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

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**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
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).]
empirical weight to Harvey's thesis. In the US, Weber (2002) showed that the urban strategy that sits between the devaluing of an old regime (e.g., welfare-state public housing) and the rolling-out of a new regime (e.g., the post-welfare-state global city) is premised on the idea of urban “obsolescence” (p. 114). Goetz (2012) illustrates how obsolescence has been deployed in the US to justify the redevelopment of large tracts of public housing, even though the obsolescence was partly the outcome of mismanagement of the physical assets.

As is the case in many post-welfare state countries (Fitzpatrick & Pawson, 2013; Goetz, 2012; Slater, 2014), for more than a decade housing authorities in Australia have deployed market-centric urban renewal rationalities to thoroughly restructure and reposition public housing (Arthurson, 2012; Darcy, 2012). Changes have encompassed restricted eligibility for housing assistance (Fitzpatrick & Pawson, 2013), transfer of housing management to non-government organisations (Rogers & Darcy, 2014), and physical redevelopment of dwelling stock (Bijen & Piracha, 2012). In many cases private capital and expertise has been enlisted to upgrade and sell dwellings and thus to “deconcentrate problematic” public housing estates (Arthurson, 2012; Darcy, 2012). The discursive strategy supporting public housing redevelopment relies in part on the notion of public housing obsolescence, and also on claims that the deconcentration of public housing effectively addresses entrenched poverty by breaking up stigmatised neighbourhoods and exposing public tenants to greater ‘social mix’ (for Minto see Stubbs et al., 2005; for Bonnyrigg see Rogers, 2014; for Riverwood see Bijen & Piracha, 2012; for Redfern see Rogers & Darcy, 2014). Public housing estates and tenants are positioned as a part of the city’s dilapidated welfare state past and introduction of private capital into such spaces as a redemptive strategy for securing the city’s progression to its global future (Rogers, 2014; Slater, 2014). Through increasingly sophisticated communication and consultation strategies employed by housing authorities, accompanied by continuing powerlessness and stigmatisation of public tenants, resistance by tenants or other groups, and the promotion of counter discourses, has been fragmented and localised. Any media attention to redevelopment has generally supported dispersal of public tenants.

Both major political parties across all Australian states have pursued ‘deconcentrate and mix’ policies. But Millers Point is by no measure a dysfunctional community and the wider neighbourhood is very economically mixed, with many wealthy homeowners living alongside the poorest public housing tenants (DFCS, 2014). The rationale offered for disposing of public housing in this neighbourhood is not to improve the lives of existing tenants by dispersing them, but explicitly to realise the high capital value of the property ostensibly so as to provide more housing in less valuable parts of the city (DFCS, 2014) – effectively to ‘un-mix’ the neighbourhood and move tenants to places where land values more closely reflect their socio-economic position. The housing authority’s assessment is that the benefit to tenants living in public housing in Millers Point is too great and so should be reduced and redistributed to some of the other 58,000 eligible applicant households as yet unhoused (DFCS, 2014).

Millers Point tenants responded to this plan by mounting a highly organised campaign of resistance. While tenant resistance to public housing sales is not unknown in Australia (Rogers & Darcy, 2014; Stubbs et al., 2005), it has rarely attracted high profile support or metropolitan media coverage. Our research focuses on how and why resistance arose in Millers Point and how it was maintained, asking two research questions: (1) How have the Millers Point residents mounted their political campaign of resistance in Millers Point? (2) What makes the Millers Point case different to other tenant-led resistance campaigns in NSW?

The empirical data presented here is drawn from: (i) 10 semi-structured interviews conducted with the tenant leaders from the various tenant groups, representatives non-government heritage and other organizations, journalists and documentary filmmakers; (ii) participant observation covering the NSW state and local government’s public
events relating to Millers Point; (iii) extensive participant observation of the community organising activities; and (iii) analysis of 53 policy and media texts sourced from the NSW Department of Planning, Housing NSW, City of Sydney, Heritage NSW, and local, metropolitan and national media reports.

The analytical approach applied is Critical Discourse Analysis drawing on the framework set out by Fairclough (2003) which itself relies upon the concept of discourse developed by Foucault (1989). For Foucault, all knowledge is conditional and historically contingent, and thus the aim of analysis is not to distil objective or universal lessons about the actions of government agencies, tenant activism or resistance. Rather, it is to explicate what happened in Millers Point by locating our understanding in its specific historical, geographical and discursive context, at local, metropolitan and ultimately global scales.

