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Public housing on 'The Rocks': brutalism, heritage and the defence of inhabitance

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The affordability, availability and adequacy of housing is a problem which now affects almost every major city in the world, as processes of financialisation and commodification increasingly circumscribe the possibilities for the democratic inhabitance of urban space. In Sydney, there has been a long-running campaign against the eviction of public housing residents in the historically working class, inner city neighbourhoods of Millers Point and The Rocks. This article discusses the community opposition to the New South Wales State Government's decision in March 2014 to sell off 293 public housing dwellings and relocate residents, and focuses on the resistance by tenants of the famous Sirius building in The Rocks against forced evictions and the sale of the building. Reflecting on the 'brutalist' design that characterises the Sirius building, it will be argued that it is important to resist simplistic characterisations of brutalism as a relic of an inhuman modernism. The Sirius building demonstrates the possibilities of designing inner city public housing with the concerns of the elderly, the frail and the marginalised in mind. The campaign to save the Sirius building may be understood as a political defence of the idea of 'inhabitance', understood in terms of bodily occupation, the creative appropriation of space and the

possibility of utopia. The preservation of such a building can be seen as an egalitarian and utopian demand for what Henri Lefebvre describes as housing for 'collective luxury'; an entitlement to inhabit the inner city in dignity, from which none should be excluded.

Keywords: public housing, urban space, brutalism, democratic inhabitance, utopia, right to the city, Lefebvre Sydney

Introduction

The affordability, availability and adequacy of housing within all Australian capital cities is a highly charged political issue. This is certainly not a unique problem to Australia, but now affects almost every major city in the world as processes of financialisation and commodification of housing have become a central source of wealth creation for capital and individual investors (Madden and Marcuse 2016; Rolnik 2013). In Australia, the focus on rising levels of housing unaffordability has been most intense in the nation's largest city – Sydney – where it is now common to describe the relentless increase in housing costs and the difficulties of the young and renters to find satisfactory dwellings as a 'housing crisis' (Thomas and Hall n.d.; Yates 2008; Phillips and Joseph 2017; Coote and James 2018). Orthodox neoliberal policy responses to this problem regularly include calls by developers and their political supporters for the opening up of more land on the suburban outskirts of Sydney and further deregulation of land-use planning approval processes, to encourage greater investment in housing development. For much of the past three decades there has been a mainstream political consensus over the need to provide taxation concessions to property owners. But in the last two years there has been a shift in the rhetoric of the national opposition party – the Australian Labor Party (ALP) – to a questioning of the role of national taxation incentives for housing investments in exacerbating speculation and increasing the cost of housing across the country. These were central issues during the 2016 national election. While the ALP's policy shift did not result in an electoral victory, it demonstrated for the first time in almost two generations the possibility of challenging the political orthodoxy of neoliberal approaches to housing, and credibly linking notions of social equality and state-mediated distributional solutions to housing affordability.

Alongside these shifts in the meta-narratives surrounding housing politics at the national level, there have been a number of concrete local struggles over housing availability and affordability which have been fought in parallel, revealing how neoliberal conceptualisations of housing still structure state management

and policy-making in this area. One recent flashpoint over the provision of public housing in Sydney has reignited debates about the governance of housing and exposed the exhaustion and intellectual bankruptcy of neoliberal urban policy in Australia. Since early 2014 there has been an ongoing campaign against the eviction of public housing residents in the historically working class Sydney neighbourhoods of Millers Point and The Rocks. These conflicts provide an opportunity to consider the future role of social housing in a decision-making environment constrained by the politics of austerity and a determination by the New South Wales State Government to remove the remnants of the welfare state's gesture towards urban inclusiveness from the geography of inner Sydney. This article is concerned with community opposition to the NSW government's decision in March 2014 to sell off 293 public housing dwellings and relocate residents to other localities. In particular I will focus on the resistance by tenants of the famous Sirius building in The Rocks against forced evictions and the sale of the building. The social movement which has developed around the defence of these evicted tenants allows us to confront important questions about future justifications for social housing and also to identify the limitations of trying to protect 20th Century public housing stock in Australian cities through assessments of heritage significance.

I will briefly discuss the history of public housing struggles in Millers Point and The Rocks and explain how the construction of the Sirius building was a compromise between the housing authorities and local residents, which emerged from a previous era of political struggle during the 'Green Bans' of the 1970s. Next, I will provide an explanation of the building's 'brutalist' design and the way in which this international architectural movement made its way to Australia during the 1960s and 1970s. I will argue that contrary to simplistic rejections of brutalism as a dominating, modernist relic, examples such as the Sirius building demonstrate the possibilities of designing inner city public housing specifically with the concerns of the elderly, the frail and the marginalised in mind. While much of the campaign to save the Sirius building has emphasised its place as part of Australia's architectural heritage, it is also important to understand this social movement as a political defence of inhabitation, understood in terms of bodily occupation, the creative appropriation of space and the possibility of utopia. The preservation of such a building can be seen as an egalitarian and utopian demand for what Henri Lefebvre describes as housing for 'collective luxury' (Stanek 2017).

