

The “Future” of the Past and the Present of City of Sydney

– on Studying the Conservation of The Rocks Historic Area

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Abstract: Questioning the conservation of the City of Sydney’s past is the focus of the paper, with reference to the protection of The Rocks historic area. With its interpretation and protection of elements relating to individual collective pasts and the identity of the city, conservation of its urban heritage has been playing a significant part in the development of Sydney over the past more than three decades. As a most historic city in Australia, it seems to have successfully established its image both as a city of great vitality and of sustainability which celebrates its old and new. The two are well blended that it can be said Sydney has grown far better out of the conditions of Lewis Mumford’s “Babel in Europe”.¹ And this seems to be demonstrated in The Rocks in particular, with the area’s unique location and iconic historic status. Yet by studying the history of The Rocks conservation movement and the current practices, the paper explores the contradictions between the past and present and in the conservation itself ever since the area has been protected.

Introduction

Throughout the past century, movements to preserve cities’ heritage worldwide have increasingly expanded their scope with the ever increasing development (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990, 2000; Lowenthal 1996). They move away from simply protecting the particular structures which have the strongest symbolic appeal (“monuments”) to protecting also their environmental contexts (for example, the “vernacular,” “urban fabric” etc.), to protecting the urban fabric itself, in particular residential neighbourhoods and architectural types as well as specific buildings whose value is only in contribution to an overall scene (hence the terms like “heritage areas,” “streetscape,” “cityscape,” etc.) (The Athens Charter 1931, The Venice Charter 1964, the Washington Charter 1987, and the Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage 1999); and then towards protecting the social and ethnic composition of its population other than only the physical urban fabric (Boyer 1994). Their contributions to the uniqueness and identity of relevant cities and their functions to bridge the past and present have been increasingly appreciated (Lowenthal 1996), which in return inspires their preservation.

Yet these developments in the conservation of the urban heritage scope have not been always in chronological order. The related interpretations have often been mixed, which constantly arouse contradictions and cause disagreements and disappointments among different groups of people concerned. With respect to the city of Sydney these have been either seen in its vital heritage conservation movements and practices, from the Green Bans to the continuously active Glebe Society and Paddington Society, and then to the current internationally renown Rocks conservation model. Of the process the campaign for the conservation of The Rocks in the past decades and the current activities around the area probably can best illustrate the confusion and contradictions concerning the conservation of Sydney’s past and its relationship with the city’s present.

¹ Mumford L. 1963 *The Highway and the City* pp2-12, here referring to the miscellaneous situation

To illustrate these points of view, a brief introduction to The Rocks historic significance and the battle for the conservation of this area in the late 1960s and the 1970s have to be addressed at first, though they have already been considered history.

A Brief History of The Rocks

Conserved nowadays as an icon of Australian history, The Rocks is the site of Australia's first European settlement in 1788, which nowadays is located on the western side of Sydney Cove, lying to the north of the Sydney CBD between Circular Quay and the approaches to Sydney Harbour Bridge. With the coming of the First Fleet, The Rocks became the site of the first convict encampment, military camp, bakehouse and hospital, and the site of the first Australian pub etc.

With the growth of the colony, the land close to the water's edge was used for government purposes; merchants established private wharfage facilities, and the High Street (later named George Street by Governor Macquarie) became the hub of Sydney's wharfside trading life.

The craggy topography of The Rocks defied orderly settlement, and the construction of proper roads and drainage proved difficult. Despite Governor Macquarie's effort to build up the area, The Rocks became the first slum of Australia, lower orders characterising the area. Shacks and shanties of convicts, ex-convicts, sailors, wharfies, and other salty characters graced the rocky outcroppings. The environment, however, produced the characters exemplified in Henry Lawson's poem "The Captain of the Push", and The Rocks was marked by some social historians as the birthplace not only of Australia, but also of the Australian character. (Roddewig 1978, p 17)

In 1900 an epidemic of bubonic plague swept The Rocks, and the government resumed the area by demolishing large areas of slum houses, most of The Rocks coming into public ownership. Yet the redevelopment program for the area was largely ignored, which was further made oblivious of by the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge (1925-1932), the latter sweeping away many streets and houses and splitting the peninsula along its spine. The area west of the Bridge became known as Millers Point. The construction of the Cahill Expressway across Circular Quay in the late 1950s caused further evictions and extensive demolition, where over one third of the area, mainly that south of the Cahill, was vacant.