As Sassen (2014: 3) notes, “the globalisation of capital and the sharp rise in technical capacities have produced major scaling effects” in globalising cities, and “[t]o understand this scaling as more of the same inequality, poverty and technical capacity is to miss the larger trend.” Peck (2010) and Wacquant (2009) describe this transformation as a new form of governmentality which reverberated around the world to dismantle unionised labour, and to promote the privatisation of public goods and responsibilisation of the individual, especially the poor. Thus we locate our understanding of tenant resistance in Millers Point in this context of the transformation from an industrial to a global Sydney and all that this entails.

The following sections outline the interactive political strategies of government and community actors involved in promoting and resisting the Millers Point sell-off. The state government’s announcement of the sell-off and strategy for relocation of tenants is considered first. Following this we examine the response from the tenant community and investigate how and why such vigorous resistance emerged in this particular neighbourhood at this particular time.

3. The sale announcement

The announcement of the sale of the 293 public housing dwellings in March 2014 illustrates a methodically organised and tightly scripted strategy commencing with the wide circulation of a one-page media release (DFCS, 2014: 1) by DFCS and LAHC. Importantly, a 17-page “media pack” was simultaneously provided to a much smaller group of selected media outlets and journalists (DFCS, 2014: 2–17).

The headline on the release summarises DFCS/LAHC’s central discursive strategy, which constructed a narrative of public tenancy in Millers Point as ‘unfair’, and individual tenants as the beneficiaries of enormous and inequitable largesse delivered at the expense of genuinely disadvantaged existing and potential tenants in other neighbourhoods.

“HIGH COST HARBOURSIDE ASSETS TO BE SOLD FOR A FAIRER SOCIAL HOUSING SYSTEM”.

[(p.1).]

The headline encapsulates three central features of the discursive strategy that framed the sale. The first was an emphasis on the economic specifics of the location, as in “harbourside assets”, the second was to focus attention on the “social housing system” rather than on public dwellings or people’s homes, and the third was a claim to “fairness”. The term “harbourside” has particular resonance in Sydney property market discourse where “harbour glimpses” can add millions to the market value of dwellings. In this case the suggestion that taxpayers are funding others to enjoy them is particularly powerful. The body of the media release also highlights the age and heritage value of the buildings, all framed by the overarching construct of fairness:

“The average maintenance cost for one terrace house in Millers Point is almost $15,000 per year, compared to the normal maintenance allowance of $3000 to $3500 for public housing properties”.

[(DFCS, 2014: Appendix B).]

DFCS/LAHC’s construction of fairness, and the way in which evidence is assembled to demonstrate “unfairness” is worth exploring in some detail. Fairness is couched not in terms of the eligibility or needs of individual tenants, or between tenants and taxpayers or homeowners, but rather between public tenants living in different neighbourhoods or even different cities. Yet in demonstrating the degree of unfairness the media release calculates the opportunity cost to taxpayers of housing poor tenants in specific locations, and then assigns this “subsidy” as if it was paid out to individual tenants.

“Subsidies to tenants in the last year alone reached $8.89 million, with individual tenants receiving subsidies as high as $44,000 per annum. This compares to subsidies of $8000 per year in Campbelltown, $7000 in Gosford, and $11,000 in Wollongong.”

[(DFCS, 2014: 1)]

This individualised calculation approach was expanded upon and promoted in the restricted circulation media pack mentioned above. The pack included detailed “case studies” showing “the average maintenance costing for one terrace house (sic)”, and the estimated cost of restoring one particular dwelling. In Australia, rent on public housing is calculated at the relevant local “market rate”, but the actual rent payable cannot exceed 25% of household income. As the bulk of public tenants are on very low incomes, more than 90% of households pay income related rents regardless of the particular house or local market conditions. The media pack included calculations to show how different “rental subsidies funded by the NSW taxpayer” were provided to tenants in different neighbourhoods and parts of NSW (DFCS, 2014: Appendix A–D) with Millers Point residents benefiting from higher “subsidies” than tenants in similar circumstances housed in less valuable outer suburban areas. Notably the pack did not compare Millers Point to other high value Sydney suburbs. In fact, the nearest comparator referred to in the pack is located 65 km from central Sydney on the urban fringe. An example of the case studies included in the pack is:

“Case study – Mrs. P. Mrs. P, aged 55 years, lives alone in a four bedroom property in Kent Street. She has held the tenancy since August 2003. The market rent for this property is $3770 per month and Mrs. P pays $414 per month. This equates to a subsidy of approximately $40,000 per annum. Maintenance costs for this property are $72,000 since 1999.”

