Sirius, the Rocks
Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

International working party for
documentation and conservation
of buildings, sites and
modern movement

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composed by working party of: Australia

1 Identity of building/group of buildings/urban scheme/
landscape/garden

Sirius Apartments

1.1 current name of building

Sirius Apartments

1.2 variant or former name

Sirius Building or just Sirius

1.3 number & name of street

2-32 Cumberland Street

1.4 town/suburb, city

The Rocks

1.5 state

New South Wales

View of the Sirius building in 2014, Photographer Noni Boyd
The Sirius Building is constructed overlooking Sydney Cove. In the 1820s Sydney's most prominent merchants built villas on Bunker’s Hill, Dawes Point and Millers Point overlooking their private wharf complexes. In the 1840s additional housing was built including a series of townhouses with frontages to Cumberland Street and rear entrances to Gloucester Street, which ran along the top of a cliff. Gloucester walk still follows this alignment.

Following the outbreak of plague in Sydney in 1900 the entire area was resumed. Substandard housing was demolished. Cumberland and Gloucester Streets were realigned, resulting in the demolition of the townhouses and villas at the northern end of the street. From 1914 the site was redeveloped. The NSW Housing Board erected bond stores (Rowan’s Bond) and the Mercantile Shipping office. Below the shipping office was a warehouse, the roof of which carried part of the realigned Cumberland Street. The structure, the first reinforced frame to have been built in Sydney, was built by the Public Works Department and was then infilled to form a warehouse by the Housing Board. Following the dissolution of the Housing Board the properties remained in Government ownership, passing to the Maritime Services Board in 1936.

A competition was held for the redevelopment of the entire area however this did not go ahead. A new State Government agency was created, the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority, tasked with redeveloping the area. In 1972 Kings Parking Company proposed to build the East Rocks Car Park however this proposal, which would have seen an eight-storey car park erected at the northern end of Cumberland Street, did not proceed. The proposal to demolish the majority of the buildings in the Rocks area and build high-rise buildings had resulted in a green ban first being imposed by the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) in December 1971. Additional green bans followed when it became apparent that local residents were not going to be able to afford the proposed new apartment block. SCRA produced an article outlining the ‘rehousing program for the East Rocks tenants’. Assistance was to be provided by the Housing Commission, but only to pensioners and existing residents who qualified for assistance.

A compromise was eventually negotiated that saw the demolition of Rowan’s Bond Store and the construction of a large block of public housing known as the Sirius Apartments designed by Tao Gofers for the NSW Housing Commission and built by Alexander and Lloyd. The Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority named its redevelopment projects after the ships of the First Fleet. In addition to the demolition of Rowans Bond, the southern half of the warehouse built by the Housing Board, including the former shipping office, was also demolished.

A smaller prototype, also designed by Tao Gofers, was trialled in Sans Souci (which also survives). Plans and models for the Sirius apartments
were prepared during 1975. The existing tenants of Nos 1-11 Gloucester Street were asked to vacate by July 1975, the ‘green ban’ imposed by the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) having been lifted the month before, allowing the construction of the block of public housing to proceed. The Sydney Tribune reporting

The Rocks residents recommended the bay be lifted after closely examining and proposing changes to a Housing Commission housing plan for 70 units on the site. The original plan had allowed for a 30-storey home unit block for wealthier tenants or owners. The [green] ban on the remaining 52 acres of the Rocks will stay. (22 April 1975)

Final designs were submitted to the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority in 1977. The initial design was modelled to ensure that views from the bridge to the Opera House would not be obscured and the urban design advice was sought. The building application to erect a new block of residential flats buildings at 2 – 36 Cumberland Street was submitted in December 1977. Repairs were undertaken to Gloucester Walk in 1979 and the first tenants of the new housing block moved in during 1980. During the 1990s terminally ill patients were housed in the block, which has expansive views of Sydney Harbour and the Opera House. The World Heritage listing of the Sydney Opera in 2007 included a Buffer Zone and the Sirius building sits within that buffer zone.