Struggles over public housing in Millers Point and The Rocks

In March 2014, the New South Wales Minister for Family and Community Services, Pru Goward MP, announced the proposed sale of 293 public housing dwellings owned by the New South Wales Land and Housing Corporation in the historic

harbourside neighbourhoods of Millers Point and The Rocks, and the relocation of approximately 600 tenants to alternative public housing accommodation around the state (DFCS 2014). This announcement of the sale of public housing stock and the forced dispersal of residents is not novel in itself, as it followed a number of well-established precedents in public housing policy in New South Wales in recent years (Arthurson and Darcy 2015; Darcy and Rogers 2014; Rogers 2014; Stubbs et al 2005). However as Darcy and Rogers point out, this proposal was of particular interest because of the justifications for the sale by the department and the passionate resistance by public housing tenants and their supporters (Darcy and Rogers 2016: 47). The minister's rationale for the decision was based on the "the high cost of maintenance, significant investment required to improve properties to an acceptable standard, and high potential sale values" in this area of Sydney. It was claimed that the money spent on the maintenance of these few properties could be "better spent on building more social housing, or investing in the maintenance of public housing properties across the state" (DFCS 2014).

While both ALP and Liberal-National State governments in New South Wales have adopted policies aimed at the deconcentration and dispersal of public housing tenants in recent years, what is distinctive about this case is that the department did not attempt to rely on a need to resolve the urban pathology of a dysfunctional housing estate or the lack of socio-economic mix within the wider neighbourhood. Instead, the explanation for the sale was premised on a conceptualisation of "fairness", presented in terms of an abstract comparison between the costs of maintaining public housing dwellings in vastly different localities around the state, and by noting the "unfairness" of public subsidisation for poor tenants to enjoy the benefits of living in "harbourside assets" (DFCS 2014; Darcy and Rogers 2016: 50). Accordingly, the minister argued that it was only by realising the high capital value of these properties and dispersing existing tenants to other, less valuable localities that it would be possible to effectively invest in "a sustainable social housing system which supports disadvantaged people across the whole state" (DFCS 2014).

The second distinctive aspect of this controversial proposal identified by Darcy and Rogers was the "intensity of the resistance" to the planned sale by public housing tenants in Millers Point and The Rocks, and the way in which they were joined by a broad network of supporters including residents' alliances from other parts of Sydney, community activists, heritage bodies, the City of Sydney Council, filmmakers and trade unions (Darcy and Rogers 2016: 51-52). This latest programme of removing public housing from the inner city is not an isolated example, as this area of Sydney has itself been the site of multiple waves of disruption to existing modes and patterns of inhabitation, beginning with the violent displacement of the Gadigal people by European colonisers in the years

following the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 (City of Sydney 2013). At the turn of the 20th Century, Millers Point was subjected to an intensive campaign of property resumption and “slum clearances”, primarily justified by the outbreak of bubonic plague in 1900, but also clearly driven by an economic agenda to redevelop and modernise the wharves (Fitzgerald and Keating 1991: 70; Volke 2006: 5-13). Then in the early 1970s, low-income and public housing in The Rocks was threatened by the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority’s (SCRA) radical plans for extensive demolitions of existing housing stock and their replacement by high-rise and commercial developments. It was at this point that public housing tenants in The Rocks joined with the militant elements of the construction workers’ union, the Builders Labourers’ Federation, to implement bans on proposed developments in the area, as part of a broader campaign against state-led destruction of inner city working class neighbourhoods which facilitated the commercial interests of land developers and the real estate industry.

This movement, which became known as the ‘Green Bans’, involved a series of innovative and radical interventions in the politics of urban governance and development in New South Wales between 1971 and 1975. Community and environmental activists joined forces with the industrial power of the New South Wales Branch of the Builders Labourers’ Federation (NSW BLF) to halt development in the name of environmental responsibility and the maintenance of liveable spaces and affordable housing in the inner city (Munday 1981; Burgmann and Burgmann 1998; Iveson 2014; Thorpe 2013; *Rocking the Foundations* 1985). During this period, more than 50 green bans were imposed, the majority of them in Sydney. Many bans were only lifted after the union’s national executive, with the encouragement of prominent land development interests, mounted a hostile intervention into the NSW BLF in 1975. This brief period of urban activism had a profound influence on the modernisation of the New South Wales planning system from the mid-1970s onwards. Amelia Thorpe explains that the principles of participatory democracy which drove the green bans were not directly translated into the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (NSW) and the *Heritage Act 1977* (NSW), but it is clear that without these bans and their success in challenging the presumptions behind development approvals and planning of the inner city, these new laws would not have been enacted so quickly following the election of the Wran Labor government in 1976 (Thorpe 2013: 100).

