



Place, political culture and post-Green Ban resistance: Public housing in Millers Point, Sydney



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 November 2014
Received in revised form 7 August 2015
Accepted 16 September 2015
Available online 28 September 2015

Keywords:

Public housing
Redevelopment
Urban Renewal
Resident Action
Resistance
Green Ban

ABSTRACT

In early 2014 the announced sale of 300 public housing dwellings in Millers Point and the proposed relocation of tenants to other parts of the city sparked a media storm. Millers Point is a prime location in central Sydney, and while some media commentary was initially supportive of dispersal a highly organized protest campaign involving various non-government organizations, the City Council, parliamentary representatives, heritage bodies and trade unions quickly emerged in support of the tenants. Public tenants in other inner city locations also became involved. Redevelopment of public housing neighbourhoods has proceeded relatively slowly over the last decade in Sydney, Australia, with most attention focused on broad acre suburban estates. Partly because of increasingly sophisticated consultation strategies employed by housing authorities, and partly due to the continuing powerlessness and stigmatisation of public tenants, resistance has been fragmented and localised. Any media attention given to redevelopment has generally supported dispersal of public tenants. We analyse the Millers Point case in order to identify elements that have allowed resistance to be organized in a way that has not previously been seen in Australia. Through interviews with local tenant leaders and other key players, and analysis of media treatment of the case, we describe the historical, locational and political factors and strategies deployed on both sides of the retrenchment plan. This case of resistance is examined within the context of the globalization of the Sydney economy and property market.

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1. Introduction: selling off Millers Point

This article reports on a study conducted over a three-month period following the announcement to sell off Millers Point in Sydney, Australia. Millers Point is a small inner city neighbourhood located at the southern end of Sydney's iconic harbour bridge. It is contiguous with The Rocks, the site of Australia's earliest permanent European settlement and is within a short walk of many other high profile tourist sites and the main downtown business district (see Fig. 1). See Fig. 2

Early in 2014, the New South Wales (NSW) Minister for Family and Community Services (FACS) announced the proposed sale of around 300 dwellings in Millers Point, which are owned by the NSW state government's Land and Housing Corporation (LAHC) and managed by Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS) as public housing. Eligible residents would be relocated to other dwellings in unspecified locations over the following two years. The sale of public housing units is not an unusual occurrence in Sydney (Rogers, 2014; Stubbs, Foreman, Goodwin, et al., 2005). According to some community activists State housing agencies have sold 2.5 houses per day over the last ten years (ISRC, 2014: 5). However, this planned sale departs from recent experience in two important respects: firstly the rationale offered

by government for liquidating dwelling stock on this particular site; and secondly, the nature and intensity of the resistance offered by Millers Point tenants and their supporters. The land which these dwellings occupy has been at the fulcrum of tension between local place-making and globalising forces for almost 250 years, and the site of repeated waves of displacement, resistance and renewal (City of Sydney, 2013; Iveson, 2014). Prior to their displacement by European settlers in the late 18th Century, the Gadigal people lived in rock shelters around the steep shoreline, and fished the harbour for tens of thousands of years. The British colonists who arrived from 1788 rationalised the displacement of the Gadigal via the narrative of *terra nullius*, a legal doctrine which asserted that the previous inhabitants had no recognisable system of land ownership.

In early colonial days the steady winds on the high peninsular made it a suitable place for windmills, leading to the name Millers Point. But for most of the last two centuries its proximity to major wharves and maritime industries saw the place develop as a largely low-income, working class neighbourhood which, in the early 1970s, was saved from modernist redevelopment by 'Green Bans' imposed by building unions (for a detailed analysis see Iveson, 2014). Green Bans were a form of political action used to oppose a range of developments in Sydney where the Builders' Labourers Federation (BLF) banned work on particular sites where environmental, heritage or other social values were threatened. The BLF leadership worked closely with resident