The Battle for The Rocks

During the 1960s the Rocks had become a centre of government attention, when the commercial office boom peaked in Sydney. With its proximity to the CBD and being almost completely in public ownership, it occurred to the state that the area could be a significant source of revenue.

A series of plans and the recommendations of Sir John Overall, former director of the National Capital Development Commission and one of the most famous urban planners in Australia, all favoring massive demolition and high-rise development, led to the creation of the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority (SCRA) in January 1970. This was the statutory authority given the responsibility for most of the land in the area, apart from the St Patricks Church property.

The establishment of the SCRA was rushed through to meet the deadline of a State whose desire was to have a cash flow as soon as possible. The SCRA put forward its scheme for broad scale high-rise development with accompanying wind swept plazas, without consultations with the residents concerned. The scheme, made public in

February 1971, aroused the local residents, and The Rocks Resident Action Group (RAG) quickly sprang into life under the leadership of Nita McRae, a lifelong resident of the area. After a year of lobbying government, The RAG resorted in desperation to the NSW branch of the Builders Labourers' Federation, who imposed 'green bans' – union bans on construction work for environmental reasons. The Rocks then became the site of the most protracted debate about redevelopment versus heritage and one of the most publicised areas of confrontation between the resident/union coalition and the State Government in the 1970s.

How The Rocks was Saved?

Apart from the fact that nine historic buildings were to be retained, the land use, height, and density scheme, as announced in the scheme by the SCRA, envisioned two-thirds of the area being cleared and rebuilt as commercial office space. Almost five million square feet of net useable office and retail space were proposed, three new hotels were proposed, one to be a major international class Hyatt-Regency hotel. New high-rise and low-rise residential construction was to commence and boost the number of residents to twelve hundred, but in a "socio-economically mixed pattern." (Sir J. Overall 1967, in Roddewig 1978, p20; The Rocks Heritage Management Plan 2001, p 45 Vol. 2) And residents in the public housing such as the sailors, wharfies, pensioners and other low-income earners were to move out.

Demolition was due to commence in January 1972 to allow construction of two 105-metre skyscraper buildings as Phase One of the SCRA plan. The union responded to the RAG's plea and imposed a ban on 6 November 1971, announcing that it would not move a single brick until the 416 residents forced to move had been satisfactorily rehoused. (Burgmann 1998, p196)

There was an irreconcilable difference about the historic value of The Rocks between the residents concerned and the SCRA, as analysed by Roddewig (1978, p 27): ***for Nita McRae and The Rocks RAG, "the uniqueness of The Rocks area is the people who live in the historic buildings with all their past generations of ancestors who lived and died here." For SCRA, as well as for most Australians, however, the old buildings matter most.*** The Rocks should be an exciting place to visit. In the vision of Owen Magee, Director of SCRA, "Fifteen years from now, The Rocks will be the liveliest spot in Sydney, a place of galleries, bistros, wine bars, and theatres."

On this matter, the Union agreed with Nita McRae, and the ban on The Rocks redevelopment continued, despite the political and legal pressure.

With the support of Neville Gruzman, an architect and town planner critical of the scheme, and other architects, The Rocks RAG drafted and published in April 1973 the 'people's plan': specifying 'that the future planning of The Rocks should involve as fully as possible, to the point of veto, those who lived and worked there.' It represented the residents' desire 'that their neighbourhood be retained as a residential and historic area, separated from the CBD.' And it recommended 'that the area be revitalised through a return of residents, an injection of cultural and entertainment centres and an extensive program of historic preservation.' (Burgmann 1998, p 198; Roddewig 1978, p 25) This formed the basis on which the Rocks RAG would lift the green ban and allow redevelopment to proceed.

