

Knock-Down, Rebuild, Redfern Waterloo

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Ned Cutcher has recently taken up a post as a Senior Policy Officer with Shelter NSW, where his focus is on the impact of urban renewal and redevelopment on low-income, marginalised and excluded members of the community. He has previously worked as a tenants' advocate with a number of Community Legal Centres, most recently as the Senior Policy Officer with the Tenants' Union of NSW.

The story of Redfern is a story of housing justice, particularly for Aboriginal people. It is a story of resilience in the face of discriminating landlords, of evictions and squats. It tells of an emerging self-determination following almost two hundred years of violence, so-called protectionism and assimilation. It is the story of The Block, and the establishment of the Aboriginal Housing Company, where for the first time since colonisation, housing for Aboriginal people was owned and managed by Aboriginal people.¹

The neighbouring suburb of Waterloo has a housing story too. It tells of slum clearance and urban renewal, high-rise apartment buildings, and the last major investment in public housing in inner-city Sydney.² It is the story of affordable housing on the city's doorstep, and for this reason it is a story of housing justice too.

These stories are contemporaries, sharing similar origins around the beginning of the 1970s when government policy was in their favour. They have shaped a community for over a generation, almost 50 years, as governments and policies have changed around them. But as Sydney has grown, and as the city and its pockets of privilege continue to change, these stories have become harder to sustain. Both The Block in Redfern and the Waterloo public housing estate are subject to plans for significant redevelopment that would alter both the physical and social fabric of their community.

Early in December 2015, then Premier Mike Baird announced that Waterloo would host a station on the planned Sydney Metro line, running between Chatswood and Bankstown. This was hailed as a 'once in a lifetime opportunity to renew the area's social housing and increase the supply of new homes close to the CBD'.³ The announcement said that the ageing Waterloo social housing estate would be progressively renewed with a mix of private, affordable and social housing, with no loss of social housing from the current 2000 or so dwellings.⁴ Thus it was confirmed that one of the country's largest and most iconic public housing estate is to undergo urban renewal according to an emerging formula of increased density and socially mixed communities, known as 'Communities Plus'.

Communities Plus is the name given to the NSW Government's current policy for growing the



social and affordable housing portfolio, aiming to deliver 23 000 'new or renewed' dwellings over the next two decades.⁵ In order to achieve this, around 17 000 existing dwellings are set to be demolished, providing a net gain of around 6500 social housing dwellings across the State.⁶ This will be delivered as part of an increase in density across the affected sites, with the balance of new dwellings to be sold into the

¹ Redfern Oral History, *Aboriginal Housing Company & The Block* (2 September 2018) <<http://redfermorahistory.org/Organisations/AHCAboriginalHousingCompanyTheBlock/tabid/209/Default.aspx>>.

² Patrick Troy, *Accommodating Australians: Commonwealth Government Involvement in Housing* (The Federation Press, 2012) 158 [21].

³ NSW Department of Premier & Cabinet, 'Sydney Metro to Rejuvenate Waterloo' (Media Release, 16 December 2015) <<https://www.nsw.gov.au/your-government/the-premier/media-releases-from-the-premier/2016/10/sydney-metro-to-rejuvenate-waterloo/>>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Land and Housing Corporation, *Communities Plus Industry Briefing* (27 February 2018) Communities Plus <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/ta/5625d102e4b0040b09643cc5/517/assets/docs/180327-CP-IndustryBriefing.pdf>>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

private housing market by developers who will use the anticipated proceeds to fund the redevelopment. The overall target is for 70 per cent of housing in the renewed estates to be sold off, with the remaining 30 per cent to be given to community housing providers to manage as social and affordable housing.⁷

In public policy terms, Communities Plus reflects a significant departure from the status quo. It is the first attempt in decades by a NSW Government to stem the loss of social housing stock, whereas previous governments have allowed the portfolio to run down.⁸ But it is not a sustainable model for growth, as it relies on the transfer of public land to private developers in order to finance the necessary construction. While a commensurate number of dwellings may be returned to the social housing portfolio at higher densities, only a fraction of the land will be returned, resulting in an overall loss to the citizens of New South Wales.

The Communities Plus website says that the policy will '[d]eliver more housing and a better social housing experience, with more opportunities and incentives to avoid or move beyond social housing'; '[d]evelop new mixed communities where social housing blends in with private and affordable housing, with better access to transport and employment, improved community facilities and open spaces'; and '[p]artner with the private and not for profit sectors to fast track the redevelopment of sites in metropolitan Sydney and regional NSW'.⁹ Some of this is clearly aspirational, as it attempts to make broad yet direct links between the Communities Plus agenda and the government's overall Future Directions for Social Housing strategy. Mostly, it speaks to a new built form, of imagined communities of home-buyers and social housing renters integrated in as yet unimagined places. What it doesn't say, unless you look a little more closely, is that to achieve all of this, the erasure of existing communities will be required. Communities like Waterloo.