[(DFCS, 2014: Appendix C)]

The case studies were supported by print-ready photographs of dwellings showing some of the worst cases (including tenant neglect), itemised maintenance costs and journalistic summaries that could be – and later were – copied verbatim into news items by journalists. Unsurprisingly, the initial media reporting of Millers Point was generally supportive of the proposed sell-off. In one extreme case a newspaper journalist also referenced the Green Ban history,

“Millers Point… is a decaying monument to the standoff tactics of the wharfies… These belligerent unions helped keep Millers Point in the hands of their friends and family for generations, people who paid peppercorn rents, first to the Sydney Harbour Trust, then the Maritime Services Board from 1910, and finally, from 1970, to… Housing NSW.”

[(Devine, 2014: 1)]

The same journalist used material from the media pack to attack tenants in familiar terms: “Millers Point today remains an aristocracy of hereditary huevos, like Mr. H, 39…” (Devine, 2014: 1). The term ‘houso’ has long been in common use amongst Australian public housing tenants signifying identification with a common community experience. However it also has wider currency, including its use in the title of a popular television satire, and evokes well-rehearsed and exaggerated stereotypes and popular perceptions concerning a jobless underclass (Arthurson, Darcy, & Rogers, 2014). “Mr H’s”
case was reproduced, directly from the media pack text, in the metropolitan press.

The pack also offered selected journalists and their photographers “walk-through access” to the “case study” dwellings (DFCS, 2014: Appendix B). The name and mobile telephone number of a DFCS/LAHC media liaison “Contact on site” was provided in the pack, so that journalists could arrange a walk-through of selected dwellings (DFCS, 2014: Appendix B).

REDWatch, a resident action group from the Redfern/Waterloo neighbourhood about five kilometres from Millers Point (see Fig. 1 and Rogers & Darcy, 2014), obtained a copy of the restricted media pack and published the document in full on their website along with the statement:

“Unlike the media release the media pack is not available on line. This media pack... provides a good insight into how the NSW Government & LAHC managed the media event at the same time as keeping this information from NGO’s who may have been able to provide alternative perspectives. In part, this probably explains the slant of much of the media reporting about the issue.”


As suggested by REDWatch, the DFCS/LAHC’s communications about the proposed sale served simultaneously (and somewhat contradictorily) to devalue the houses as public assets while at the same time emphasising their increasing private value so as to ready them for private sale (Weber, 2002). The poor state of maintenance and high cost of renovation linked to the heritage status of the dwellings were presented as central reasons for selling-off the properties (DFCS, 2014).

The emphasis on the maintenance backlog and the government’s inability to house the large numbers waiting for public housing exemplifies the ‘TINA’ (There Is No Alternative) discourse, first articulated by Spencer (1851) and favoured by Margaret Thatcher, which proposes that the free market is the only valid solution to social problems. As outlined below, resistance campaigners addressed this discourse directly by commissioning their own professional study of economic costs and benefits which also proposed economically justified alternatives to the government’s plan (SGS, 2014 #124).

4. Tenant networking and community resistance

As outlined above, over the previous decade, the NSW government sold thousands of dwellings and relocated at least as many households largely without significant tenant resistance. When tenants have objected, they have rarely been in a position to mount a sustained campaign supported by the media or by other organisations. To understand what happened in Millers Point it is necessary to deconstruct the competing narratives which sought to define and decide the issue. The narrative of the housing authority, outlined above, highlights individualised histories and measures of fairness, and instead relies strongly on communal experience and wider notions of fairness and rights. At the same time, tenants and their supporters were aware of the need to engage the government strategy in its own economic terms.

