

8 September 2015

Mr Terry Bailey
Chief Executive
NSW Office of Environment and Heritage
PO Box A290
SYDNEY South, NSW 1232

Dear Mr Bailey,

Re: Proposed addition of the Sirius Apartment Building to the State Heritage Register

The Urban Taskforce has reviewed the '*Statement of Significance*' and the '*Assessment of Significance*' for the proposed addition of the Sirius Apartment Building (36-50 Cumberland St, The Rocks) to the State Heritage Register (the Register).

We believe that these documents do not justify the addition of this building to the State Heritage Register. While it is clear the Sirius Apartment Building (the Sirius Building) has some positive qualities, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the Building is of such historical, associative, aesthetic or social significance that preservation through the recognition in the Register is required.

The Urban Taskforce, in collaboration with architect Chris Bosse, has developed an adaptive re-use proposal that restores the Building to the white colour originally envisaged by architect Tao Gofers, who has recently indicated that he always intended the building to be white. This proposal can be seen at Tags A and B. The modification also improves amenity for the user of the building through the addition of new, curved balconies. Gofers was quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald supporting the changes- '*I think adding balconies would be a very good idea*'. Adding the Building to the Register would prevent these balconies (or any other additions or modifications) to occur.

Our arguments against the proposed listing of the Sirius Building are outlined below.

State Heritage Register - Criteria

a) Historic significance

Under *Criteria a) – Historic Significance*, the Assessment of Significance (the Assessment) states the Sirius Building has a historic significance due to its connection to the Green Bans and the protest movement against the development of The Rocks and The Millers Point area in the 1970s. However, the site of the Sirius Building was originally a brick warehouse (known as the Ajax Building) a key part of the architectural fabric of The Rocks at the time. The Ajax Building was demolished and replaced with the Sirius Building. The National Trust originally

¹ Sydney Morning Herald '*Architect Chris Bosse's plan to keep the Sirius building in the Rocks*', 28 July 2015, www.domain.com.au

criticised the Sirius Building as '*a vast and out of character building*²'. The remains of the Ajax Building are now listed on the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority's Heritage and Conservation Register and the National Trust Heritage Register. Clearly, the Ajax building was of strong heritage significance and it appears perverse to associate the destruction of this building, in order to construct a concrete tower, with the aims and objectives of the Green Ban movement.

The Statement also proposes that the historic use of the Sirius Building in providing affordable accommodation is socially significant. The NSW Government has announced that the building will no longer be used for this purpose, thus reducing this significance³.

b. Associative significance

Under *Criteria b) – Associative Significance*, the Assessment proposes that the Sirius Building has a '*special association with Jack Munday through The Rocks / Millers Point 'Green Ban*⁴'. This association is tenuous at best. The site upon which the Sirius Building is located was once a brick warehouse, the Ajax Building, which was knocked down and replaced with the Sirius Building. The remaining portion of the Ajax Building has since been deemed to be of heritage significance recognised by both SHFA and the National Trust. The demolition of a heritage building for an eleven storey concrete high rise block is NOT in the spirit of Jack Munday's Green Bans movement.

The Assessment also indicates that the Sirius Building has associative significance due to its association with architect Tao Gofers. Gofers, although interesting, is not an important or distinctive architect in Australian architectural history, with the exception of the Sirius building. Gofers has also publicly stated that he supports proposed modifications to the Sirius building, as reported in the Sydney Morning Herald, indicating he is not committed to preserving the building in its current form through the State Heritage Register.

c. Aesthetic significance

The Assessment focuses on the Sirius Building as '*a fine example of the Brutalist architecture style, especially in its use of off-the-form concrete*⁵.' Architect Tao Gofers has stated that the Sirius building was intended to be a white colour, not grey, and that he thinks '*adding balconies would be a very good idea*⁶'. Clearly Gofers does not want to freeze the current design of the Building by adding it to the State Heritage Register.

The Assessment also states that the Sirius Building has aesthetic significance as '*an early example of rooftop landscape gardening in NSW and Australia*⁷.' However, the Readers Digest building, constructed in 1967, incorporates a rooftop garden and predates construction of the Sirius building by a decade⁸.

² NSW Office of Environment and Heritage '*Sirius Apartment Building –Assessment of significance,*' www.environment.nsw.gov.au.

³ NSW Government – Family and Community Services Media Release, '*New housing builds on Millers Point Sales*', 17 April 2015, www.facs.nsw.gov.au

⁴ NSW Office of Environment and Heritage '*Sirius Apartment Building – Statement of significance,*' www.environment.nsw.gov.au.