A change in government policy has seen the sale of all of the properties in The Rocks and Millers Point occupied as public housing, including the series of purpose designed model workers housing erected 1906-1920 and the Sirius Building erected by the NSW Housing Commission.

The National Trust submitted a nomination for State Heritage Listing that was unanimously approved by the NSW Heritage Council. The minister refused to list the building. This decision was successfully challenged in the Land & Environment Court however the NSW State Government still refused to list the building. As the foundations of earlier buildings remain on the site, the area is still subject to certain NSW Heritage Act provisions.

As of December 2017 the building has been put up for sale and only one tenant remains. The action by the State Government to displace longstanding tenants has received international news coverage.

2.1 original brief/purpose
Housing for people displaced by redevelopment

2.2 dates:
commission/completion
1975/1980 (official opening)

2.3 architectural designers
NSW Housing Commission (Project architect: Tao Gophers)

2.4 others associated with building
Design development & documentation architects: Alexander & Lloyd

2.5 significant alterations with dates
None identified

2.6 current use
One long standing resident remains (December 2017)

2.7 current condition
The building is in good condition

3.0 Description
3.1 general description
The following description has been taken from the State Heritage Register nomination prepared by the National Trust
Sirius

This 79-apartment residential building complex consists of repetitive geometric (cubic) elements stacked on top of each other to give a step-like terrace effect rising from under five storeys for much of the northern sections and part of the southern end, to eleven storeys in a high-rise block towards the south. In fact 75 per cent of the building is five storeys or less. It was originally intended to have a white finish to echo the Opera House but, due to budget constraints, the building remained in grey, off-the-form concrete. At the time of construction, one of the main complaints was that the building rose above the level of the Bridge’s roadway.

There are 79 1-, 2-, 3-, and 4-bedroom apartments, mostly single storey, with two- or three-level walk-ups as well as lifts. Because of the design, each lift foyer on each floor serves only a small number of apartments. The apartments were designed to cater for the tenants that were to be rehoused.

3.2 construction
The building is constructed of concrete, with an in-situ frame and precast panels. The floors are concrete floor slabs.

3.3 context
The building is located on a site that is within a statutory heritage conservation area of predominantly single storey 19th century houses and early twentieth century warehouses and public houses. The building replaced a bond store erected c. 1920.

4 Evaluation
4.1 technical
The building is of Technical Significance:

The building is of technical significance as part of the series of high-rise housing blocks erected by the NSW Housing commission from the 1940s until the 1980s.

The building is of Social Significance:

The Sirius Apartments were funded, designed and built by the NSW State Government to house community members of the Rocks/Millers Point who were displaced by redevelopment. To ensure this occurred a union ‘Green Ban’ was placed on the site by Jack Mundey and the Builders’ Labourers Federation. The housing block has a direct, strong and special association with the Rocks/Millers Point Community of long-term residents and direct descendants of maritime workers that the public housing in the area was initially created for.

The building is of Aesthetic Significance:

Aesthetically significant the excellence of its Modernist design as a Brutalist building, the design of this well-executed and relatively intact example of late 20th century public housing, part of a series of buildings as urban development by the NSW Housing Commission during the 1970s.

4.3 cultural & aesthetic
Described in magazine Concrete (Issue 11) as ‘a bold and exceptional experiment in low-income public housing’, the design was a conscious attempt to reduce the monolithic nature of most high-rise residential developments.
Sirius

The building is of Iconic /Canonical Significance:

The building is a well-known Sydney landmark, as it is visible from the Sydney Harbour Bridge and from many points in Sydney Cove. It is also well known for its association with the Union ‘Green Bans’, bans that saw the retention of historic areas of Sydney proposed for wholesale redevelopment.