Defending the sale in an interview in metropolitan radio, the NSW Minister for Housing insisted that Millers Point was no different from other public housing communities with high levels of unemployment and mental illness, and that references to the neighbourhood as “a low-income working class community” were “a romance” (ABC Radio, 2014a). But the very fact that the Minister was forced to defend the decision in this way demonstrates that this case was indeed different. Accounts of the problems and failures of public housing, on which the government’s narrative relied, were challenged by a discourse of historical struggle to maintain residency and local community values in the face of globalising forces represented by the property market. In this account these historical associations do not make Millers Point any more deserving of protection than other public housing communities, but as will be shown, the Millers Point narrative has powerful political utility at this particular place and time which serves to highlight the threat to public housing more generally. The local historical resonance of this case had meaning well beyond the particular neighbourhood which allowed the tenants to access broader political, media and social networks and interests groups.

Within a few weeks of the initial sale announcement Millers Point residents had public support for their resistance campaign from, amongst others, local private leaseholders and owner-occupiers, the city council, local members of Federal parliament and non-government heritage organisations. Tenant groups from other inner city public housing areas and tenant advocacy organisations had also joined the campaign.

The historical Green Ban movement played both a symbolic and practical role in the organisation of resistance in Millers Point. The continuing consciousness of that history was demonstrated by Jack Mundey, the union leader who was the face of the 1970s Green Bans movement, in a prescient newspaper interview in 2013 which highlighted the contemporary human cost of the transformation from an industrial to a global Sydney. Mundey stated.

“I think we owe it, to the people and their forebears, who after all built this city; this is where the city was built from. And so it’s very, very, important, that their lives, be made as good as possible... and we need to bring the people around Millers Point and Dawes Point and The Rocks all together, and to fight to keep these places...”.

(The Sydney Morning Herald, 25th August 2013, online video)

Symbolically, the area around and including Millers Point had been saved in the 1970s, and in developing the campaign resident organisers frequently recounted Green Ban narratives to boost morale and garner support. Current building union leaders appeared at tenant and public meetings and assured tenants of their support. Significantly, this stopped short of banning union labour on the site. Tony Hadfield, a former organiser for the Builder Labours Federation, told a resident rally.

“I was around and involved in the ‘72 Green Bans that saved The Rocks... I’m in no position to give you a Green Ban... So what you gotta do... get the meeting going... where everyone can be there and then you elect a committee, and then that committee then organises a campaign...”.

(cited in Hermann, 2014: 4:30)

The union’s inability to deliver industrial bans in support of the campaign as they had in the 1970s reflects the diminished power of labour organisations in the globalised economy. In Australia, Federal legislation adopted in the 1990s prevents unions from taking any industrial action not specifically directed at improving wages and conditions and within the context of highly regulated enterprise bargaining processes. (The penalties for so called ‘secondary boycotts’ include large fines and possible gaol terms for union officials and even individual members.)

In the absence of an industrial campaign, three local resident groups formed an alliance to organise the resistance, which they called the “Community Defence Committee”. These were The Rocks Resident Action Group (RAG) which was originally constituted in the 1970s, and two much more recently formed organisations, Committee of Residents Elected by Millers Point (CoRE) which included home owners and private leaseholders as well as public tenants, and the Public Tenants Group (PTG). In practical terms the three resident action groups, RAG, CoRE and PTG, had different interests in opposing the Millers Point sell-off, and each employed different political tactics to achieve their outcome.
“The local resident action society [RAG] had been in place for nearly 30 years. It goes back to the Jack Mundey days, when The Rocks were saved, as it were”.  

[[Interviewee E]]

During the research period, the chair of the open-membership RAG was a private leaseholder, and former Councillor with the City of Sydney. CoRE was focused on housing issues, and was involved in advocating for a non-government community housing solution (see: http://clearinghousetunsw.blogspot.com.au/2013/05/millers-point.html). The PTG was primarily public housing tenants, some of whom had strong links to various unions and key Green Ban figures. It formed specifically in response to the sale announcement. While the RAG was mobilising a political campaign built around political alliances with the City of Sydney, PTG drew on their union networks and organising skills. For example, Barney Gardner, a leading PTG organiser and retired member of the Maritime Services Union, organised public rallies and arranged for union leaders to address them (see Fig. 3).

Following the announced sell-off, and early media coverage supporting the sale, all three groups moved very quickly to engage more supportive journalists and sympathetic government and NGO contacts. From late March 2014 a diverse set of media relationships were developing. Sophisticated audio-visual reporting, much of it covering the human cost of the sell-off, appeared at regular intervals between March and August 2014. One interviewee stated,

“Well, the initial media was very much based on [Housing Minister] Pru Goward’s media release. And this whole argument ‘how dare these people sponge on the public’, of course, that has been well and truly debunked now by other reports”.  