Under these circumstances and then the emerging 'commercial attractiveness' of the heritage value of The Rocks, the SCRA made a major compromise with the residents and the union in 1975, announcing that future planning 'should place great importance

upon cultural, social and historical values', that the residential population of The Rocks should be increased, with existing residents rehoused within the area, and that residential development should cater for a variety of age and income groups. (The Rocks Heritage Management Plan 2001, p 42, Vol 2)

For the local community, the main outcome of the change in policy was that a medium height block of apartments, which was to be called *Sirius* overlooking Cumberland Street, was to be built by the NSW Housing Commission. And that all the *Sirius* Apartments managed to do was to maintain the population base of 240. Though it was the population of an all-time low that had been fallen to at the time of the Green Bans, *Sirius* would mean that at least some of them could remain living in the area. The residents were reasonably satisfied and the ban was accordingly lifted that year. (The Rocks Heritage Management Plan 2001, p 42, Vol 2)

The Rocks has become one of the most popular places for the Australian visitors, their number being one of the key factors reflecting the 'success' of The Rock's redevelopment. This, for the Green Ban purists, means too many visitors and too few residents though, they admit that the outcome is a considerable improvement on the fate from which it was rescued, of becoming an extension of the CBD. (Karskens 1997, p 5; Burgmann 1998, p 201)

What had been saved?

The SCRA agreed their future planning 'should place great importance upon cultural, social and historical values', 'the area be revitalised through a return of residents, an injection of cultural and entertainment centres and an extensive program of historic preservation', as mentioned above, and from the 1970s to the early 1980s great attention had been focused on restoration work in George Street and Argyle Street. But, while the main street took on heritage colours and street awning re-appeared, the rest of the acreage was still posing development questions.

For instance, the next big investment in residential accommodation right after *Sirius* had nothing to do with housing more permanent residents; rather, it aimed to cater for Sydney's growing popularity as an international tourist destination. The SCRA issued tender documents for an international hotel on a site overlooking the intersection of Alfred Street and George Street. Built by Civil and Civic between May 1979 and January 1983, the hotel was financed by Singaporean businessmen and operated by the international Regent Hotel chain. Labor Premier Neville Wran produced for the Regent Hotel's opening a lavish booklet, in which he explained in developer prose:

Ten years ago... all redevelopment and construction had been halted by 'Green Bans'. And for the moment, it appeared as if all progress had also been defeated. But despite the exodus of family businesses, some people clung to the belief that this was the chosen spot for the first truly international hotel of Sydney. This is where the Regent of Sydney could pay homage to the true value of the Rocks. This is where nostalgia and progress could co-habit to the benefit of all concerned... The shadows of the past ten years were finally lifted. Progress was reinstated. (The Rocks Heritage Management Plan 2001, p 43 Vol 2)

Again it is stated in the Rocks Heritage Management Plan (2001, p 44, Vol 2): the Regent's magnificent foyer, with its lavish marble flooring, stylish café and expensive restaurant, was talking points; few Sydneysiders visiting the place had any idea that it formed part of the land of The Rocks, managed by SCRA; and inside the Regent's glamorous public rooms you were oblivious of The Rocks; guest rooms on the northern side actually overlooked The Rocks, but the marketing of the hotel

concentrated on the view of Circular Quay and the Opera House.

Of the local residents who had lived in The Rocks for generations, only three score and ten had survived to move into the *Sirius* block, and a few more got in there, who were at the top of the waiting list of the NSW Department of Housing. (The Rocks Heritage Management Plan 2001, p 45 Vol 2) Though the physical fabric of the area has been largely preserved north of the Cahill Expressway, the character of the area has changed to be dominated by tourism and entertainment uses, and the social cohesion of the community has been dissipated. In that sense, when referred to The Rocks RAG' conception of the area's historic value: "the uniqueness of The Rocks area is the people who live in the historic buildings with all their past generations of ancestors who lived and died here. ... we can't differentiate the buildings from the people who live in them ..." (Roddewig 1978, p 27), the victory won by the residents and the green bans was a hollow achievement. (Blackmore, in Webber 1988, p 138)

A 'Real Historic Place' Preserved?

