

Heritage: The narrative of a city | Rebecca Gross

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Three Modernist buildings are situated on Sydney Harbour in close proximity to Circular Quay: Sydney Opera House (1959-73), Blues Point Tower (1958-62) and Sirius (1978-80). While the future of the opera house and tower are protected (the opera house is National and World Heritage listed while Blues Point Tower has State Heritage listing), Sirius, which recently had its heritage recommendation rejected, remains under threat as the state government plans to demolish and sell the site. The aesthetics of Blues Point

Tower and Sirius are not to everyone's taste and strongly contrast that of the Opera House. Yet both are exceptional architectural and cultural examples of a particular era and provide far more than face value, which is why Blues Point Tower has gained heritage status, and why Sirius duly deserves it.



Sirius by Katherine Lu

National Heritage listing is given to natural, historic and indigenous places of outstanding significance to the nation. NSW State Heritage listing is likewise given to places of outstanding significance. As the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage website states:

“The heritage places of NSW not only reveal the story of Australia’s past; they safeguard and enrich our present and future. Retaining our limited heritage resources is green, sustainable, an investment and community building. Owners, business, residents and visitors all benefit as a result.”



Blues Point Tower was a new type of housing solution in Australia in the post-war era. Upon completion, the International Style building designed by Harry Siedler was the tallest apartment building in the country and a forerunner to high-density housing. Its affordable apartments were marketed to single people, young married couples and older people wishing to downsize, and as the first strata-titled apartment block in NSW, people could, for the first time, own their individual apartment.

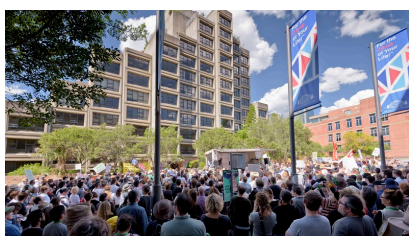
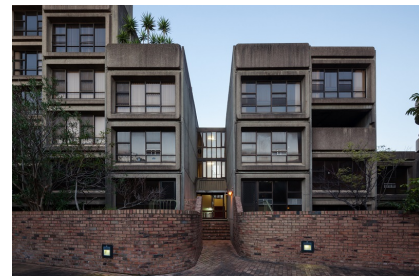
Image left: Blues Point Tower, Hpeterswald (creative commons, wikipedia) Image below-right: Sirius by Katherine Lu

However the development of Blues Point Tower, the first tower in what was meant to be a larger residential development, was at the loss of earlier buildings; an historic stone

house and row of terraces. In the late 1950s the pending demolition stirred greater consciousness of Sydney's heritage and by the 1970s when proposed redevelopment threatened The Rocks' colonial-era buildings, civil and union action against redevelopment, known as the Green Bans, proved successful.

Sirius was built as a direct result of the Green Bans in The Rocks. Designed by Tao Gofers, Sirius was specifically designed for its site and its purpose: to provide high-quality housing for low-income and aging residents in Millers Point, many of whom had been displaced by redevelopment in the area. Indeed, Sirius represented the move towards housing solutions that engaged the local

community and enabled long-time residents to continue to live in Sydney's historic working-class neighbourhoods. It also represented the utopian hope of Brutalism: that architecture could help change lives. As such, Sirius is not only an exemplary and rare example of Brutalist architecture in Australia, but also of social housing.



In late 2016, the NSW Government rejected the Heritage Council's recommendation for Sirius' State Heritage listing. But as history repeats itself, a new battle wages in The Rocks. There is now a Green Ban on Sirius, and the Save Our Sirius foundation has been established to fight for the conservation of the building. Saving Sirius is not

just about protecting architecture, but also about preserving history and community and recognising the forces that shape our changing cities. Image: Sirius Rally, by Ben Guthrie



Sirius was designed to foster a sense of community within the building; it was developed with respect to its surrounding community; and there is now a broader group of people who are fighting to save it. Thus the preservation of Sirius goes beyond the building's architectural and cultural value, and represents the values of inclusion and diversity instilled by the social housing project itself.

Image: Sirius interior by Barton Taylor

Of course the demolition and preservation of buildings is a recurring theme throughout Sydney's history, as it is in most cities around the world. The Sydney Living Museum's current

exhibition Demolished Sydney tells the story of a city "built and rebuilt" and draws attention to 13 former buildings from Sydney's convict beginnings to its industrial and metropolitan growth. The Fort Macquarie Tram Shed (1902) was demolished in 1958 to make way for the Sydney Opera House; the Hotel Australia (1891) once stood where the MLC Centre (1977) is now; and the former Kent Brewery site (1835, mostly rebuilt in 1980) demolished in 2008, is now the site of the new Central Park Sydney precinct and the award-winning adaptive reuse project, The Brewery Yard.

Image right: General yard shot of workers and casks. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences

But as buildings are earmarked for demolition or preservation, it encourages us to consider what "heritage" means and presents the opportunity for citizens to become one of the forces that shape their own city and its narrative.

Heritage buildings provide more than architectural value. They embody cultural, historical and social values and by losing buildings it is not just the structure that is erased, but the identity and character of communities is changed, as is people's relationship to their environment.