⁵ NSW Office of Environment and Heritage '*Sirius Apartment Building –Assessment of significance,*' www.environment.nsw.gov.au.

⁶ Sydney Morning Herald '*Architect Chris Bosse's plan to keep the Sirius building in the Rocks*', 28 July 2015, www.domain.com.au

⁷ NSW Office of Environment and Heritage '*Sirius Apartment Building –Assessment of significance,*' www.environment.nsw.gov.au.

⁸ MacMahon (2001) *The Architecture of East Australia*, Edition Axel Menges

The Assessment also makes an amazing claim for aesthetic significance, stating that the Sirius Building balances and 'bookmarks the view of Circular Quay together with the Opera House⁹.' To claim that the aesthetics of the Sirius Building are equivalent to the Sydney Opera House questions the rigour of the entire Assessment.

The Assessment notes that there are four wooden sculptures by Tao Gofers located in the foyer of the Sirius Building which could be of state significance. These sculptures can easily be relocated and exhibited in an adaptive re-use of the Building or at the Art Gallery of NSW, if they are considered to be of such high aesthetic significance.

d. Social significance

Under *Criteria d) – Social Significance*, the Assessment indicates that the Sirius Building was to house residents of the Millers Point and The Rocks community, giving the building social significance. The NSW Government has recently indicated that the Sirius Building will no longer be used to provide social housing for the community, and would be sold¹⁰. The Statement also proposed that the Sirius Building is socially significant as it once housed many of the maritime and dock workers employed to work at nearby wharves. These wharves have long since changed use from shipping, freight and maritime purposes and are now largely open waterfront for public use and commercial and retail development. The social connection between the maritime workers and the Sirius building no longer exists.

f. Rarity

Under *Criteria f) – Rarity*, the Assessment indicates that the Sirius Building and another project located at Sans Souci represent the only known examples of architect Tao Gofers' modular social housing. Gofers has recently publicly stated that he is supportive of proposed modifications to the Sirius Building, indicating that he does not bestow sufficient heritage significance to the Sirius Building to justify preserving the Building in its current form.

g. Representativeness

Under *Criteria g) – Representiveness*, the Assessment indicates that the Sirius Building is "the most prominent and intact example of this type of social housing specifically designed for its intended occupants needs¹¹". This is inaccurate. There are many other examples of prominent, intact buildings which have been specifically designed for social housing purposes. Examples include the Greenway building located in Kirribilli and the social housing towers located at Redfern and Waterloo, all of which are much more prominent and intact examples of social housing in the Sydney city area from a similar period of time.

In summary the Urban Taskforce does not believe that the Sirius Building fulfils the criteria to warrant adding the building to the State Heritage Register and believes that adding this building to the Register will prevent further adaptive re-use of the building in the future, limiting use of this highly valued and prominent location. Please feel free to contact me on telephone number 9238 3927 to discuss this further.

⁹ NSW Office of Environment and Heritage 'Sirius Apartment Building –Assessment of significance,' www.environment.nsw.gov.au.

¹⁰ NSW Government – Family and Community Services Media Release, "New housing builds on Millers Point Sales", 17 April 2015, www.facs.nsw.gov.au

¹¹ NSW Environment and Heritage 'Sirius Apartment Building – Statement of significance,' www.environment.nsw.gov.au

Yours sincerely

Urban Taskforce Australia



Chris Johnson AM

Chief Executive Officer

Tag A: Sydney Morning Herald 'Architect Chris Bosse's plans to keep the Sirius building in The Rocks,' 28 July 2015, www.domain.com.au

Tag B: Urban Taskforce Media Release, 'Sirius building can be improved with a new layer of balconies rather than being frozen as heritage,' July 2015, www.urbantaskforce.com.au

Architect Chris Bosse's plan to keep the Sirius building in The Rocks

Sydney Morning Herald, July 28, 2015

Sue Williams

The controversial Sirius apartment building at The Rocks – loved by some, loathed by others – could enjoy a new lease on life with a modern makeover designed by one of Sydney's leading architects.

Debate has been raging over whether the 1970s building, lauded as a fine example of 'brutalist' architecture and originally constructed to provide affordable public housing during the period of the Green Bans, should be heritage-listed or demolished. But now the novel plan has already won backers, including from the original building's architect and developers, as well as stirring "interest" from one of its most ardent supporters.



Architect Chris Bosse's plan for remodelling The Sirius building at The Rocks. Photo: Supplied

Award-winning architect Chris Bosse, director of LAVA, an adjunct professor at UTS, and a key designer of the Beijing Watercube, has released drawings of his vision for the 79-apartment stepped block. He sees its future as a much more contemporary re-adaptive re-use with clipped-on curved balconies providing residents with a more "friendly" Sydney lifestyle.