Since 1998 the management of the Rocks is vested in the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority (SHFA) under the SHFA Act 1998. The Authority's functions as stated in the Act are:

- (a) to protect and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the foreshore area;
- (b) to promote, co-ordinate, manage, undertake and secure the orderly and economic development and use of the foreshore area, including the provision of infrastructure;
- (c) to promote, co-ordinate, organise, manage, undertake, secure, provide and conduct cultural, educational, commercial, tourist, recreational, entertainment and transport activities and facilities.

The importance of heritage conservation is acknowledged in the Authority's Mission, which includes:

To enhance Sydney Harbour's reputation as an accessible, rich and diverse living environment, while protecting its natural and cultural heritage.

With respect of The Rocks, Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority's role as custodian of the area encompasses the maintenance of the precinct, the customer relationship, management of its retail, residential and commercial leases, the preservation of its heritage buildings, the creation and development of its events, its marketing, and the management of its operating and capital costs and revenues. (SHFA 2003/4 Annual Report)

In 2001 SHFA commissioned the preparation of a Heritage Management Plan by Godden Mackay Logan Pty Ltd, Heritage consultants, in recognition of the importance of heritage conservation in The Rocks,

With acknowledging its heritage significance and the primary role of heritage conservation of The Rocks, The Rocks Heritage Management Plan adopted by SHFA and The Rocks Heritage Policy then stressed the excellence in heritage management for the area: The Rocks should set national and international standards for recognised best practice heritage conservation program, its key value being the conception of it as a 'real historic place' through the retaining of authenticity and continuity.

For the authenticity, it refers to that The Rocks contains genuine physical, documentary and associational evidence covering Sydney's and Australia's history from before the time of first European settlement until the present, while the continuity

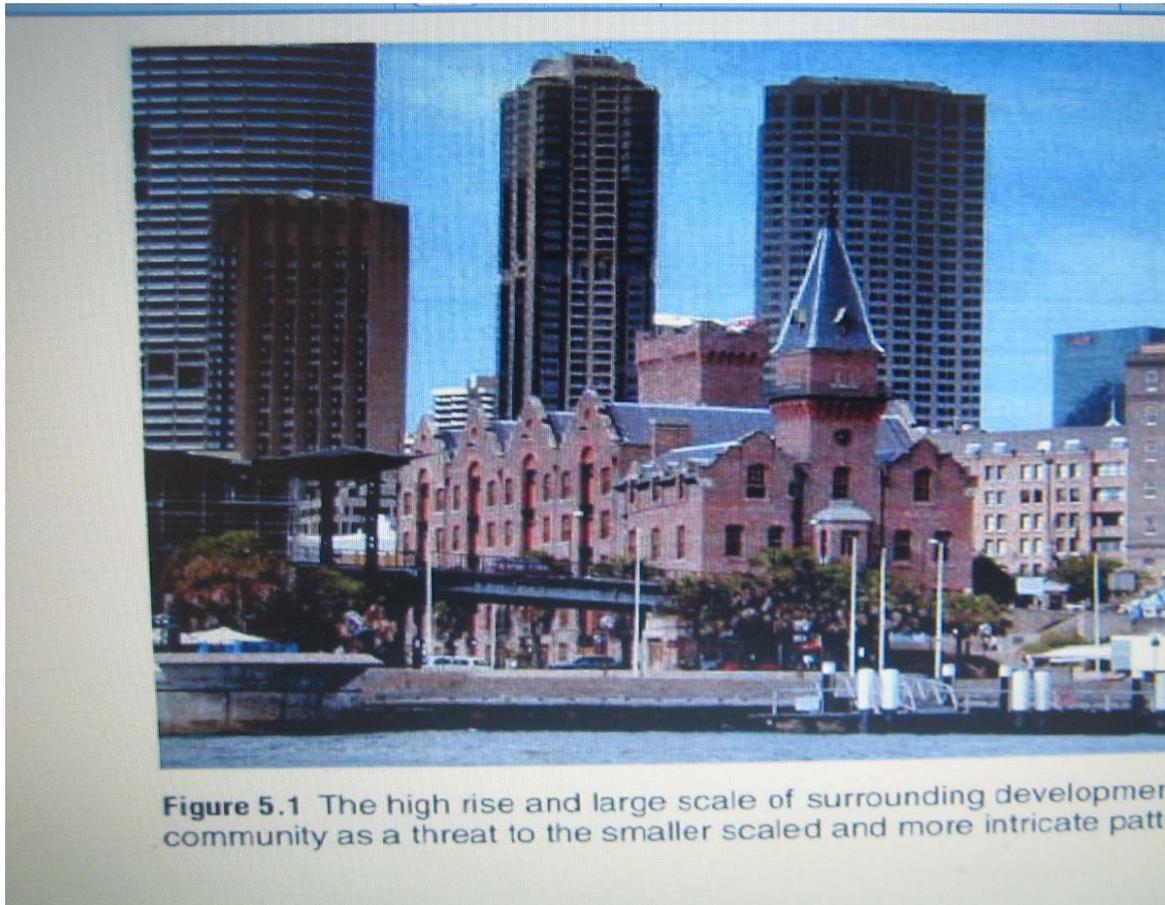
means the continuing presence of residents: they provide not only an outward and visible sign that The Rocks is a living community but, through their very presence, provide connections between past, present and future. (The Rocks Heritage Management Plan, pp 32-3 Vol. 1) The authenticity of The Rocks and its perception as a real place, rather than an artificial tourist destination, partly relies on the continuing presence of residents.