The ban on development in The Rocks was one of the most famous of these community and union collaborations, and it remained in place from late 1971 until the end of 1974. Like green bans in other inner Sydney localities such as Woolloomooloo and Waterloo, the campaign in The Rocks was not solely focused on physical occupation and resistance, but also produced an alternative ‘People’s Plan’ which challenged the focus on high rise development and relocation of

public housing tenants in the SCRA's original plan for the area. As Nita McCrae, a prominent member of the Rocks Resident Action Group at the time, explained:

The 'People's Plan' was drawn up as an alternative to the SCRA plan in 1972 when architects, town planners and sociologists came to the assistance of the Rocks RAG. With residents they helped to prepare the 'Peoples Plan' for the Rocks. This simply called for resident rehousing in the area, retention of historical buildings (which has partly been achieved), infill development on vacant sites and public participation in the planning, and less emphasis on planning for profit with Australia's heritage (The Rocks People's Plan Committee 1972; cited in Iveson 2014: 1001).

Brutalism: the aesthetics and ethics of public housing

The importance of the People's Plan in The Rocks lies in its generation of a radically democratic model of urban planning process, which posed an alternative to the established decision-making models which existed at the time, and provided a set of concrete demands that the residents could use in their bargaining with housing authorities. One of the most significant results of the entire Green Ban movement was the decision of the NSW Housing Commission to construct the Sirius apartment building as a compromise development which would be acceptable to the Residents Action Group, and provide a way to end the ongoing development ban over The Rocks district in 1975. This building is one of the most well-known examples of late brutalist architectural style in Australia. The building is located on a long block of land between Cumberland Street and Gloucester Walk in The Rocks, which lies parallel to the freeways approaching the Sydney Harbour Bridge from the south. As the only high rise residential block in this harbourside district of Sydney, it is characterised by a stepped construction, which tapers from one storey at its northern end, to eleven storeys in the middle, and back to two storeys at its southern end. The architect, Tao Gofers, was employed by the New South Wales Housing Commission and it is clear that his design incorporates some of the repetitive geometric elements of Japanese metabolist architecture. It is also often assumed that it pays homage to the prefabricated modular structure of Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67. Like many buildings which have had to wear the label of brutalism it has continuously been the subject of controversy and public debate since its completion in 1980. For the architect and critic Norman Day,

Sydney should be ashamed of itself. It is an affront to travel over the Harbour Bridge, or arrive on a ferry from Circular Quay, and find that the original Sydney landmark – the Bridge – has been

vandalized by the Housing Commission of NSW. The half-built chicken crate Housing Commission estate, built on Bunkers Hill which sits over The Rocks, is a disgrace . . . The building is a series of tiny concrete boxes stacked on top of each other like so many grey playing cards . . . as if designed by a group of droogs from Clockwork Orange . . . (Day 1979: 7).

Such criticisms of brutalism are common, as are the associations that it rhetorically conjures up of 'brutality', or the brutishness of the living surroundings that it imposes on its inhabitants. Indeed for critics of brutalist architecture, the very name provides an easy target by which a whole architectural style and the communities which inhabit these buildings can be maligned and condemned without consideration of the complex factors which generate social disadvantage and inequality. Internationally, brutalist social housing estates have been consistently attacked on aesthetic grounds and blamed for causing social disadvantage and crime (Coleman 1985; Newman 1972). References to brutalism have been tactically employed in contemporary neoliberal attacks on public housing, such as that launched by ex-UK Prime Minister David Cameron in his announcement of a plan for the widespread demolition of council estates across the country: "... step outside in the worst estates and you're confronted by concrete slabs dropped from on high, brutal high-rise towers and dark alleyways that are a gift to criminals and drug dealers" (Cameron 2016). Prominent examples of social housing designed according to brutalist principles which have been already demolished, or are currently targeted for destruction include the Heygate and Aylesbury estates in South London, and Robin Hood Gardens in East London (Lees 2014; Sebregondi 2012; Mould 2017; Slater 2014).

But brutalism has a much more complex history than such a polemical dismissal can accommodate. Initially it was most closely associated with a group of British architects in the early 1950s, who challenged the frivolous character of diluted forms of modernism that had crept into the architecture of the mass building programme carried out during post-war reconstruction efforts. The term 'New Brutalism' was initially coined in 1953 by Alison and Peter Smithson in their description of a design for their uncompleted 'Soho House' (Smithson A and Smithson P 2011a). Etymologically, it drew its inspiration from both Le Corbusier's enthusiasm for *béton brut* (raw concrete), particularly in his *Unité d'habitation*, built in Marseille between 1947 and 1952, and Swedish architect Hans Asplund's characterisation of the Villa Göth housing project in Uppsala as 'nybrutalism' (Mould 2017: 703). Beyond the Smithsons's influence, brutalism gradually emerged as a category to describe a large body of architectural work between the 1950s and 1980s, becoming a global phenomenon, particularly in the design of public buildings. There were always differences in emphasis between the architects and

critics who embraced the tenets of brutalism, but a common reference point has often been Reyner Banham's classic 1955 essay 'The new brutalism', which provided a quasi-manifesto for the movement. Banham attempted to distil three elements which could define the character of new brutalism:

The definition of a New Brutalist building ... must be modified so as to exclude formality as a basic quality ... and should more properly read: 1. Memorability as an Image; 2. Clear exhibition of Structure; and 3. Valuation of Materials "as found" (Banham 1955: 361).