4.4 Iconic/canonical

The building was also well known for a sign announcing ‘One Way! Jesus’ was displayed in the window of Unit 74 facing the Bridge for more than 15 years.

More recently the building has achieved iconic status through the campaign mounted by Save our Sirius to save the building from demolition.

The building is of Historic Significance:

The construction of the Sirius demonstrated the power of the Union’s Green bans in protecting the historic built environment in Sydney. This Green Ban was a seminal event in Australia and led to the saving of most of the Rocks/Millers Point from wholesale redevelopment. The Sirius Apartments were part of the agreement with the Union to bring the Green Ban to an end by providing public housing for those persons displaced by the development that did proceed. The Green Ban was specifically lifted on this site to allow for the construction of housing, it remained in force for the rest of The Rocks.

The construction of Sirius also demonstrates the process of rehousing people displaced by redevelopment, as subsequently resident displaced from Woolloomooloo were housed in the block.

5 Documentation

5.1 principal references

1975
During the year a scheme to provide public housing in The Rocks Redevelopment Area was agreed upon by the [Housing] Commission and the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority. The project, which will provide 69 units on Bunker’s Hill close to the Expressway approaches to the Harbour Bridge, will be proceeded with when funds permit.

The Housing Commission of NSW Annual Report 1975

1975
Commissions proposals reported in the SMH April 1975

1977
Daily Telegraph 11 March 1977
Sun Herald 4 September 1977

1977
Working Drawings
Alexander & Lloyd P/L, Architects
State Records of NSW Height of Buildings Plans and Drawings application H3213.

1977
Building Application
Erect new residential flats building (Housing Commission of NSW). Council of the City of Sydney Building Application files BA 1452/77. Not yet accessed

1977
Today the Commission’s architects are providing some of the most advanced housing developments in Australia. This artist’s impression of a new housing scheme in Sydney’s Rocks district is typical of the Commission’s ‘new look’. When completed it will provide 79 units with some of the best harbour views in the city. Some of the larger units will have either private courtyards, roof terraces or large balconies. It will be a mixed development with accommodation for aged pensioners, as well as families with children.

Coloured Perspective reproduced in the 1977 NSW Housing Commission Annual Report
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tr>
<td>Late 1970s</td>
<td>Promotional brochure for the Sirius Apartments</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970s, 1980</td>
<td>Before and After photographs taken by the Sydney Cove Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td><em>Concrete Poetry: Award Winning Buildings 60s – 80s</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Brutalism, A Heritage Issue edition</em></td>
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<td>Architecture Bulletin (NSW) March-April 2012</td>
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<td>Glenn Harper &amp; Noni Boyd</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td><em>Aesthetics as a Practical Ethic: Situating the Brutalist Architecture of the Sirius Apartments, 1975 – 80</em></td>
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<td>Russell Rodrigo, SAHANZ Fabrications 2015</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>From Eyesore to Icon, Reappraising Sydney’s Sirius Apartments (1975-80)</td>
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<td>Russell Rodrigo, Proceedings of the 13th Australian Urban Planning History Conference</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>Sirius</td>
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<td>John Dunn, Ben Peake, Amiera Piscopo</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>SOS Brutalism exhibition</td>
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<td>Deutsches ArchitektureMuseum</td>
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<td>Wikipedia Page</td>
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5.2 visual material attached

Dr Noni Boyd December 2017

5.3 rapporteur/date

Sirius Building under construction. Photo: Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority (former SHFA now Property NSW)
Perspective of the proposed Sirius apartment building in The Rocks, Housing Commission of NSW

View of the completed Sirius building, with the Opera house in the background. Powerhouse Museum collection
Nearly every tenant can enjoy growing things. All top floor units have roof gardens and all units on the ground floor enjoy their own terrace garden. The community room for aged residents opens onto a large outdoor garden area and a generous garden area at ground level is provided for all residents and their visitors.

Brochure produced by the Housing Commission of NSW.