The nature of those residents, however, has changed dramatically in the last forty years. Most of the working-class residents in The Rocks have been displaced by new office and retail uses. The bulk of The Rocks residential population today is accounted for by domestic and overseas tourists on relatively short stays, with some upper middle-class permanent housing. The Rocks community is a mix of non-resident workers, school groups, adult day visitors, evening bar and restaurant trade visitors, and the traditional community which continues to decline. The changed nature of the community indicates that the real history of the traditional residents has been lost, at least partly, as afore-mentioned.

To retaining the authenticity of The Rocks, it should also mean that the development in the area is sympathetic to the heritage values of the place, as stated by SHFA in its annual reports. Yet until the year 2004, high-rise development was seen in the historic precinct of The Rocks. It was reported in SHFA's 2003/4 Annual Report:

In November 2003, SHFA offered for sale a 99-year leasehold interest in a consolidated parcel of three buildings located in Gloucester Street (171-193 Gloucester Street). The sale included the heritage-listed Reynell Building. An unconditional sale of \$22 million was negotiated with the successful purchaser, Stamford Windsor Pty Ltd. Payments will be staged over a two-year period. Stamford Windsor's architect, Kan Finch, proposed a tower to the north of the Reynell Building to provide 26 levels of residential apartments. This plan is consistent with the provisions encompassed by an existing DA (Development Application) on the site. Sale contracts for the leasehold interest were finalised on 30 June 2004.

And the high rise and large scale of surrounding development is viewed by the community as a threat to the smaller scaled and more intricate patterns of The Rocks, as shown below in Figure 5.1, Vol 2 of The Rocks Heritage Management Plan. This again remind us of Neville Gruzma's comment, 'to restore isolated "historic" buildings and sandwich them with glass and concrete offices is to make a shallow mockery of our heritage', when the initial plan was produced by SCRA on the redevelopment of The Rocks in the early 1970s. Although the plan envisaged that a limited part of The Rocks, around the 1814 Cadman's Cottage (Sydney's oldest surviving house), would be renovated and maintained as an 'historic precinct', it was a tiny part of the overall plan and would be overwhelmed visually by neighbouring high-rise buildings.



It is stated in The Rocks Heritage Management Plan (p 55, Vol. 2):
...The challenge facing the Rocks Heritage Management Strategy is to **both preserve and capitalise on the setting**. The right mix of conservation, interpretation, commercial and residential activity to achieve that end is far from obvious.

The challenge will last.

Conclusion

By tracing the campaign for the conservation of The Rocks in the 1960s and the 1970s and activities concerning preservation and development around this area, it is demonstrated the past and present have hardly been blended well. Different interpretations of historic area and neighbourhoods, the conservation of either urban fabric or community not only aroused contradictions in the 1970s, but have posed questions up to now. And the conflicts between heritage definition of the historic setting and the continuing developments around have ever been challenging The Rocks, which makes it prone to a 'heritage island' other than a place well-bridging its past and present, the icon it has been supposed to be.

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