area and across the Inner Sydney Council area's (e.g. City of Sydney, Marrickville, Ashfield, North Sydney).

The Council's commitment is reflected in Leichhardt's *Affordable Housing Strategy (2011)* and the aims of Council's planning instrument, *Leichhardt Local Environmental Plan 2013*, which includes at Clause 2:

Clause 2 The particular aims of this Plan are as follows:

- h) to promote accessible and diverse housing types, including the provision and retention of:
 - (i) housing for seniors or people with a disability, and*
 - (ii) affordable housing**

It is on the basis of the Council's commitment to social and affordable housing, that this submission is made.

3 the issues

3.1.1 the use of the Sirius Apartments

The history of the Sirius Apartment Building is well documented and intrinsically linked to the Green Bans of the 1970's. The Sirius Apartment Building was purposely designed and built to rehouse public tenants displaced during the controversial redevelopment of The Rocks during the 1960s and 1970s.

Proposed high rise building work in The Rocks was halted by union Green Bans and resident opposition. In 1975, the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority agreed to suspend most of its development plans for The Rocks and rehouse displaced public housing tenants in new purpose built public housing. As a result, Tao Gofers was commissioned to design the Sirius Apartment Building. Records indicate that most of Sirius' original tenants had lived in terraces on George, Playfair and Atherden Streets, in The Rocks.

The heritage significance of the Sirius Apartment Building is not just the physical structure and architecture of the apartment building itself, but its specific design for social housing. Unusually, for the development of social housing, the architect, Tao Gofers, interviewed prospective social housing tenants at the design phase of the building. Significant social design elements of the building comprise:

- The provision of two common meeting rooms and a number of common landscaped terrace areas, with highly valuable outlooks to Sydney Harbour and the CBD.
- The inclusion of accessible and pensioner apartments, located in the tower building where there are no steps at the entrance to the units.
- Emergency call buttons and special electronic locks on the unit doors in case of accident or medical emergencies were included in all pensioner and accessible units.
- The mix of apartment sizes from 1 – bedroom apartments through to 3 and 4 – bedroom apartments, appropriate for families, ensure a mix of tenants in the development.

The building's design cannot be separated from its use. In order to understand the significance of the architecture of the building, it is imperative that the very use of the building, for social housing, is protected in perpetuity, for generations to come.

3.1.2 The sale of 239 inner city public housing properties

In March 2014, the NSW Minister for Family and Community Services announced the sale of 239 public housing properties in The Rocks and Millers Point area, within a two-year period. This announcement included the sale of the Sirius Apartment Building. There are 79 apartments in the Sirius Apartment Building.

The Sirius Apartment Building therefore, makes up 33% of the total public housing properties identified for sale in the area.

A Social Impact Assessment of the sale of public housing in Millers Point was prepared by CRED Community Planning for the Land and Housing Corporation (the statutory body responsible for the management of the NSW Government's social housing portfolio). It is noted that the scope for the Social Impact Assessment did not include the sale of the Sirius Apartment Building. It is Council's view that this is a serious flaw in the Land and Housing Corporations policy decision to sell-off public housing in the inner Sydney area.

The other 160 dwellings identified for sale predominantly fall within the Millers Point and Dawes Point Village Precinct. This precinct was listed on the NSW Heritage Register in 2003 as "a living cultural landscape". Many of the properties identified for sale in the Millers Point area are heritage items of State and local significance.

The Sirius Apartment Building is not currently protected by a State or local heritage listing, nor is the important social aspect of the building (i.e. its use for successful social housing) protected as part of a "living cultural landscape". As stated above, the loss of the social housing building was not considered in the State Government's Social Impact Assessment, which was released in conjunction with the Government's announcement of the sale of the 239 properties in Millers Point and The Rocks.

Social housing tenants make up part of the living history that contributes to the heritage value of the Millers Point and Dawes Point Village Precinct which is recognised by its listing on the State Heritage Register. Consistent with this approach, the purpose for which the Sirius Apartment Building was constructed must also be recognised for its State significance.

3.1.3 Living cultural history

The evidence that supported the State Heritage listing of the Millers Point and Dawes Village Precinct Heritage Conservation Area is applicable to the Sirius Apartment Building.

The Statement of Significance in relation to the Millers Point and Dawes Village Precinct Heritage Conservation Area on the NSW includes that:

"The whole place remains a living cultural landscape greatly valued by both its local residents and the people of New South Wales".

The Sirius Apartment Buildings and their use, as a well-designed and successful public housing project, is a logical extension of the "living cultural landscape" of the Millers Point and Dawes Village Heritage Conservation Area. The purpose built public housing development at the Sirius Apartment Buildings was as a direct result of the Government's initial plans to redevelop much of The Rocks in the 1970s, and move public housing residents out of the area. Residents of Millers Point fought

with the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) through the Green Bans to protect public housing residents in The Rocks.

As a compromise and in order to end the Green Bans, the Sirius Apartment Building was constructed, specifically to provide well-designed public housing to displaced social housing tenants in The Rocks. It is this historic link to the provision of social housing, for the more vulnerable members of society, in the heart of Sydney City that must be maintained.

This important linkage between longer-term social housing tenants and the local area is recognised as a highly significant and valuable factor in the heritage assessment of the Millers Point and Dawes Village Heritage Conservation Area. This historic linkage is also evident and important in relation to the Sirius Apartment Building.