In this statement, Banham focused on an alliance between the power of the monumental image, honesty in structural elements and the open presentation of a building's materiality, in order to suggest the possibility of this emerging movement fulfilling the role for architecture claimed by Le Corbusier, that of using "raw materials to establish stirring relationships" (Le Corbusier 2008: 194).¹ This characterisation of brutalism was always contentious, and indeed by 1966 even Banham acknowledged that it had been compromised by his wish to shape the movement according to some of his own "pet notions" (Banham 1966: 134).² Nevertheless, one dimension of the brutalist project on which there was almost universal consensus among its early proponents and sympathetic critics, was an adherence to an ethics of inhabitation which critically engaged with the priorities of post-war reconstruction and affirmed the egalitarian principles of a social democratic approach to public housing provision.

One famous example can be seen in the Smithsons's response to a panel discussion on New Brutalism which was originally published in a 1957 issue of *Architectural Design*:

From individual buildings, disciplined on the whole by classical aesthetic techniques, we moved on to an examination of the whole problem of human associations and the relationship that building and community has to them. From this study has grown a completely new attitude and non-classical aesthetic. Any discussion of Brutalism will miss the point if it does not take into account Brutalism's attempt to ... face up to a mass-

1 This quote is a translation extracted from the statement: '*L'architecture, c'est, avec des matières brutes, établir des rapports émouvants*' which opens Banham's 'new brutalism' essay (Banham 1955: 355).

2 For a contemporary critical account of Banham's account see Boyd (1967). See also Dirk van den Heuvel's discussion of the differences between Banham's interpretation of brutalism and the Smithsons's broader aim to redesign 'the system of relationships between the everyday, domestic life, labour' and society: van den Heuvel (2015: 305).

production society, and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work. Up to now Brutalism has been discussed stylistically, whereas its essence is ethical (Smithson and Smithson 2011b: 37).

Contrary to the simplistic rejection of brutalism as a rigid and deliberately anti-human style of state architecture imposed from above, many of its advocates had emphasised from the outset the importance of habitation in adjusting and appropriating a building to human usage. As Banham argued, the brutalist interest in 'anti-art' or 'anti-beauty' in his 1955 essay was a way of challenging the standards of classical aesthetics: "What pleased St Thomas (Aquinas) was an abstract quality, beauty – what moves a New Brutalist is the thing itself, in its totality, and with all its overtones of human association" (Banham 1955: 358).

This theorisation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of brutalism provides one way of approaching the design and social role of the Sirius apartments as an important contribution to the politics of public housing in inner city Sydney. While it is one of the best-known Australian examples of brutalist architecture, it is necessary to acknowledge that this building was a late example of the style, and its final form reflects the complex trajectory through which the ideas associated with this movement were translated into architectural practice in Australia. From at least the early 1960s there was a steady growth of (predominantly) civic buildings, drawing on contemporary influences from Europe, North America and Japan, which have come to be defined under the label of brutalism. Much of this work can be most accurately seen as experimentations in concrete construction, rather than being explicitly driven by an ethics of social concern or the progressive social outcomes that guided the early designs of the Smithsons (Rodrigo 2015: 238). Nevertheless the translation of these diverse brutalist influences to an Australian context during the 1960s and 1970s involved a complex interaction of factors such as the 'rediscovery of the Australian landscape', 'the Australian city' and a renewed appreciation of the role of the country's civic and educational institutions (Goad 2015: 208-209).³

A crucial Australian interlocutor in architectural debates on brutalism throughout this period was the Melbourne architect and writer Robin Boyd, whose qualified defence of the idea of brutalism was premised on what he saw as its capacity to provide an alternative to the 'featurism' he famously despised

3 For a detailed inventory of existing brutalist architecture in the Greater Sydney region, see Harper (2016).

in Australian cities (Boyd 1980).⁴ It is clear that Boyd remained sceptical about Banham's idiosyncratic definition of a brutalist aesthetics, which the former claimed was always far too closely associated with the designs and works of the Smithsons to be able to adequately describe a coherent 'movement'. Nevertheless, in his review of Banham's 1966 book, Boyd emphasised that the other dimension of brutalism, "the ethic, was happily independent, and had no need to die along with the over-strained aesthetic argument" (Boyd 1967: 11). It is in this context that we can understand the importance of the contribution that the Sirius building has made to the incorporation of a brutalist architectural ethics in the production of public housing in Australia. There had previously been a number of other examples of brutalist-inspired public housing built by the New South Wales Housing Commission in Sydney, most notably Harry Seidler's Roseberry Flats (1967), and the Endeavour Project in Waterloo (1976) which was specifically designed to address the needs of elderly residents (HeriCon Consulting, Morris and Spearrit 2013: 56; Rodrigo 2015: 240). While these buildings were exercises in the public provision of affordable housing, their monumental forms were imposed 'in *tabula rasa* landscapes' according to the abstract doctrines of orthodox (CIAM-influenced) modernism.

