Sirius: Retrofitting Brutalism in Sydney

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Abstract. The Sirius building in Sydney, Australia has and continues to be at the centre of contestations pertaining to its proposed sale, possible demolition, and redevelopment of the site. The ostensibly Brutalist building erected between 1975 and 1980 was built to accommodate public housing tenants, as were a number of other such buildings in different parts of the world built during post-World War II, as Brutalism was seen to represent an ethical architecture through its expression and aesthetic. With 79 apartments of 1-4 bedrooms, and of in-situ and precast concrete construction, Sirius is being upheld as an excellent example of Brutalism, and opposition to the proposed sale and redevelopment of the site has been mounted on the basis that the building should be heritage listed for its historic, social, technical and aesthetic significance. The argument of saving the building on the basis that it houses public housing tenants has also been rigorously employed. At the same time the sale of the building has been justified on the basis that its retention would cause undue economic hardship to the owners by limiting funds for reinvestment in social housing elsewhere. This paper while acknowledging both sides of this debate, will seek to explore whether the retention of Sirius can be undertaken through refurbishment and retrofitting. Other such examples of Brutalist public housing in countries like the United Kingdom which have been retrofitted will form the basis of comparison to examine whether retrofitting of the Sirius will uphold its ethical dimension, or whether its retention will serve a market of consumers with an interest in mid-century architecture and design.

1. Background

The Sirius Building, located in the historic district of The Rocks in Sydney, New South Wales (NSW) Australia, is a multi-storey social housing apartment building which was and continues to be at the centre of contestations pertaining to the proposed sale, possible demolition, and redevelopment of the site. The building gained worldwide attention with the Save our Sirius public campaign which sought to garner support from the wider community for the heritage listing of the building. This paper seeks to examine the feasibility and projected ethical or consumerist considerations associated with the proposed refurbishment and retrofitting of the building. More specifically it teases out the inherent tension between the conservation of the building for its ‘architectural’ value and other values, and whether conservation of this building would actually be consistent with the “ethical” frameworks of Brutalism.

The majority of the research pertaining to Sirius has been based on heritage consultancy work undertaken by one of the authors, who was engaged as a heritage advisor by the state government.[1] Brutalist public housing in countries like the United Kingdom have been drawn into the discussion to showcase the possible outcomes of retrofitting, as could be applicable to Sirius.
Built in the late 1970s, the Sirius was first opened to social housing tenants in February 1980, with priority residency given to residents who had resided in the area surrounding the site prior to July 1968. 24 of the 79 apartments were initially tenanted by people from this category, with the remainder drawn from the general social housing waiting list at the time. [2] The complex is located prominently next to the southern approach to the Sydney Harbour Bridge and many of the apartments feature spectacular views across Sydney Harbour. The NSW Government made a decision to sell the site in 2014, on the basis that the building did not meet current standards for social housing, and that the funds from its sale would be used to build a much larger number of social housing dwellings elsewhere in NSW.[3] The Sirius Building’s 79 apartments could house up to approximately 200 tenants.[4] The NSW Land and Housing Corporation (LAHC), an entity under the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS), the lessee for the building and estimated that the proceeds of sale could fund up to 800 new social housing units. Implicit in that decision to sell was that the site would be redeveloped.

The proposed sale of the Sirius Building caused concern among some segments of both the local community and the heritage advocacy community, for reasons ranging from the loss of social housing in Millers Point to the loss of a (debatably) Brutalist architectural structure to concerns over the scale of what would replace the building. On the other hand, Property NSW, the owners of the building on behalf of the NSW Government, asserted that the State heritage listing could reduce the sale price of the site by up to $70 million, resulting in a consequential reduction in the funds available for social housing. A listing on the NSW State Heritage Register would mean the whole of the building could not be demolished and there would be a variety of restrictions on the changes that could be made to the place.