[[Interviewee J]]

Key media outlets were drawn into the Millers Point resistance movement and the city’s major broadsheet newspaper, the Sydney Morning Herald, produced a multi-media website documenting the history of the local community and the contemporary struggle (see http://www.smh.com.au/interactive/2014/millers-point/home.html). At least two documentary filmmakers shot footage of the sell-off and related protests. One filmmaker, with close links to PTG, had been a builders’ labourer in Sydney in the 1970s and had participated in and filmed the demonstrations associated with the Green Bans. This type of documentary/union link has a long history going back to the 1950s Waterside Workers’ Federation Film Unit (Milner, 2000). Following this documentary/union tradition the filmmaker stated,

“When we were [squatting] in Victoria Street [another Green Ban site], twenty of us came down and got arrested at The Rocks… in October, November’73… we started filming all the demos… my attitude is, everything I shoot is hopefully going to help what’s happening”.  

[[Filmmaker Interview D]]

Community organisations from other inner city areas began actively contributing to the resistance campaign very soon after the initial announcement. REDWatch, a local organisation based in Redfern/Waterloo about five kilometres away, where several thousand public tenants live (see Fig. 1), organised meetings and circulated material via their website and media contacts outlining their concerns that all the government’s arguments about the “fairness” of public housing subsidies in Millers Point, as exemplified by the case studies in the pack, could equally be applied to all other inner city neighbourhoods.

“Millers Point is not within Redfern Waterloo but aspects of the March 2014 Government decision to remove public housing from Millers Point has implications for all of Sydney’s public housing that sits in areas that are in high demand by the private market and Redfern and Waterloo are rapidly becoming part of that club.”  

[[see: http://www.redwatch.org.au/issues/public-housing/millers]]

The Inner Sydney Regional Council for Social Development, a community organisation with a wider geographical focus raised funds for short term employment of a part time Community Development Officer to provide assistance to the three community groups in Millers Point (ISRC, 2014). The NSW Tenants Union, a state wide tenancy advocacy group, published a series of articles challenging the information and case studies in the media pack. One article, entitled “The truth about subsidies at Millers Point and The Rocks”, concluded,

“You can see the impression [DFCS/LAHIC is] trying to make… Half of all public housing tenants are over 60 years of age. They are ageing in homes to which they are much attached in a supportive community and should be allowed to stay there… A significant minority, however, have been there since before it public housing, when the Maritime Services Board owned the houses and let them to people who worked on the harbour”.  


The Resident Action Group made representations to parliamentary representatives and to the City of Sydney, particularly the Lord Mayor, and effectively elevated the Millers Point sale to the level of party politics. The disposal of public housing and relocation of tenants became a party political issue as Labor members of the Federal Parliament joined the debate to attack the actions of the conservative New South Wales government in the media, despite the fact that their own party had followed a similar policy when in government in that state less than a year before.

“The logic [of Minister] Pru Goward’s comments mean that the next stage will be to move people on from Pyrmont, from Ultimo, where there is still public housing. Our city needs diversity.”  

[[Anthony Albanese, Federal Member for Grayndler, on ABC Radio, 2014b]]

Lord Mayor Clover Moore, an independent Councillor, also became a vocal opponent of the sell-off labelling it “social cleansing” and warning that,

“All public housing tenants in inner city properties are now put on notice that if the value of your home goes up, the government is going to put you out of your home.”  

[[Hasham, 2014: 1]]

The Council provided a grant of $10,000 (through a community legal centre) to support tenants’ legal challenge to the sale, and Councillor Moore used her website to further challenge the NSW government:

“I will continue to call on the NSW Government to halt the proposed sale of the Millers Point social housing estate, support residents to stay in their homes, and to reinvest funds in new social housing in or near Millers Point if the sales proceed.”  


Economic arguments against the sale were provided in a report commissioned and prepared on a pro bono basis by private consultants. The consultants assessed the costs and benefits of the government proposal from a broad perspective incorporating the impacts of relocation, spatial disadvantage and social mix, and broader urban outcomes. They also considered the price impact of bringing so many properties to market in such a limited period of time. The report concluded that a more economically sustainable alternative was available based on a staged approach involving a mix of sales and long term leases designed specifically to retain socio-economic mix in the neighbourhood (SGS, 2014 #124).