In this sense, the Sirius building marks a major reorientation in design principles by the NSW Housing Commission in the mid-1970s, towards "urban-scaled and socially mixed housing development" (Harper 2016: 35). For the architect Tao Gofers, the modular design of Sirius was not arrived at as the result of a deliberate adoption of international influences or through the imposition of personal or ideological preference (Rodrigo 2015: 241-242). It arose from a piecemeal process of engagement between the Housing Commission and the potential residents of the building in The Rocks area, which followed the Residents' Action Group publication of their People's Plan. The green ban in The Rocks during the early 1970s provided the local community with time to organise and collaborate with supporters and sympathetic professionals from outside the area in formulating an alternative plan, which effectively killed off the original proposal for extensive development of the area. In this sense, the construction of Sirius as a public housing project would never have occurred were it not for the pressure that the community was able to place on state housing providers and the SCRA to ensure that low-income residents of The Rocks were not compulsorily removed from the neighbourhood. The final design of the 79 apartments was agreed as a pragmatic compromise between the government's preference for high rise

4 Boyd defined featurism as 'the subordination of the essential whole and the accentuation of selected separate features ... It is the evasion of the bold, realistic, self-evident, straight-forward, honest answer to all questions of design and appearance in man's (sic) artificial environment' (Boyd 1980: 23-24).

towers and the Resident Action Group's initial desire for remodelled low density Victorian-style terraces.

Brutalism and the limits of heritage

Of course the success of the 1970s green ban in forcing modifications to the original SCRA plans for the redevelopment of The Rocks and ensuring that approximately 240 local residents would be rehoused in Sirius was only ever a temporary victory. Since the building's construction in 1980, there have been regular calls for its demolition on aesthetic grounds, and constant pressure from those interested in the potential capital gains that would flow from turning this valuable harbourside site over to the private housing and commercial property markets. This pressure became an imminent threat with the NSW government's 2014 announcement of the forced relocation of public housing tenants from Millers Point and The Rocks. This announcement led to the reactivation of a broad community campaign, along the lines of the 1970s protests, but this time, it was able to generate a wide public and media presence through online forums such as <http://millerspointcommunity.com.au/> and <http://saveoursirius.org/>.

One important difference in the current environment is the significant restrictions on the capacity of organised labour to take legal industrial action in Australia (McCrystal 2010). The ease with which the NSW BLF was previously able to mobilise in defence of community campaigns has been greatly curtailed. While its successor, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) has actively participated in street protests and provided its public support, there has been a much reduced role for organised labour in the campaigns to save the Sirius building and neighbouring Millers Point (Darcy and Rogers 2016: 54). Given this lack of industrial power, it is inevitable that many tenants did not feel able to withstand the pressures placed on them by the government to move, and significant numbers left their apartments during 2015 and 2016 (Miller 2017).

Despite this, and in the shadow of the real prospect of the building's demolition, a central focus of the community campaign to save the Sirius apartments during 2016 and 2017 was the possibility of legal redress through the heritage protection regime established under the *Heritage Act 1977* (NSW). The unanimous decision by the New South Wales Heritage Council to recommend the listing of Sirius on the State Heritage Register, on the grounds of its 'aesthetic values' and its 'rarity' was a crucial precondition to this legal strategy. The Council formally made its recommendation to the NSW Minister for Heritage, Mark Speakman MP, on March 14 2016, in which it stated:

The Sirius Apartment Building at 36-50 Cumberland Street, The Rocks ... is of state heritage significance as a rare and fine example

of the late Brutalist architectural style especially in its application to social housing, for its use of off-form concrete, the stacking of box-like components and the use of roof terraces to create a harmonious whole (Heritage Council of New South Wales 2016).

The Council recommendation went on to quote a report by Philip Goad, an expert on architectural brutalism in Australia, who stated that the aesthetic significance of the Sirius building also derives from the fact that it is a physical

representation of an important move by the NSW Housing Commission in the mid-1970s, away from modernist ideals of housing in towers or slab blocks on cleared sites towards [architectural] solutions that involved community participation and sympathetic contextual placement of such housing and the retention of long-term, low income residents in historic inner urban precincts (Heritage Council of New South Wales 2016).