"Rather than freezing architecture for an eternity, I think it's much better to adapt it to current circumstances," Mr Bosse said.

"Lifestyles and circumstances change, and buildings should change with them. This is a way of preserving a building in a fabulous location and giving it a whole new life. The social housing issue is an emotional topic and a completely different question; this is about the building itself."



The Sirius building at The Rocks, as it is now. Photo: Supplied

The original architect of the building, at 36-50 Cumberland Street, Tao (Theodore) Gofers, is also enthusiastic about the proposal. "I think adding balconies would be a very good idea," he said. "That's much better than demolishing it which would upset me a little bit."

One of Sirius's greatest champions, Millers Point conservation activist Mary Sutton, has been shown the proposal by Fairfax Media and said she was also looking at it with interest.

"I like the idea but I'm not totally convinced – yet – but the concept is one that deserves further study. A heritage listing wouldn't preclude such a scheme, and this is a rare example of brutalist architecture, but it's certainly much more promising than a tall steel and glass structure in its place!"

In October 2014, a nomination for listing the Sirius Building on the State Heritage Register was received by the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage from the National Trust of NSW, and earlier this month the Heritage Council formally notified their intention to consider listing the building and called for public submissions.

A spokesperson from the Office said that part of this process involved informing residents of the nomination and encouraging them to make comment, with the call for public submissions closing on September 8.

The Heritage Council believes the building may be of State Heritage Significance as a rare, representative and fine example of the Brutalist architectural style, especially in its use of off-the-form concrete and the stacking of cubic components to create a harmonious whole. It says it's also significant as an early example of rooftop landscape gardening in NSW and Australia.

But Mr Bosse's scheme has already been applauded by developers' lobby group the Urban Taskforce. Its chief executive Chris Johnson said he would not like to see the building either

heritage listed – which would keep it in its current form – or demolished to make way for a new building. The Bosse design, he believed, was an excellent alternative.

“It’s a way of upgrading the building to give it a lot more amenity, while still working with the original structure,” he says.

The director (advocacy) of The National Trust of Australia (NSW), Graham Quint, however, has examined the design and has reservations. While he said the process of public consultation needed to run its course first, and only later could such schemes be considered, he was not sure how practicable such an adaptation could be.

“It’s heartening that developers aren’t planning a complete demolition of the building, but this is a little premature,” Mr Quint said. “And if cantilevered balconies were added on, that could be a massive amount of work for every single unit and the cost could go through the roof.

“It certainly changes the whole character of the building, too.”

Sirius building can be improved with a new layer of balconies rather than being frozen as heritage

Tuesday, 28 July 2015

The Sirius building in The Rocks, Sydney can be improved while respecting its original design says, the Urban Taskforce.

"The proposed heritage listing of the Sirius building at the Rocks could freeze the brutalist form of the building and therefore limit the amenity of future residents," says Urban Taskforce CEO, Chris Johnson. "There is a better way to ensure the building relates to its setting while lifting resident amenity by adding balconies."

"The Urban Taskforce has asked Sydney architect Chris Bosse of the award winning firm LAVA to develop a new layer for Sirius that respects the original design while improving amenity. The result is to 'clip' onto each of the box like shapes a curved balcony that provides residents with views towards the Opera House while reinforcing the pattern of the building."

"The original building is designed in the 'brutalist' style which was a popular style at the time with a small group of architects. The style is deliberately raw, heavy and utilised rugged concrete as its primary material. While still popular with a few architects interested in history the style has been rejected by most in the community as unfriendly."

"Many Sydneysiders have seen the Sirius building as being unsympathetic to its historic neighbours and not having a character that celebrates its amazing setting overlooking Circular Quay. The Urban Taskforce believes the Chris Bosse scheme demonstrates that the building can become more friendly in its appearance while respecting the original design intention. The Bosse design addition of clipped on balconies also gives the building a more Sydney- style appearance and relates the building to Sydney Harbour."

"Our concern is that State Heritage listing will simply freeze the current raw, brutal look of the building and minimise the amenity for future residents. Heritage listing is not needed as this will not encourage a rethinking of the building to increase its amenity and improve its appearance. The simple clipped on balconies proposed by Chris Bosse is only one approach to how Sirius could evolve. There are other options but these would have little chance of success if the building is heritage listed.

Below are images of the Sirius building as it is and the building with Chris Bosse's added balconies:



The **Urban Taskforce** is a property development industry group, representing Australia's most prominent property developers and equity financiers.

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