The tenants’ legal case against the sale was partly based on heritage protection. Many buildings were registered on the National Trust Register following the Green Bans. More recently, these buildings were listed on the City of Sydney’s heritage list, under the Local Environmental Plan. They have been listed individually and in cohorts on the NSW State
Heritage Register. A change of ownership of buildings would not normally represent a threat to heritage values but in this case heritage advocates claim that the sitting tenants are a key element of the area’s heritage value. As one heritage professional interviewee put it,

“Right from those early [Green Bans] days we actually nominated Millers Point as [one of] Australia’s most threatened and endangered places... [the] more recent [state] listing specifically refers to the social significance of the community, and that is of state heritage value. Now our view is that if you move the community out, you are destroying one of the state heritage values, which is illegal...”

[(Interviewee J)]

5. Moving tenants on

At the conclusion of the research period, and up to the time of writing, Millers Point resident groups had managed successfully to maintain media attention on their resistance and to elicit robust support from community organisations and urban institutions across the city. For the first time since public housing retrenchment began in New South Wales, there was genuine debate amongst serious commentators in mainstream media concerning the value of public housing and its place in the urban system. Anti-sale banners continued to adorn the heritage streetscape, and tenants have held regular meetings to reinforce their solidarity in resisting relocation. Despite this, sale of (unoccupied) dwellings proceeded amid ongoing community protest, and the government showed no sign of relenting or retreating from their claim to be pursuing “fairness” through the sales. While the Minister’s description of the residents as “just like any other public housing community” was severely compromised in the course of the campaign, unlike the 1970s, the political landscape was such that the retired dockworkers and other tenants could not call on the unions to withdraw labour from any redevelopment. Powerful as the tenants’ narrative was, they remain tenants and so it has proved insufficient to overcome the government’s claimed legal right to sell its property and to move them on.

Given the high level of media attention to the Millers Point plan, and the likelihood that noisy and colourful protests at property auctions would attract even more, auctions were arranged to take place in the evenings and well away from the site. To re-emphasise its force their solidarity in resisting relocation. Despite this, sale of (unoccupied) dwellings proceeded amid ongoing community protest, and the government showed no sign of relenting or retreating from their claim to be pursuing “fairness” through the sales. While the Minister’s description of the residents as “just like any other public housing community” was severely compromised in the course of the campaign, unlike the 1970s, the political landscape was such that the retired dockworkers and other tenants could not call on the unions to withdraw labour from any redevelopment. Powerful as the tenants’ narrative was, they remain tenants and so it has proved insufficient to overcome the government’s claimed legal right to sell its property and to move them on.

At the same time, the DFCS continued efforts to move existing residents, the vast bulk of whom were qualified for rehousing elsewhere. A special purpose rehousing process was established for this purpose entitled “My Property Choice” (FACS, 2014). Tenants were told to attend a local “rehousing office” to view a range of properties “which match their entitlement in any location” on television screens, and “decide whether to bid for them” (FACS, 2014). DFCS informed tenants, “No aspect of the My Property Choice process is appealable” (FACS, 2014). A former dockworker tenant described the process and the “rehousing office” as follows,

“That’s the most disgraceful thing... this is where we came up with the name housing lotto... to sit in front of a TV, and be shown all different units, all over the suburbs... And if you say, oh dear, I like that, I’ll put my name down. The department [DFCS] calls that a bid... if two or more people are interested in the one property, they draw them out of the hat or the box or whatever... they cast that sort of thing on us. And if you imagine, say, three people who have been neighbours for quite a long while, and they have to be in a draw, that’s gunna cast suspicion, its gunna cast ‘oh, why’d they get-it?... it was professionally done, it was like walking into a used car sales yard...”

[(Interviewee A)]

6. Conclusion: Declining industrial labour and global city expulsions

“When asked about the future of Millers Point one interviewee evoked iconic Green Ban folk music instead of answering the question. He stated, “Well, have you ever heard the song ‘Across the Western Suburbs?’” (Interviewee D, see: http://unionsong.com/u118.html). The 1973 lyrics resonate with an uncanny contemporary irony, as relevant today as they were 40 years ago in Green Ban Millers Point.

