

NATIONAL TRUST REGISTER LISTING REPORT

CITY/SUBURB/TOWN	NAME OF IDENTIFICATION	ADDRESS OR LOCATION
THE ROCKS	SIRIUS APARTMENTS	14 – 36 Cumberland St

LGA:	City of Sydney	ABORIGINAL NATION:	The Gadigal Clan of the Eora Nation
POSTCODE:	2000	LOT/DP:	Lot 100 DP 264104
COMMITTEE:	Built Heritage Advocacy Committee	GRID:	Lat: -33.857589 Long: 151.208065
AUTHOR:	Graeme Aplin	LISTING DATE:	28 May, 2014

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The Sirius Apartments building at 14-36 Cumberland Street, The Rocks, designed by Tao (Theodore) Gofers is a fine example of the Brutalist architectural style, especially in its use of off-the-form concrete and the stacking of cubic components to create a harmonious whole. It is also significant as an early example of rooftop landscape gardening. As such, it is featured on a number of architectural websites and in architectural literature internationally. The block was named after the First Fleet ship, HMS 'Sirius'.

The building has high social significance as it took form in 1978–1979 in the wake of the Green Bans movement that was protesting at the 1970s proposed wholesale redevelopment of The Rocks and Millers Point. The Sirius building was seen as providing affordable public housing in its 79 apartments, housing approximately 200 people potentially displaced by other developments in the area. It has been policy to house a social mix of young and old, and of large and small families. Some apartments were designed with particular families in mind as original occupants.

The building has landmark significance notwithstanding that the construction of the building was notable for the amount of discord it created in the community, including extensive correspondence in the newspapers of the day. However, it was described in the magazine *Concrete* (Issue 11) as 'a bold and exceptional experiment in low-income public housing'. It was a conscious attempt to reduce the monolithic nature of most high-rise residential developments.

The four wooden sculptures have aesthetic and technical significance and are rare surviving works by architect Tao Gofers.

DESCRIPTION:

This 79-apartment residential building complex consists of repetitive geometric (cubic) elements stacked on top of each other to give a step-like terrace effect rising from under five storeys for much of the northern sections and part of the southern end, to eleven storeys in a high-rise block towards the south.

In fact 75 per cent of the building is five storeys or less. It was originally intended to have a white finish to echo the Opera House, but due to budget constraints, the building remained in

grey, off-the-form concrete. At the time of construction one of the main complaints was that the building rose above the level of the Bridge's roadway.

The general form is said to have been inspired in part by Moshe Safdie's Habitat '67 residential complex in Montreal, originally built for Expo '67. Another Housing Commission apartment building designed by Tofers was built at 1A Ritchie Street, Sans Souci, on the site of a former trolley-bus, then bus, depot.

Floors are concrete slabs, and the window frames are acid-etched. There are 79 1-, 2-, 3-, and 4-bedroom apartments, mainly or perhaps solely single storey, with two- or three-level walk-ups as well as lifts. Because of the design, each lift foyer on each floor serves only a small number of apartments.

The majority of the apartments open onto gardens on the roofs of lower apartments, while there is also a communal garden on the 8th floor and ground floor courtyards. Hanging garden effects somewhat soften the concrete. Large planter boxes on the top floor, visible from the Sydney Harbour Bridge, were referred to in a 1979 letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* as 'those hideous purple bulbous things on the roof'. They are still there, but much faded.

Inside, the main foyer has a slatted 'waving' timber ceiling and there are three-dimensional wood sculptures designed by the architect, Tao Gofers, based on European cave art figures. There are two community lounges, both with marvelous views, as well as service rooms and on-site parking.

The building was also well known for a sign announcing '*One Way! Jesus*' that has been displayed in the window of Unit 74 facing the Bridge for more than 15 years.

HISTORY:

The first buildings on the site were a row of sandstone terraces built in the 1840s along similar lines to London townhouses. These were replaced by Housing Board buildings erected in 1913-1916 after the realignment of Cumberland St. These consisted of bond stores, warehouses and government office buildings.

According to Jack Burke, Chairman of the Housing Commission when Sirius was designed and built, it replaced an ugly warehouse in dangerous condition with a large neon 'Yamaha' sign on its roof.

The Sirius building was designed by Housing Commission architect Tao (Theodore) Gofers during 1978-1979 and construction was completed in March 1980. Its construction was in response to the 1970s Green Bans movement protests over planned redevelopment in The Rocks and Millers Point, and a move to rehouse some of the residents in somewhat up-market accommodation but at low, affordable rents. The comprehensive redevelopment plans were largely dropped in 1975 after vigorous public and union protests. Sirius was built by the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority and leased to the Housing Commission, later going through the hands of the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority.

Roads adjoining Sirius were closed in the early 1980s and Gloucester Street became Gloucester Walk, which is now listed on the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority Heritage and Conservation Register. The remaining section of the warehouse, the Ajax building at the northern end of the site (23 George Street North) is also listed on the SHFA.

There was much public outrage at the time of construction and for some time afterwards. The National Trust, in 1979, referred in its *Bulletin* to 'a lump in The Rocks', viewing Sirius as 'a vast and out-of character building'. Tao Gofers, in 1980, was quoted to the effect: 'I'm not worried

about the criticism. People will accept it in 3 or 4 years.' Charles Pickett, writing on the Powerhouse Museum website, comments: 'This prediction proved to be correct.'

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

'Architecture according to Apple' website.

Bogle, M. 'Beauty of the beast', *Architecture Bulletin*, Australian Institute of Architects, March-April, 2012, p.13.

Concrete, Issue 11. (www.concrete.com.au/CplusA/issue11/CCA0011_Rearview_FA)

Cove Courier, November 1979.

National Trust Bulletin, No.87, April 1979.

Pickett, C. 'Sirius on The Rocks',
www.powerhousemuseum.com/insidethecollection/2013/05/sirius-on-the-rocks/

Sirius, Housing Commission of NSW, 1978?

Wikipedia: 'Sirius building'

BOUNDARY OF LISTING

The boundary of the listing is the boundary of Lot 100 DP 264104

SITE PLAN:





PHOTOGRAPHS:



'Sirius'

Sirius Tower. Sirius as depicted in Housing Department promo booklet, 1980



Architectural elevation, Sirius public housing apartments, watercolour and ink on board, Alan Patterson, Australia, Powerhouse Museum



Sirius Tower Block, photograph: Graeme Aplin



Sirius Tower Block, photograph: Graeme Aplin



Sirius North Buildings, photograph: Graeme Aplin



Sirius North Buildings, photograph: Graeme Aplin



Sirius Buildings from Gloucester Walk, photograph: Graeme Aplin



Sirius Courtyard, photograph: Graeme Aplin



Sirius roof-top gardens, photograph: Graeme Aplin



Sirius roof-tops, photograph: Graeme Aplin



Sirius Phillip Room. Photo: Graeme Aplin



One of four sculptures - Sirius Building. Photo: Graeme Aplin



Moshe Safdie's Habitat '67 residential complex in Montreal, originally built for Expo '67



Tao Gofers Building – 1A Ritchie Street, Sans Souci



Tao Gofers Building – 1A Ritchie Street, Sans Souci