

# Submission on the Draft Sirius State Environmental Planning Policy

## on behalf of the Historic Houses Association of Australia

In 2016, the Historic Houses Association of Australia established Sirius as a House Member of HHA. This identified Sirius as an item of heritage significance and marked a change in HHA. Hitherto, HHA had focused on much older historic homes. The campaign to save Sirius and the ways its heritage significance were being celebrated resulted in the Board of the Historic Houses Association inviting Sirius to become a House Member through the Save Our Sirius Foundation.

This decision was not taken lightly, but since establishing Sirius as a House Member of HHA, its heritage has been embraced by members of HHA.

The HHA tours of Sirius have been sell-out successes, reports in the HHA newsletter have been warmly received, and HHA has provided resources for *This is Sirius* art exhibition at the National Trust Centre on Observatory Hill.

In Gabrielle Upton's Inaugural Speech to the NSW Legislative Assembly, Ms Upton noted that her Vacluse electorate includes many people who are "socially isolated and need assistance with housing", and these people help to make her electorate a "diverse community, a community that punches above its weight". In the same paragraph she says she has "an infectious love of knowledge and respect for heritage". (*Hansard and Papers* Thursday 26 May 2011)

Gabrielle Upton, and subsequently Pru Goward, have been the ministers chiefly responsible for the displacement of all public housing residents from Sirius and from its neighbourhood. They are the ones chiefly responsible for the planned erasure of Sirius from the landscape.

A direct consequence of the proposed planning controls for the Sirius site is that the neighbourhood of Sirius will no longer be a diverse community, and if public housing tenants in Vaucluse are community members who punch above their weight, there is an implication that others of similar standing are being displaced because they are not up to scratch.

When he was Social Housing Minister, Brad Hazzard said the government he was part of would “ensure large redevelopments aim for a 70:30 ratio of private to social housing”. There is no suggestion in the proposed redevelopment or restoration of Sirius that such a target would be appropriate for Sirius / the Sirius site. However, amongst all of the property that is owned by this state government, if one site and one building has a claim above all others to retain a significant proportion of social and affordable housing, surely Sirius is the one that must meet this 70:30 target, and the building itself must be retained, not only for the high regard in which it is held as a fine example of Brutalist architecture, but also for its direct and powerful connection to the historic Battle for The Rocks and the 1970s Green Ban that led to its construction. This is a building that embodies an important chapter in Sydney’s history. It helps to tell us who we are. It is not the same to erect a plaque to tell the story of the Green Bans. The city itself should be readable. This is the essence of heritage. This is why we believe some important buildings should be retained as markers for telling our own story.

The second quality that Gabrielle Upton says she brought to the NSW Parliament, her “infectious love of knowledge and respect for heritage”, appears to have been lost after joining this government. Neither Gabrielle Upton nor Pru Goward would meet with community members in order to acquire first-hand knowledge about the people who lived in Sirius, and the government responses to the heritage value of Sirius appears to have been limited to looking for ways to get around any heritage valuing of the building. The government asserted there was no direct link between The Rocks Green Ban and Sirius, and when its own documentation of the time showed their assertion was false, they claimed the greater return they would receive by paving the way for the demolition of Sirius outweighed its heritage value. This remains the government’s belief, and the present consultation is directed towards the design excellence of what will replace Sirius, giving back the “skyline” to Sydney, and providing a building that will blend in behind the nineteenth-century buildings of The Rocks, which are the ones the government appears to believe are the “true” heritage buildings.

The heritage importance of Sirius cannot be overstated. Every reputable heritage and cultural body that has prepared a report on Sirius has called for it to be saved,

restored and repopulated with at least a substantial proportion of social and affordable housing. The National Trust, the Historic Houses Association of Australia, ICOMOS, the Australian Institute of Architects, the NSW Government's own Heritage Council, the World Monuments Fund. The list goes on.

Instead of answering these calls for heritage protection of Sirius, in the documentation that forms the foundation of the proposal for Sirius or the Sirius site, the government denies all significant heritage listings of Sirius. It records that neither the National Trust classifies nor the Australian Institute of Architects lists Sirius as a heritage item when indeed both organisations clearly do list Sirius and a significant heritage item.

Sirius is listed on the Australian Institute of Architects Register of Significant Architecture (item no. 4703569). It was listed by the National Trust in 2014. Departmental Registers are subject to the Heritage Act. It is also listed on the Land and Housing Corporation Section 170 Register which makes it subject to the *Heritage Act*, regardless of the claim that:

The Sirius building and site is not identified by statutory protection provided pursuant to the NSW Heritage Act and is not identified as an item of state heritage significance. As such no constraints apply. (AP HIS Nov 2017: 21)

On this point alone, this process of community consultation and information should be stopped immediately, and there should be no progress made towards disposal of this asset until the government rectifies the inaccuracies it has promoted. Whoever purchases this site would have a case for saying they were informed that there were no heritage restrictions on the building, that Sirius had no heritage value, and that this was uncontested. The purchaser would have increased leverage for the demolition of the building and/or demanding compensation for any heritage restriction or delay caused to them.

The NSW Government attempted to trash its own heritage system, to politicise it and deny listing to Sirius in a blatant cash grab. The Save Our Sirius Foundation took the government to the Land and Environment Court and had the government decision overturned. The government appears once more to be intent on

The Historic Houses Association of Australia calls on the government to redraft this SEPP so that it addresses the heritage significance of Sirius, so the building is retained and restored, so that its role in the 1970s Green Bans is acknowledged, so that a substantial proportion of it is used for social and affordable housing, and so that we do not lose this heritage that we should be handing on to our children.