2. The Sirius Building – the design

Sirius was designed by the Housing Commission of NSW Specialist Design Architect, Tao Gofers in 1975. Gofers had designed The Laurels – a housing development in the eastern suburbs of Sydney – in which he moved away from the standard Commission townhouse typology, to develop a design compromising stacked development of interlocking unit types (Figure 1, 2 and 3). This formed the prototype for Sirius which was originally designed to integrate a “stacked commercial block to the south and a stacked residential block to the north”. [5] However, only the residential block was built and comprises five blocks of walk-up flats contained within a stepped, narrow building envelope which is “eleven storeys in the middle and tapers down to one and two storeys at the north and south ends”. [5]

A basic cube module is employed to provide for four-, three-, two- and one-bedroom units which also include specially designed units for the elderly. The building is constructed of a load-bearing in situ concrete frame and precast exterior infill wall panels with brickwork to internal walls.

Sirius has been identified and upheld as an example of Brutalist architecture, most likely as a result of the “frank exposure of its material” – in this case precast concrete, and owing to its having been designed and built “towards the end of a period when the Brutalist idiom dominated architectural thinking and practice”. [5] [6] However, while Tao Gofers might have been influenced by Brutalist architecture he was insistent that he had not intended to design the building as an example of Brutalism. [5]

The identification with Brutalism has also been driven by the need to demonstrate its “egalitarian ideals” in the use of Sirius for social housing.

Figure 1. The pyramidal structure of Sirius (Source: Sirius SEPP, 2017)
Figure 2. The site layout and floor plans of Sirius (Source: Housing Commission NSW)

Figure 3. The cube based module and pyramidal structure of Sirius (Source: Google Images, 2018)
3. Sirius, Heritage and Social housing

Social housing is a contentious issue, and its heritage value is equally contested around the world. In Australia, social housing was largely a private charitable and local government issue until the 1950s, though some larger housing estates of freestanding houses were built by state governments from the 1920s. By the 1960s, the emphasis had shifted away from individual houses to higher density apartment blocks and complexes, with the earliest high-rise social housing appearing in Australia in the late 1950s, however by the time of the construction of Sirius large scale multisocial housing was already viewed as problematic. Thus, in many respects, Sirius represents the end of both the Brutalist tradition in social housing, but also a shift away from highrise, to townhouse and medium rise buildings. This trend has further shifted to ensuring modern social housing complexes are a mix of privately owned and social housing, to ensure a social mix and not create ghettos.

As the needs of social housing tenants change – be they for reason of age, family structure or mental health – so have the requirements for social housing changed to better accommodate them, as have building standards generally. An inherent conflict can then arise in attempting to retain older, potentially historically significant social housing where to do so may lead to the residents receiving a substandard quality of life. Thus, the issue of the significance of social housing becomes a double-edged sword – to adequately conserve it may require that it is repurposed for a non-social housing use, but this then destroys the nexus between the social housing community, the site and its heritage values. Just as Brutalist architecture was seen to be an “ethical” architecture due to its honesty of form and structure, so soon should decisions regarding heritage conservation be housed in an ethical framework when considering the impacts on the users or residents of a place, particularly where those users represent a marginalised or disempowered community such as social housing tenants.

4. Issues and approaches in adaptation and reuse

Retrofitting a Brutalist building while a plausible solution was one that was not comprehensively explored in the case of Sirius. The retention of the building was argued on the basis of its adaptive reuse. However, for the building to be compliant with legislative requirements for multi-unit residential buildings and to be in accordance with design guidelines for apartment buildings, its retention necessitated an increase in the internal height of ceilings in the dwelling units and provisions for disability access, as well as façade modifications to install external verandahs. Were it to remain as social housing, it also needed to comply with the modern standards and needs of such tenants. Other requirements considered necessary in submissions that supported the retention of Sirius included the incorporation of sustainability requirements pertaining to energy efficiency of any proposed commercial, retail and hospitality developments and energy and water efficiency requirements for residential components. While these concerns were considered necessary for upgrading the building the view that "strict compliance" with such legislative requirements would "could actively discourage retention and retention and re-use" of the building were widely expressed. It was argued that it would not be possible to achieve "a satisfactory outcome in terms of sensitive heritage and urban scale issues" if design excellence were to be achieved.[7]

In fact, the design of the building has a number of elements which would prove to be restrictive in terms of its reuse:

- The ceiling heights of the dwelling units were considered as one of the primary reasons that the building would not be able to meet apartment design objectives, as the concrete slabs with integrated inlaid services would require services reticulation to retain the current functionality of the building. [8]
- The existing glazing of east and westward facades would need to be upgraded to meet contemporary performance standards. [8]

Simultaneously there was a great appreciation for the flexibility of the internal layout of the building which would allow for a variety of new accommodation configurations. The modularity of the design would allow for combining two adjoining apartments on the same floor level, into single larger
apartments. Other aspects included the kitchen and “generously sized private laundries” in each unit which could be reconfigured to increase internal usable space. [8] However, while it would be feasible to combine apartments as the internal brickwork can be dismantled, the feasibility of reworking kitchens and laundries was not explored in terms of reworking plumbing systems which were integrated into the concrete slabs and would require intensive interventions in terms of both cost and material impact.

A conceptual design (Figure 4) alternative by Australian design studio CplusC Architectural Workshop sought to retain the Sirius building while proposing a series of staggered blocks and terraces around the original building. [9] However, the design alternative focused on the design of the additional new structures on site, with little in terms of design intervention for Sirius. Such an approach does little to preserve the context and setting of the building, nor does it address the concerns expressed by the community regarding the scale of potential new development on the site.

![Figure 4. The alternative conceptual design for Sirius (Source: CplusC Architectural Workshop, 2018)](image)

5. Brutalism adapted and reused
The successful retention of Brutalist buildings which were used for social housing projects include Park Hill in Sheffield, and the Barbican Estate in Central London. Both housing projects were built between the 1950s and 1970s and were designed and influenced by the modernist and Brutalist aesthetic and ideals.

5.1. Park Hills, Sheffield
Comprising 995 dwellings within four interlocking tower blocks with street decks connecting blocks at the third-floor level, Park Hill was designed by Ivor Smith and Jack Lynne and completed in 1961. As in the case of Sirius, where Tao Gofers noted that he had not designed Sirius as a Brutalist building, Smith and Lynne did not think of “themselves as ‘brutalists’”. [7] Nonetheless, Park Hill was heritage listed in 1998 for its “exceptional architectural value” and is recognised as the largest listed Brutalist building. [7] It is celebrated for its street decks which are seen as attempting to create the social and psychological equivalent of a street which “in working class areas in Britain – is the main forum of communication, the traditional playground for children, and the only public space available for mass meetings and large-scale sociability”. [8] The evocation of the working class ethos has been further identified in the choice of unfinished concrete for Park Hill by the architects, as it is seen to “emphasize the imprint of labor”. [7] In 2004, after over four decades of being largely unoccupied and after
numerous calls for its demolition, Park Estate was identified for regeneration. A mixed-use model was adopted in which two-thirds of the existing flats would be converted into market-rate condominiums, with the remaining one-third continuing as subsidized rental housing, and shops and amenities were to be introduced to the ground and first floors. The ensuing adaptive reuse of the buildings has involved stripping away all the original fabric to allow for reconfiguration of the apartment layouts and introduction of new external skins that would comply with required energy efficiency standards. While majority of the original infill internal and external fabric of the buildings has been removed the restoration of the buildings’ concrete frames has been driven by the need to conserve the “‘brutalist identity’” of the housing estate.[7] The emphasis on the aesthetic appeal of the architectural style has incentivised the conservation and adaptive reuse of Park Hill, but in doing it has moved away from the ethical dimension of Brutalism, as social housing is no longer a priority of the estate.

5.2. Barbican Estate, London
The Barbican Estate in Central London a largely residential estate built in 1962-82 by architects Chamberlin Powell and Bon. The Estate was built as housing to cater to middle-to-higher income groups
of professionals working in the city. While the site in Central London was earmarked by the Corporation of London to house a mixed society of residents, change in politics led to the majority of housing being designed and sold to private owners and landlords. As Barbican was to be “unsubsidised – self-sustaining financially once constructed” it did not include social housing. [9] Set on a raised pedestrian podium above ground-level car parking, the Barbican comprises 2113 flats, maisonettes, and terraced houses and a number of communal and public buildings including the Arts Centre, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the City of London School for Girls, and St Giles’ church. The housing components of the Barbican was built between 1964-1975 and comprises seven-storey blocks set on raised pedestrian podium with mews housing, basement storage and car parking below, for 2,500 cars, and with three triangular towers of 44, 44 and 43 storeys rising above. [10]