The minister's response to the recommendation was a decision in July 2016 not to register the Sirius building on the State Heritage Register. Invoking the considerations set out in section 32(1) of the *Heritage Act 1977*, the minister stated:

I consider that in this case whatever the heritage significance of the Building, even at its highest (including even if it reached a threshold for State heritage significance), this is outweighed by the undue financial hardship its listing would cause to its owners, by diminishing what would otherwise be its sale value (possibly by in the order of \$70 million), which would potentially represent foregone funds for additional social housing (Quoted in *Millers Point Community Assoc. Incorporated v Property NSW* [at 11]).

This decision was highly controversial, not least because the minister focused so much attention in his decision on the potential revenue the government could receive by selling the building (Muller 2016). In early 2017, the Millers Point Community Association made an application for judicial review of the decision in the NSW Land and Environment Court, and in July that year the court held that the decision was invalid and of no effect (*Millers Point Community Assoc. Incorporated v Property NSW*: [155]). The court did not agree with the entire argument of the applicant that in making a decision not to list a building on the Heritage Register, a minister will always have an obligation to come to a conclusion on its heritage significance ([108] – [109]). However in this case, the minister had explicitly followed a decision-making pathway which required a determination of heritage significance in order to provide a satisfactory justification of the nature of any “undue financial hardship” that might be suffered by Property NSW (as the owner of the building) ([104] – [109]; [153]).

By failing to take into account the mandatory relevant consideration of heritage significance and inordinately focusing on a presumption of financial hardship, the minister had legally erred and the court ordered that the decision be remade according to law. For a short period during late 2017, the affected residents were buoyed by this result, but on 25 October 2017, the new Minister for Heritage, Gabrielle Upton MP, remade the decision not to list the building on the State Heritage Register (Minister's Decisions on Heritage Listings 2017). In doing so, the minister was careful to focus on the criteria of 'aesthetics' and 'rarity' that were the basis for the Heritage Council's recommendation, and deliberately avoided making definitive arguments about the economic and financial impacts of listing the building on the Register. Following this decision, the government proceeded to publicly list the property for sale in early December 2017 (Nicholls 2017; Tan 2017).

It is particularly ironic that a campaign to defend public housing concerning a prominent example of brutalist architecture should have to rely so heavily on strategies which attempt to harness the nostalgic preoccupations of the heritage industry. But in the face of concerted neoliberal attacks on the idea of social housing provision around the world, it has become increasingly difficult to make substantive arguments defending the intrinsic right to urban inhabitation for low-income residents. This means that legal heritage protection processes are often the only avenue remaining for public housing residents to prevent imminent plans for the destruction of their homes. As Owen Hatherley notes in relation to similar struggles in the United Kingdom, the proponents of architectural modernism were largely uninterested in the preservation of the historical city or in understanding their own work as part of "the continuity of our civilisation and the uninterrupted parade of progress". But within the political and social constraints imposed by neoliberal urbanism, "[i]f we want to preserve what remains of Modernism, then we're necessarily conspiring with the very people that have always opposed it: the heritage industries" (Hatherley 2008: 5-6).⁵

One inevitable consequence of strategies of this kind is that the radical promise of brutalism as a contributor to democratic and egalitarian urban landscapes has become sidelined by the need to defend it solely as "architectural form" (Mould 2017: 701-702). While the recent revival of interest in brutalism is partly driven by genuine interest in architectural history (Beanland 2016; Harwood 2015),

5 In the case of Sirius, it is instructive to compare the negative attitudes of the heritage sector to the building when it was first constructed (Glascott 1979) with the current acknowledgement of its heritage significance by local, national and international bodies, including NSW Heritage Council, City of Sydney, NSW Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects, National Trust, World Monuments Fund, Australia ICOMOS, Docomomo, Historic Houses Association, Tenants Union NSW and Leichhardt Council. The building is also included in the #SOSBrutalism Database under the auspices of the Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt.

it must also be acknowledged that its popular reception has been mediated by its linkages to global processes of inner city gentrification. In this sense, the heritage protection of modernist architectural 'forms' becomes yet another exercise in the consumption of retro styles and the value of a building is competitively measured according to either pure aesthetic criteria or its capacity to deliver financial returns (Wiles 2016). This highlights one of the intrinsic limitations of 'heritage' framed as an individualised interest, which constrains the capacity of processes of public participation of this kind to address "larger social, economic and environmental questions" that are at stake in urban planning and development decision-making (Thorpe 2017: 142). The Sirius building has repeatedly attracted controversy for its perceived 'ugliness' – its height, shape and materials – and it is clear that there has been a considerable degree of hostility towards it from the conservative wing of the governing Liberal Party because of its associations with the green bans, and its symbolisation of an important victory for local democracy in The Rocks during the 1970s (Carter 2017; Pickett 2013). Hence its aesthetic and historic value is openly contested and, when combined with the fact that a heritage listing would place obstacles in the path of the government's stated policy to privatise the asset and relocate existing residents to other parts of the city, it was always unlikely that the use of heritage protection mechanisms would achieve a lasting outcome for the residents of Sirius.

