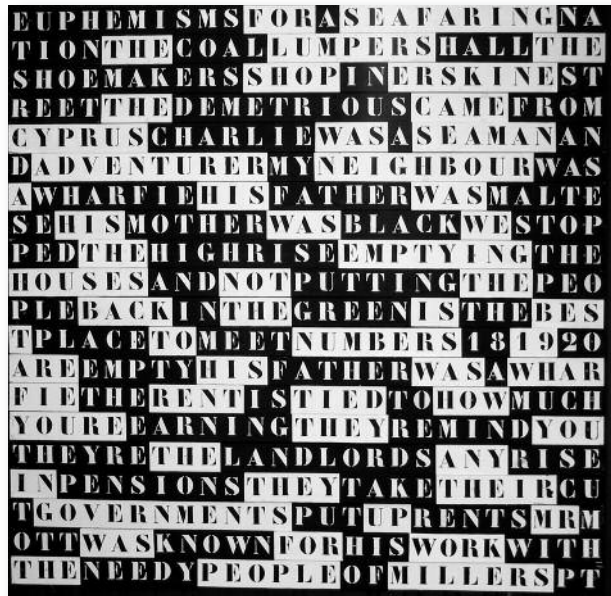


# 'Housing the Seafaring Nation'

An Ephemeral  
Public Art Installation  
by Ruark Lewis



**Dates:** Through February and March 2009

**Sites:** National Trust (NSW) Headquarters, Observatory Hill; Abraham Mott Community Centre in Argyle Place and Baby Health Centre on Lower Fort Street, (now Older Women's Network), opposite the Garrison Church, Millers Point, Sydney.

**Curator:** Jo Holder

**Official Opening and Round Table Discussion on Public Housing in Millers Point**

**Venue:** Abraham Mott Hall

**Friday 20 March 2009 at 6.00pm**

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## Project Information

Artist Ruark Lewis and writer-curator Jo Holder are undertaking a series of ephemeral art works that take up the idea and form of a public conversation. The issue under discussion here is the government's policy of selling-off of Public Housing in inner-city Sydney.

'Housing the Seafaring Nation' is a series of artworks attached to the facades of 2 key public buildings in Millers Point, at the foot of the Harbour Bridge, and 1 to the National Trust (NSW) headquarters, as well as a round table discussion.

Ruark Lewis said: "Art can help create a wider public awareness. I hope that the act of artistic play will illuminate the human rights issues at stake in selling-off public housing in New South Wales".

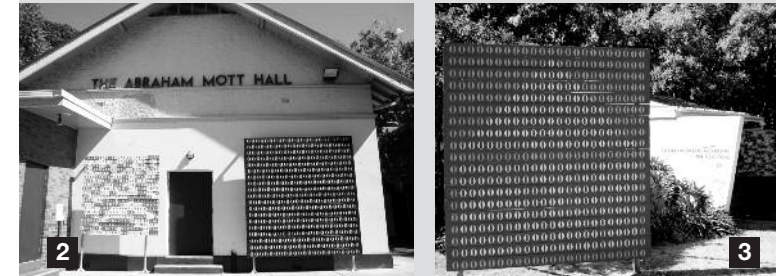
The artwork re-inscribes the importance of Millers Point as it is the oldest continuous urban community in Australian/European settlement history.

Around the 1900s the Sydney Harbour Trust (succeeded in 1936 by the Maritime Services Board or MSB) initiated a visionary rehabilitation project and created Australia's first public housing community. Preference was given to the families who lived and worked on Sydney's docks and wharves, bond stores and warehouses and other maritime-linked businesses. Their families have fought and still fight to keep this working class heritage intact.

Today the quarter is a popular tourist precinct. Tenants once paid their rent to MSB officers in the building now housing the Museum of Contemporary Art. In 1982 the MSB gifted most of the Millers Point area to the Public Housing Department to manage and conserve for the future.

Now the working harbour is dismantled. Walsh Bay and most of the foreshores are sold-off and the harbour enclosed by walls of residential towers. But the Millers Point community remains the real thing. Now some public houses are being slowly sold to the private market on 99-year leases.

These 5 large billboards are installed in sequence on sites symbolising civic activism in Sydney. For an example, in the 1950s a respected local man, Abraham Mott, inspired



## Installation sites, Millers Point, Sydney 2009

1. National Trust Building Observatory Hill
2. Abraham Mott Community Centre in Argyle Place
3. Baby Health Centre on Lower Fort Street (opposite Garrison Church)

residents to found a welfare centre in the former Coal Lumpers' Hall and build a baby health centre.

On Observatory Hill a monumental frieze on the parapet of the National Trust building spells out HOMELESSNESS, the giant letters enabling easy reading by motorists crossing the Harbour Bridge.

The Millers Point billboards recall the patterning of maritime pilot markers rendered as a kind of pattern poetry. These navigational signals are positioned along the shoreline to direct tugs pulling ships. Seagoing vessels are paradoxical symbols of temporary homes and homelessness, independence and interdependence. Seafarers, everyone agrees, are different.

Beside the pattern billboards are 2 storyboards formed out of interviews and conversations with local people. These open-ended poetic works aim to reflect the area's playful political language and resistant spirit.