The utopian ideal of creating a mixed society development combined with its distinctive tooled-concrete lends the Barbican the Brutalist tag. It is noted for being one of the largest examples of Brutalist architecture and was heritage listed in 2001. The heritage value of Barbican has added to its real estate value, as the housing is highly sought after owing to its location in Central London with penthouses valued at over £4 million in 2016.[11] Unlike Park Hills and Sirius, the Barbican was designed for a well-off resident which resulted in a development that had high quality of construction and finishes both to the interiors and exteriors. As a result, the Barbican has not had to undergo any major adaptive reuse or conservation works.

6. Conclusion
The Sirius building in Sydney has been at the centre of contestations including a large scale public campaign to save the building on the basis that it is an outstanding example of Brutalism both in terms of its aesthetic and social value. The retention of the building was argued on the basis of its heritage value, which had until recently effectively stalled its sale and any proposed future development of the site. However, the retention of the building was not comprehensively examined in the submissions that were made to oppose the proposed redevelopment of the site. The adaptive reuse of the building was proposed but the impacts in terms of possible loss of original fabric, the heritage value of the building, and the overall feasibility of the works needed to upgrade the building to meet disability and energy efficiency requirements were not explored by those advocating for its retention. Most importantly the critical issue upon which the entire public campaign had hinged – the fact that Sirius had been built as social housing – was not addressed in terms of the retention possibilities of the building. If the notion of Brutalism as an
‘ethical architecture’, as expressed by Reyner Banham and others, is in fact valid, the transformation of the building from social housing into refurbished, private and expensive harbourside apartments flies in the face of the Brutalist tradition, and simply becomes an exercise in architectural triumphalism. The building would be retained as a ‘architectural icon’ but due to the change in the use demographic and the modifications which would be required there would be little left of those aspects which were claimed to give the building significance. Given that the original ethical concern of the building was to provide social housing to disadvantaged people, the loss of potential revenue from the sale of the site is also arguably ‘unethical’ as it would restrict funds available for new social housing elsewhere.

Park Hills in Sheffield presents a scenario like Sirius, being a development that was specifically designed and constructed to cater to social housing in the 1950s and 1960s. After decades of disuse, the development was heritage listed and subsequently underwent a large scale adaptive reuse process. However, while the aesthetic value of Park Hills as an example of Brutalism was retained, its original espoused ethical value for social betterment was lost. In contract to the Sirius and Park Hills is the Barbican in Central London which is a Brutalist development that catered only to middle and higher income groups of people. Its ethical ideal was to provide a mixed society development. However, its aesthetic value as an exceptional case of Brutalist heritage has overshadowed its ethical ideals, restricting the housing available to only those who can afford the real estate prices of Central London (or Sydney).

Therefore, it is fair to conclude that the retention of Sirius might mirror that of Park Hills and Barbican as the overriding emphasis on the aesthetic value of its Brutalist heritage would mis-proportionally inform its real estate value and future use and would be unlikely to achieve any meaningful conservation outcome other than one very narrowly focussed on Brutalist aesthetics, denying the other important aspects of the site’s significance.

References

[1] Information employed in the paper has been cited from North M 2018 Case Note – Millers Point Community Assoc. Incorporated v Property NSW [2017] NSWLEC 92 – The Sirius Building Case. Environmental and Planning Law Journal. 35(2): 212-217

[2] Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority 1980 Annual Report

[3] The Hon Pru Goward Minister for Family and Community Services 2014 Media Release – High Cost Harbourside Assets to be Sold for a Fairer Social Housing System (19 March 2014)

[4] There has been an ongoing process of relocating tenants or not letting out vacant apartments since the decision to sell in 2014. Goward (2014) pg 4 noted there were 101 tenants in the Sirius Building as of March 2014. As of June 2017 it was reported there were only two tenants remaining in the building. Dominica Sanda (2017) ‘Push to save Sirius, Sydney’s controversial brutalist landmark’ Domain (7 June 2017).

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