The defence of inhabitation and the right to collective luxury

One of the most prominent public symbols of the *Save Our Sirius* campaign was the red, flashing SOS lights which were switched on at 6pm every night from the top floor apartment of Myra Demetriou. Myra was a leading anti-eviction activist in the campaign and in December 2017 her confrontation with Minister Goward on the day of the sale announcement in the foyer of the building was widely publicised ("Last Sirius resident..." 2017; Nicholls 2017; Save Our Sirius 2017; O'Rourke 2017; Sanda, Rabe and Higgins 2017). At the beginning of February 2018, Myra was the last tenant to be removed from the building and rehoused by the Department of Family and Community Services.⁶ Her relocation marked the end of the tenant occupation of the building, which had lasted for almost four years from the Minister's initial announcement of the sale of the building. The occupation had been able to continue for so long because of the high degree

6 The local community held a well-attended farewell morning tea for Myra Demetriou on 27 January 2018 (Cockburn and Laurence 2018; Knaus 2018). For a more detailed biographical account of Myra's long connection with The Rocks and her activism on behalf of the residents of Sirius, see Elliott 2017.

of solidarity between the building's residents and the broader campaign against public housing evictions in Millers Point and The Rocks.

One way of conceptualising this struggle for inner city public housing is as an expression of what the philosopher Henri Lefebvre refers to as the 'right to the city' – an assertion of the interests of the users of space to retain the capacity to remake and control the spaces they inhabit (Lefebvre 1996). In the 50 years since Lefebvre first wrote about this concept, a plurality of interpretations has been proposed, including those of radical housing activists, through to non-governmental organisations and institutions wishing to establish a juridically enforceable right to the city. Whatever the merits of each of these approaches, it is clear that the expulsion of low income residents and public housing tenants from their existing neighbourhoods under pressures from real estate speculation and changes in housing policy fit squarely within Lefebvre's original formulation of this right.⁷ As a radical political demand,

The *right to the city* legitimates the refusal to allow oneself to be removed from urban reality by a discriminatory and segregative organization. This right of the citizen ... proclaims the inevitable crisis of city centres based on segregation ... which reject towards peripheral spaces all those who do not participate in political privileges (Lefebvre 1996: 195, emphasis in original).

But the right to the city is itself situated within a deeper set of spatial relations which Lefebvre addresses in his writings. I have elsewhere described this relational context as a 'politics of inhabitation' which is based on the physical occupation of the body, the creative appropriation of space and utopian ambitions to exceed the limits of current boundaries between the possible and the impossible (Butler 2012, 2017, 2019). In Lefebvre's classic 1970s text *The production of space*, he emphasises the necessity of space to be occupied, that there is "an immediate relationship between the body and its space, between the body's deployment in space and its occupation of space" (Lefebvre 1991: 170). It is through a body's movements, rhythms and expenditure of energy that it produces its own space while reproducing itself. However, it does so subject to the "laws" and "properties" of space which are not the product of the mind or a "transcendent spirit", but derive from the "actual 'occupation' of space" (Lefebvre 1991: 171).

Closely linked to the physical occupation of space, a politics of inhabitation is also premised on the body's engagement with the creative appropriation of space as a fulfilling aesthetic experience. A significant distinction that Lefebvre makes

7 For a recent attempt to reconcile radical, non-institutional interpretations of the right to the city with attempts to legally recognise the concept see Huchzermeyer (2018).

in this context is that between appropriation and domination. As he states in his recently discovered 1973 manuscript *Toward an architecture of enjoyment*:

Appropriation can be defined by contrast with domination and simultaneously by opposition to ownership and its consequences. The appropriated space does not belong to political power, to an institution as such. ... The latent contradiction between domination and appropriation has exploded in the modern world. Technological and political domination is fundamentally directed at the product. Appropriation is a work (in the sense of a work of art) or it is nothing. ... Appropriation is defined by radically opposite and, therefore, incompatible components: the priority of use and use value over exchange and exchange value; a community that works space for its own use; collective management of the produced space; nature transformed in such a way that it can be regenerated (Lefebvre 2014: 93-95).

The construction of the Sirius building was in itself an exercise in the collective reappropriation of The Rocks neighbourhood by its residents. Its landscaped streetscape and courtyard and roof gardens established a human scale to the exterior of the building, while the interior of the building was designed to cater for the needs of a diverse range of special needs and encouraged interaction between residents in common spaces and access to balconies with breathtaking views of the harbour, the Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Contrary to simplistic assumptions about brutalism's threatening and dominating style, Mould argues that it is precisely the presentation of the rawness and honesty of the building's materials which "exposes the building's affective processes and encourages a relation to them" which

forces people to partake in the architecture itself more so than any other form; it encourages people to take notice of their surroundings and to engage in (sub)conscious decision making processes as to how they will receive and act in the building ... It invites an active participation rather than a passive reception of it – it could be argued therefore to be very much a relational architecture (Mould 2017: 708).