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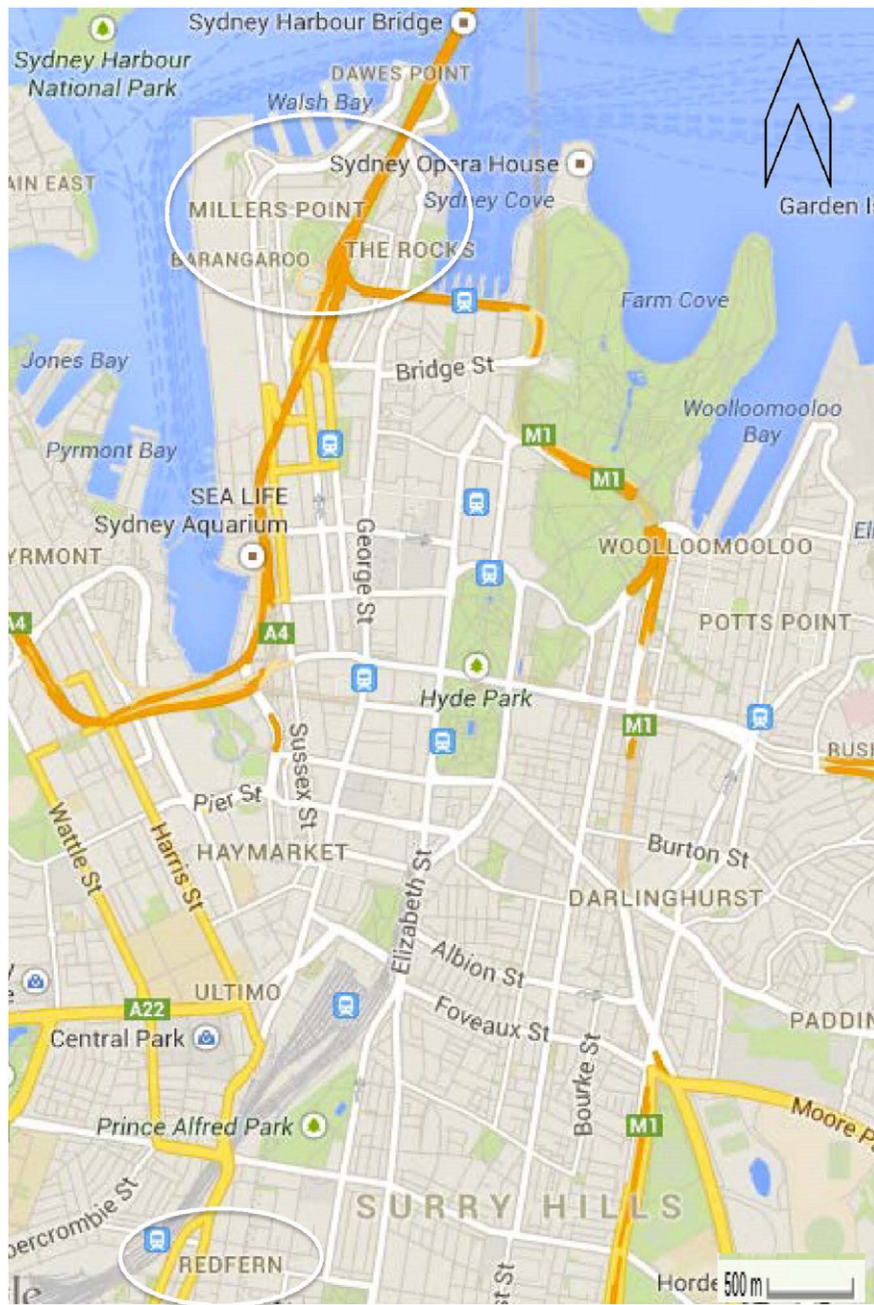


Fig. 1. Map of Central Sydney showing Millers Point in relation to The Rocks and Redfern (Source: adapted from Google Maps).

action groups, feminists, gay liberationists, Aboriginal black power activists, building and planning professionals, and academics to identify sites and organise campaigns. Nita McRae, from The Rocks Residents Action Group (RAG), stated at the time,

“The ‘People’s Plan’ was drawn up as an alternative to the SCRA [Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority] plan in 1972 when architects, town planners and sociologists came to the assistance of the Rocks RAG. With residents... [they] 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”.

[(cited in Iveson, 2014: 1001).]

As a result, many buildings and streetscapes have been listed on government and non-government heritage registers. The area’s high

economic value is due to its location and topography, which affords extensive views of Sydney Harbour in an area of relative scarcity of residential property. In the wake of the 1970s upheaval, as this revaluing of the landscape began, many dock workers’ tenancies, and the ownership of their dwellings, were converted to public housing allowing the sitting tenants to stay on.

In 2003 the NSW government announced that a large former container dock adjacent to Millers Point would be renamed Barangaroo (Wong, Bressi, Jerogin, et al., 2013), and redeveloped from shipping and stevedoring facilities into retail, commercial and recreational uses. This further repositioned Millers Point as a key node within the urban economy. As one informant, a heritage professional, explained in one of our interviews:

“We had the Barangaroo Delivery Authority, in its early days, talking about ‘activating’ Millers Point...”

[(Interview J).]

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