3.1.4 Sustainability and economic context

The Sirius Apartment Building was constructed less than 40 years ago. SGS Economics and Planning in their report for the Millers Point Resident Action Group, *Millers Point and The Rocks: An alternative way Forward* (August 2014) identifies that the Sirius Apartment Building is:

- *Highly appropriate for continued use as social housing given their low maintenance costs and appropriate design, with small and accessible apartments.*

and that

- *The proposed 'one size fits all' plan of selling all social housing in Millers Point and The Rocks is likely to lead to an inefficient outcome, given the differences in the suitability of the various properties for use as social housing. The obvious examples are the Sirius development and housing on Kent Street built in the last decade, which are highly appropriate for continued use as social housing given their low maintenance costs and appropriate design, with small and accessible apartments that align well with the household size of most of the social housing tenants in the area and the changing profile of Housing NSW's current tenant base and waiting list. The financial and welfare costs of relocating the tenants of suitable properties such as these are likely to be significant in an economic appraisal.*

The condition of the Sirius Apartment Building is described as "good" in the SGS Economics and Planning August 2014 report. There is no need, from a sustainability or economic basis, to displace the existing tenants of the building. The protection of the use of the building as public housing is unlikely to have a negative economic impact on the Government in terms of the ongoing maintenance of the building, unlike the many terrace houses in Millers Point that were not purpose built for public housing and are costly to maintain.

3.1.5 Maintaining community mix in the heart of Sydney

There is evidence to support the ideal that social and affordable housing plays an important role in providing opportunities, for people on lower incomes, to live in well serviced, accessible and job-rich areas, such as the Sydney CBD.

The SGS Economics and Planning report *Millers Point and The Rocks: An alternative way Forward* (August 2014) includes:

Facilitating a mix of residents of different backgrounds and incomes within the city has valuable benefits to society, such as economic benefits resulting from:

- *enabling workers on lower incomes to locate closer to employment opportunities, allowing them to more easily improve their skills through access to a deeper jobs pool within commuting distance*
- *making it easier for firms in the high value inner city to fill lower paid positions, such as cleaners and childcare workers*
- *providing housing for 'key workers' essential to the city's functioning, such as police and nurses. Research in the UK found a strong correlation between areas with the highest house prices and the most acute teacher shortages (The Guardian 2004), while the City of Sydney expects housing affordability issues to impact particularly on the tourism and hospitality and education sectors (including the state's attractiveness for international students)*
- *more effectively deploying human capital, since Sydney's mismatch between the locations of cheaper housing and employment affects lower income families in particular, especially women.*

These impacts on the productivity of the City of Sydney's economy can improve its global competitiveness, to the benefit of all residents of the state. There are also benefits in terms of reducing spatial disadvantage and for social justice, given that the wider metropolitan and NSW communities pay for much of inner Sydney's high level cultural, sporting, transport and public domain infrastructure.

Millers Point, Dawes Point and The Rocks have unbroken and ongoing links to the provision of social housing adjacent to Sydney's CBD, providing mixed communities close to jobs and transport. The use of the Sirius Apartment Building must be protected to provide an ongoing link to the past of mixed communities in the area.

It is noted that the very low rate of affordable housing proposed for Barangaroo (i.e. a **target** of 2.3% of residential gross floor area) was accepted by the NSW Government, on the basis that there was nearby, a high proportion of social housing in Millers Point and The Rocks. The proportion of public housing in Millers Point and The Rocks is being reduced, but there has been no commitment to maintain the historical community mix in the new housing at Barangaroo.

It is important therefore, to protect the use of the Sirius Apartment Building, for social housing, in order to maintain a healthy and diverse community, close to the Sydney CBD. This area of Sydney is under considerable development pressure, with little consideration to the historical links to social housing communities of the past, or consideration of the benefits of protecting social housing communities for healthy mixed suburbs of the future.

4 conclusion

Leichhardt Council acknowledges that the architecture of the Sirius Apartment Building is important. However, it is also considered that its high social significance, as a successful public housing project adjacent to the Sydney CBD, is of the utmost importance to the State. Leichhardt Council supports the proposed Heritage Listing on the basis that the Heritage Listing is not limited to the architecture of the building, but also related to its continued use for the purpose for which it was designed: for accessible, diverse, democratic and well-designed public housing in the heart of Sydney.

As detailed in this submission, the high social importance of the use of the Sirius Apartment Building must be protected and recognised for its State significance because of:

- Its important and ongoing contribution to the social fabric of Miller's Point and The Rocks. As listed in the NSW Heritage Council's draft Statement of Significance: *Many of The Rocks and Millers Point residents were the descendants of maritime workers who lived and worked in the area for generations. Sirius may also be of social significance to others in NSW who consider it an important achievement that the unique makeup of the Miller's Point and The Rocks community has been preserved for so many generations.*
- The Sirius Apartment Building is an example of a positive social housing project, with a strong, vibrant and successful community outcome for the residents.
- Its construction was as a direct result of the Green Bans in the 1970's. The Sirius Apartment Building was constructed to provide purpose built, affordable public housing in its 79 apartments, for approximately 200 people potentially displaced by other developments in the area.
- The building was designed by noted architect, Tao Gofers, who pioneered significant innovations in social housing design in Australia.

Council is seeking the support of the Heritage Council of NSW to preserve the use of the Sirius Apartments Building as a quality, social housing project for future generations. In addition, to protect the living culture of The Rocks area, to maintain the diversity of residents in the area in order to ensure a successful mixed, and vibrant community into the future.