Millers Point has a history of significant counterpoints between the dissident voice, the resistant voice and the government and developers. This is not an isolated situation and clearly other communities of the inner-city are threatened.

## Round Table Discussion on Public Housing in Millers Point & Opening

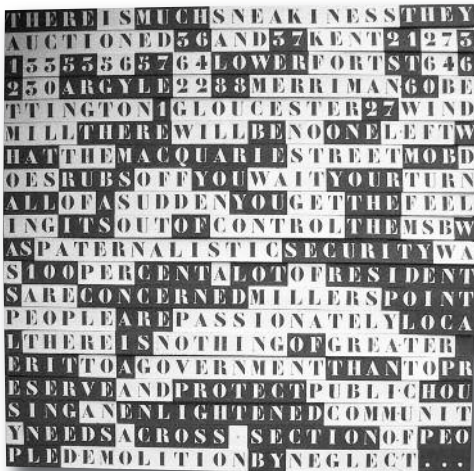
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This project aims to build a platform for policy review and for the voices of residents and heritage experts to be heard. *It's the people who make the place.*

In 1990 the National Trust (NSW) proposed that the entire area be added to the National Estate for World Heritage listing. Prime Minister Bob Hawke said he was "actively pursuing the matter". In 2002 a Housing Department Draft Report on Millers Point actively canvassed ways to retain public housing and a conservation agenda.

This trust has been betrayed. Houses are slowly emptied and run-down while new short-term tenancy contracts break down neighbourhood stability. Running parallel to stalled conservation history is the development agenda.



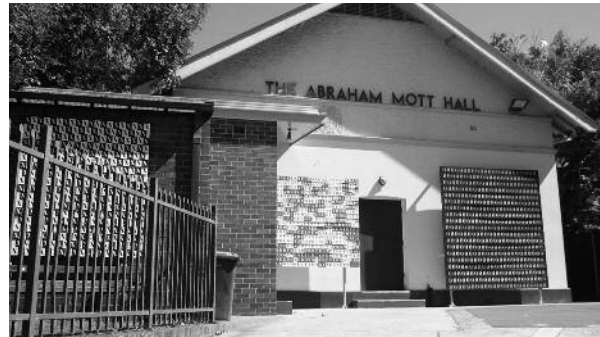
In 2005 the Housing Minister Joe Tripodi introduced an aggressive sales campaign for Millers Point. Ideas and ways of keeping and conserving public housing and encouraging mixed-income communities in the inner-city were ignored. The next minister Cherie Burton, undertook to "only" sell-off 16 more heritage properties.

In November 2008 a large terrace at 59 Lower Fort Street was sold for \$1.5 million. The new Minister, David Borger,

said that the proceeds would go to "five affordable housing properties in the inner-west". In the future this boarding house that accommodated 6 people on fixed incomes will become a luxury private residence. What else can be done to keep these houses in public hands?

Come along and consider and contribute alternate strategies and ideas to the sell-off. How can we manage heritage housing properties? How do we protect unique communities and places?

Also invited are local groups and representatives, Councillors, housing and policy officers and heritage folk. Join the artist for a celebratory cup of tea. As a record of this unique community action have your portrait taken by celebrated local photographer Izzy Perko. Works will be displayed in the Millers Point Festival in September.



"Housing the Seafaring Nation" installation view, Millers Point Sydney 2009.

### About the Artist

Ruark Lewis is renowned for his linking of art, poetics and political discussions. His method, which he calls "transcription (drawing)", often takes the work of other artists – composers, poets, choreographers, anthropologists and fellow visual artists—and transforms it into abstracted text embodied in sculptural installations. He created RAFT with Paul Carter for the Art Gallery of New South Wales and other commissioned works—for the 2000 Sydney Olympics, 2006 Biennale of Sydney and Performance Space at Carriageworks. In October 2008 he created a commissioned installation for Toronto's Nuit Blanche festival. This is his first work drawing on local voices to create a history.

### Links

[www.ruarklewis.com](http://www.ruarklewis.com)

Ruark Lewis interview on related public projects, see

*RealTime*, issue #87, Oct-Nov 2008 at [www.realtimearts.net](http://www.realtimearts.net)

### Special Thanks

Thanks to: Myra Demetriou, Charles O'Connor, Linda Gordon, Doug Sutherland and Col Tooher for participating in the conversations; to Millers Point Estate Advisory Board (Mara Barnes, Ron Jennings and Col Tooher), Millers Point Residents Action Group (Millicent Chalmers), Darling Harbour ALP branch, the National Trust (NSW) and Jane Watters & Louise Tegart of the SH Ervin Gallery, Older Women's Network, Tenant's Union and Shelter; to urban environmentalist Jack Munday; to historians Margo Beasley, the Coal Lumpers Union expert, Shirley Fitzgerald, City Historian and Rosie Block, Mitchell Library Oral History Librarian; to SCC Public Art officer Eva Rodriguez Riestra; to Bartholomew Rose for studio art fabrication and to Gareth Steiner & Jesse Hindmash for installation and assistance; to photographer Izzy Perko for documenting the round-table.

*Sponsors (fabrication and installation):*



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