Back up the hill in Redfern, the Aboriginal Housing Company has submitted a Master Plan for the 'Pemulwuy Project' to the Department of Planning and Environment.¹⁰ The Plan would see sites around The Block that were formerly used for Aboriginal housing redeveloped into a mixed-use precinct that includes retail and commercial space as well as a significant amount of student accommodation. It is

a model that is conceptually similar to Communities Plus, and it raised concerns within the community that Aboriginal housing may be squeezed out of the new development altogether.¹¹

In fact, both of these proposals have raised some alarm within Aboriginal communities, who fear there will no longer be any place for them in the soon-to-be transformed neighbourhoods of Redfern or Waterloo.¹² When acknowledging the context in which Aboriginal communities respond to change of this kind – particularly as it relates to land and housing – it is important to understand the shifts in government policy towards Australia's First Nations over time. Self-determination turned our country away from the earlier policies of assimilation and protectionism, under which Aboriginal people were prohibited from owning property and were required to renounce their cultural and ethnic heritage in order to have meaningful participation in Australian society.¹³ Those policies, in turn, were a move away from the outright violence of the expanding colonial frontiers from 1788 through to as late as the 1920s. The practice of wage theft and the removal of children from Aboriginal families may inform our understanding

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Audit Office of NSW, *Making the Best Use of Public Housing* (30 July 2013) <https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/280/01_Public_Housing_Full_Report.pdf.aspx?Embed=Y>.

⁹ Communities Plus, *Communities Plus is Delivering Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW* (18 October 2018) <<https://www.communitiesplus.com.au/>>.

¹⁰ NSW Government Planning & Environment, *SSD 8135 Pemulwuy Project Redfern – New Student Accommodation Building* (9 August 2018) <http://majorprojects.planning.nsw.gov.au/index.pl?action=view_job&job_id=8135>.

¹¹ 'Tent Embassy Victory for The Block', *National Indigenous Television* (online), 27 August 2015. <<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2015/08/27/tent-embassy-victory-block?cid=inbody;jenny-munro-brings-tent-embassy-back-to-redfern>>.

¹² Danny Teece-Johnson and Robert Burton-Bradley, 'Inner Sydney's Aboriginal Community Fear They Are Being Pushed Out for 'White Hipsters'' *National Indigenous Television* (online), 9 March 2016 <<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/the-point-with-stan-grant/article/2016/03/09/inner-sydneys-aboriginal-community-fear-they-are-being-pushed-out-white-hipsters>>.

¹³ See, eg, *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW).

of intergenerational trauma in the contemporary setting,¹⁴ but significant and severe trauma has been inflicted upon Indigenous populations in the form of dispossession, displacement, disease and destruction of culture since the colony of New South Wales was established.¹⁵ For Australia's First Nations which are built on kinship ties and the passing of convention and culture through oral traditions, resilience in the face of such trauma is nothing short of extraordinary.

Against these odds the survival of Australia's Indigenous communities is there for all to see, and this is particularly so in Redfern and Waterloo. The proposed redevelopments of The Block and the Waterloo public housing estate could be perceived as yet more threats to this survival. The recently published 'Visioning Statement'¹⁶ for a redeveloped Waterloo captures the very strong sentiment that the proposal should be taken as an opportunity to strengthen the presence of Aboriginal people in the area, and to reinforce its significance as a cultural centre for Australia's First Nations. The worry, of course, is that potential property developers will only respond to this in tokenistic ways. The subsequent release of the 'Waterloo Redevelopment Options'¹⁷ can't have done much to alleviate such concerns, given that they have failed to expressly respond to the Vision's sentiment in this regard. This is not just a matter for the local Aboriginal community – although that should be the major consideration. It is also concerning for the broader Indigenous community, for whom Redfern and Waterloo have always been the first ports of call when visiting Sydney from afar; and for the continuing stories of housing justice in these pockets of South Sydney, for whom the importance of affordability for Aboriginal households should by now be self-evident.

In the meantime, the NSW Government has launched an 'Aboriginal Social Housing Strategy' that aims to build the capacity of Aboriginal housing providers across New South Wales.¹⁸ It remains to be seen whether the redevelopment of Waterloo, and other plans for urban renewal around the area, will provide new opportunities for Aboriginal housing providers to help make the community's vision a reality, and to continue their stories of housing justice. For Redfern and Waterloo's sake, let's hope they can.

¹⁴ Heather McCrae et al, *Indigenous Legal Issues: Commentary and Materials* (Thomson Reuters, 4th ed, 2009) 33–7.

¹⁵ Ibid 9–65; Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: a History Since 1788* (Allen & Unwin, 4th ed, 2010).

¹⁶ KJA Engaging Solutions, 'Let's Talk Waterloo' (Report prepared for the Department of Family and Community Services, May 2018) 9. <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5625d102e4b0040b09643cc5/t/5b061b0e575d1f26582bc5fb/1527126916259/Waterloo+Visioning+Report+240518.pdf>>.

¹⁷ Communities Plus, 'Waterloo Redevelopment Options' (Brochure, NSW Government, August 2018). <<https://www.communitiesplus.com.au/news/waterloo-masterplan-options-released>>.

¹⁸ Aboriginal Housing Office, 'Strong Families, Strong Communities: a Strategic Framework for Aboriginal Social Housing in NSW' (Media Release, 31 July 2018). <<https://www.aho.nsw.gov.au/news/strong-family,-strong-communities-a-strategic-framework-for-aboriginal-social-housing-in-nsw>>.