“Under concrete and glass, Sydney’s disappearing fast
It’s all gone for profit and for plunder
Who is me house, me little terrace house
It’s all gone for profit and for plunder
Now before the city’s wrecked, these developers must be checked
Now across the Western Suburbs we must wander”

[(Said, 1993: xiii)]

In many important respects this example of retrenchment of public housing in the wake of deindustrialisation and rising inner city property values can be read as a familiar tale of gentrification sponsored by the globalised neo-liberal state. All the elements described by Peck (2010) and Wacquant (2009) are present: the demise of the power of organised labour; privatisation of public goods; responsibility of the poor; and the battle over land through narrative. Each is closely linked to the rescaling and transformation of the local economy as outlined by Sassen (2014), including the closure of Sydney as an industrial port and its integration into the global property market. This study however shows the need for caution when attempting to apply universalising frameworks to local situations.

The housing authority attempted to capture the Millers Point community in a generalised narrative of public housing failure. This was supported by a construct of “fairness” which claimed that the only distinguishing characteristic of these particular tenants was that they were receiving an unjustified level of benefit from taxpayers, and that this was at the expense of more genuinely needy individuals.

The lengthy intergenerational tenure of some households was translated as further evidence of their undeserving status. Even the cost of repair of buildings, poorly maintained by the authorities themselves over many years (as one interviewee put it “eviction by dereliction” (Tenant interview B)), became part of the calculus deployed to justify terminating the tenure of long term tenants. Any mention of the houses as homes, or of community networks and place attachment, or indeed the contribution of individuals to creating and preserving the physical environment of the now desirable neighbourhood, was absent from the government narrative. Instead, houses were referred to only as ‘assets’ or ‘stock’ and valued only in terms of their likely sale price. Mainstream media outlets, which are by now accustomed to describing welfare recipients and public tenants as spongers or, in Australian parlance ‘buddges’, were quick to reproduce and embellish the official story.

But clearly Millers Point is different from other public housing neighbourhoods in important ways which impinged on the veracity of this narrative, and on the construction of alternative accounts. Government identified this particular place for sale because of its relatively high value compared to public housing areas in other parts of the city and elsewhere. Their political strategy relied on the belief that its iconic location would enhance the argument that low rent paying tenants did
not deserve this level of amenity. But a major contributor to the perception of value in the site is its history, and resistance campaigners were able to garner support for the idea that the current tenants remain a living part of that history.

Millers Point tenant leaders had never accepted or internalised the discourse of public housing failure, and instead drew on their own stories of historical success over the combined forces of government and capital. Their narrative featured themselves as having historically built the city, both materially/physically with labour and socially through community place making. They did not view their current housing arrangements as welfare, but rather as a fundamental right, hard-won through struggle. Moreover, other inner city tenant groups were activated by the fear that if Millers Point succumbed to the government’s construction of fairness, then many more communities would be vulnerable to the same argument. While labour unions did not have the power or resources to take effective direct action as they had forty years before, they also called on their historic role to mobilise significant participation in street protests and demonstrations. Together these groups were able to broaden the issue to a question about the social makeup of the city as a whole. The government’s narrative of ‘fairness’ was confronted by one of ‘social cleansing’. Because of the particular character and history of the site a significant section of news media were persuaded by these alternative accounts and this was enough to draw politicians and other levels of government into a news media were persuaded by these alternative accounts and this was enough to draw politicians and other levels of government into a new social, economic and political regime being challenged by a new social, economic and political regime.

Strategies which emerged through the political struggles associated with sites of exclusion, or expulsion. The global city is a space of contested narratives of historical success over the combined forces of government and social cleansing. Because of the particular character and history of the site a significant section of news media were persuaded by these alternative accounts and this was enough to draw politicians and other levels of government into a wider debate about public housing which has not occurred around other sale and redevelopment projects in Sydney.

Sassen (2014) argues that post-Industrial global cities are now sites of exclusion, or expulsion. The global city is a space of contested politics about privatisation, individualisation, increasing property prices and the evocation of the undeserving urban poor. Millers Point relates a case study about how the housing rights and political strategies which emerged through the political struggles associated with earlier social and economic changes of the industrial era are being challenged by a new social, economic and political regime known as the ‘global city’. However, the case also demonstrates how neo-liberal hegemony is never complete and that contest remains possible. As Said (1993) points out, contests are played out in the realm of narrative and discourse and as such are focussed on the production and validation of knowledge about the city which, as the Millers Point activists have shown, is always conditional and historically contingent. As one local tenant commented:

“… retired MUA members say, ‘retired from job but not the struggle’”

([Interview D])

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