Lastly, the idea of a politics of inhabitation is a necessarily utopian endeavour, which requires an anticipatory orientation towards the future. As Lefebvre notes in numerous places in his writing,

There is no thought without a project, no project without exploration – through the imagination – of a possible, a future.

Therefore, there is no plan without utopia. Even the most realistic form of power has its utopia: to endure (Lefebvre 2014: 147-148).

But it is important to recognise a crucial distinction that Lefebvre makes between 'abstract' and 'concrete' utopias – a distinction he shared with the great Marxist philosopher of utopia, Ernst Bloch. While grounded in the material possibilities of the present, 'concrete utopia' is an anticipatory striving towards the transformation of existing social relations. This can be distinguished from 'abstract utopia', which involves a retreat into fantasy and wishful thinking which Łukasz Stanek describes as a "'positive' extrapolation of the status quo" (Stanek 2014: xxxix; Stanek 2011: 168). Lefebvre freely acknowledges there is an inevitable sense of impossibility associated with utopian dreams, but it also needs to be remembered that the apparently impossible is always present within the possible. It is the constant striving for the impossible that provides the foundations for the production of new possibilities. As he explains in *Toward an architecture of enjoyment*, concrete utopia

takes as a strategic hypothesis the negation of the everyday, of work, of the exchange economy. ... It begins with enjoyment and seeks to conceive of a new space, which can only be based on an architectural project (Lefebvre 2014: 148).

The capacity of architecture to contribute to the utopian imagination and play a role in a radical challenge to existing social relations has long been a subject of controversy. As a response to the grandiose utopian claims of the 20th Century architectural avant-garde, the Marxist architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri famously dismissed what he saw as deluded attempts to transform the city or society "by means of the image alone" which contributed to the "survival of anachronistic 'hopes in design'" (Tafuri 1976: 182). In surveying the history of the 20th Century artistic and architectural avant-garde movements, from Cubism, Futurism, Dada, De Stijl, Bauhaus, and the social democratic management of housing in Weimar Germany and Red Vienna, Tafuri identifies a unifying sensibility towards the submission of space to industrial planning. Each of these historical avant-gardes and attempts to develop 'radical architecture' were part of a broader demand for a 'rational' domination of the future through the organisation of processes of urbanisation (Tafuri 1976: 52). Tafuri's critique was largely directed towards identifying how the forces of Fordist technological modernism were being deployed in post-war Italian public housing, and it is true that challenging existing forms of social power purely through architecture or spatial design will inevitably run up against limits which are not architectural, but social (Cunningham 2007: 291; Tafuri 1976; Day 2005, 2010).

However in an era where the collective dividends of the social democratic welfare state are so directly under attack, perhaps the emphasis should be placed more on defending its piecemeal achievements in the area of public housing, than on critiquing its particular associations with bureaucratic state management, which in any case is now dominated by the logics of neoliberalism. As Stanek points out, it is useful to contrast Tafuri's unrelenting critique of "architectural ideology", with Lefebvre's discussion of architecture as more than just a territorial 'projection' of social relationships, but also a medium through which particular social groups can define themselves and their identities within the 'social totality'. This is the task of "an architectural imagination, developed from within the 'near' order of everyday appropriation of space", which allows us to 'parenthesize' the pressures on the architect to subordinate oneself to the program of urbanism and state planning in order that the architectural imagination may be encouraged (Stanek 2014: xxxvi). To do otherwise is to lapse into

the incessant repetition of the idea that there is nothing to be done, nothing to be thought, because everything is "blocked", because "capitalism" rules and co-opts everything, because the "mode of production" exists as a system and totality, to be rejected or accepted in accordance with the principles of "all or nothing" (Lefebvre 2014: 4).

The modest contribution of the Sirius apartments to maintaining a public housing presence in The Rocks reminds us of previous utopian ambitions for universal housing which have largely been removed from official discourse. Given that brutalism was originally understood as a "political aesthetic, an attitude, a weapon, dedicated to the precept that nothing was too good for ordinary people", the building's design is also a reminder of the democratic orientations of previous public housing policies and of architecture's role in implementing them (Hatherley 2011: 87). While the public campaign to save the Sirius building and other threatened public housing dwellings in Millers Point had to rely on restricted definitions of heritage as a means of resisting the government's plan, the underlying principle that they defended is a right to 'collective luxury' – an entitlement to inhabit the inner city in dignity, from which none should be excluded (Lefebvre 2014: 137; Stanek 2017). Whatever ultimately happens to the Sirius building, this is a principle and a utopian demand that will no doubt have to be reasserted in opposition to future government attacks on public housing in Sydney.

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