

You shall not covet your neighbour's house

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On [March 19th 2014](#) the O'Farrell Government announced the proposed sale of 293 public housing properties in Millers Point and the Rocks. Now, just over 18 months later, Dr Robert Mowbray provides a sobering look at the impact on this unique inner-suburban community, and its resident tenants...

You shall not covet your neighbour's house (Exodus 20:17) - Millers Point 18 months down the track

Just over 18 months ago the Hon. Prue Goward MP, then Minister for Family and Community Services, [announced](#) the sale of all public housing in Millers Point, Dawes Point and The Rocks, including the Sirius Building. The stated reason for the sale was the high cost of maintenance, significant investment required to improve existing properties to an acceptable standard and the high potential sale values of property assets on the Sydney Harbour foreshore, with the proceeds to be reinvested into the social housing system across NSW.

Previous articles on this blog (check them [here](#) and [here](#)) and on the 'Friends of Millers Point' website (check it [here](#)) have debunked some of the myths used to justify the sale of properties in Millers Point. The second of these articles makes the point that there's no plan for the sustainability of the social housing system generally: [no asset portfolio strategy, no estates strategy](#), despite the recommendation by the Auditor-General.

There were 293 properties marked for sale in Millers Point. This affected 600 people and 409 tenancies. Many of the tenants were over the age of 65 and relied upon neighbours, as well as hospitals, doctors, public transport and other support services close to the city. Many of the tenants have lived all their lives in the area and have strong community connections. Indeed, Housing NSW's own publication [Millers Point Oral History Project: Summary Report](#) reported on page 6:

Millers Point ... has a very integrated community who love living there and have a sense of belonging and allegiance to the place. ... The residents have a rich reservoir of memories of living at the Point, going, in some cases, as far back as six generations. They were born, worked, lived and died in the houses at Millers Point. **They also have a strong sense of history and heritage. It's a community within a community where everyone knew each other through work and place of living** [my emphasis].

The NSW Government's own consultant, Cred Community Planning noted that:
... 55 per cent of Millers Point tenants have lived in the area for over 10 years, and that 12 households have lived in the suburb for at least five generations. For many residents, the state government's plan to sell their homes is not only an attack on the basis of their livelihoods but an attack on their emotional and historical links to the suburb. Cred recommended that some of the funds from the sale of homes in and around Millers Point be used to build new social housing properties nearby, especially for elderly residents, adding that they may experience "ongoing negative impacts of stress and poor health outcomes". ... **The state government dismissed this recommendation, and said that they want elderly residents to "build connections in their new communities"** [my emphasis again].

You can read about this [here](#). You may also wish to check out the excellent presentation on Millers Point by The Sydney Morning Herald, available [here](#).

The NSW Government gave itself two years to empty the suburb of its public housing tenants and complete the sale of its properties. Well, these properties now are highly sought after real estate. Just in the last month three properties facing Barangaroo Headland Park reached between \$2.46 million and \$3.30 million at auction. You can check these sales [here](#). Prior to these auctions, News Corporation [reported](#) that the NSW Government has generated \$64 million in revenue from the sale of 29 properties.

Millionaire realtor and TV personality, John McGrath, has anointed The Rocks (read 'Millers Point') as one of 'must-have addresses' in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Brisbane. He is [quoted](#) as saying: As a shift in the housing stock moves from Government owned to private dwelling there is bound to be a massive upgrade to these beautiful harbourside Georgian and Victorian homes. Plus a significant change in local amenity that usually follows such upgrades. With the recently opened Barangaroo Point park, a 5 minute walk to the CBD & Barangaroo commercial precinct, this is fast becoming one of the most fashionable addresses in Sydney.

Previously, John McGrath was [reported as saying](#) that he is a great believer that money, like many things, can be used for good or bad. Well, is it good or bad to covet the houses of others? Likewise, from last year, check out [Issue 2, 2014 of Lifestyle Guide](#) which targets Sydney's most affluent residents. It reads:

What to buy ... My tip for the most popular and affordable entry into The Rocks is the Sirius Apartment development. ... The 79 apartments have a retro feel and require minimal refurbishment. In contrast, the terraces and freestanding homes will need a much more extensive renovation and could take up to four years of love, sweat and tears to renovate. It is a lengthy investment of both time and money but in the end, you will own an important part of Sydney's history in one of the best locations in Australia. Priceless.

In mid-July of this year the Heritage Council of New South Wales [called for submissions](#) in regards to the listing of the Sirius Building on the State Heritage Register (you can view the Tenants' Union's submission [here](#)). The action by the Heritage Council has revealed a [rift between government agencies](#), as reported in the Daily Telegraph:

FACS wants to sell the building to raise money for more social housing, just as it has with several other Millers Point public housing properties, and said it was preparing its own submission to the Heritage Council. An Office of Environment and Heritage spokeswoman said: "Listing on the State Heritage Register does not prevent the sale or transfer of a property."

Ponder ... the real agenda at Millers Point is to free up housing stock around [Barangaroo](#) for gentrification and to create a Paris Quarter ... a touch of Montmartre. Of course, this must be seen in the context of the development of the [casino being built](#) on the same site.

So, what has happened to the residents?

By mid-September 2015 approximately 95 to 96 properties remained tenanted, with 130 to 135 residents still holding on. Most of the others have moved voluntarily, but for many the move was under duress. Shelter NSW's newsletter [Around The House \(No. 101\)](#) documents some of these in the article 'When older people are forced to move' (see from page 18):

Once upon a time the inner-city areas were seen as slums and we aspired to live in the suburbs. Now this is reversed; and former inner-city areas are being transformed into exclusive enclaves of wealth and opportunity. In a search for new funds for public housing, the State Government is cashing in on this gentrification in an attempt to generate dollars. All public housing tenants in The Rocks, Millers Point and Dawes Point at the northern eastern edge of Sydney's CBD have been told they must leave. The government's excuse is that these properties are too valuable to retain for public housing and too expensive to repair.

As a consequence, Myra faces eviction. She is 88 years old and blind and has lived in the Millers Point community since 1959. Through her own determination and with the support of those around her, she is able to lead an active and independent life. Myra is a volunteer church and community worker and an inspiration to the people who know her. The State Government wants to 'relocate' Myra away from the only place she knows. If Myra is forced to leave, she will lose her independence.

Richard is a single chap in his 80s. Recently he signed papers to move to Newtown because his greatest fear was that they'd dump him in Campbelltown. He's been in Millers Point for over 60 years and worked in the bond stores. Richard moves slowly now and has to stop regularly for breath. But others in Millers Point keep an eye on him. He tells people that if I fall over in the street at Newtown, they'll step over me because no-one knows me ... or rob me. I know if I fall over in the street here, my friends and neighbours will look after me.

Just one week after telling this story, Richard fell over in Kent Street. Locals rushed to his assistance and he was carted off to hospital where friends and neighbours visited him. The pressure and worry has become too much for Richard and he moved just a few weeks ago.

Over recent months, social media has run stories about Myra ... and also Mary Vo, Flo and other older residents of Millers Point facing eviction. Read all their stories [here](#). On the [ABC's Open Drum](#) the uniqueness of Millers Point is penned very poignantly by the daughter of another resident.

One local resident is documenting the impact of forced relocation on the tenants. She writes: "Amidst Housing NSW's glossy brochures and promises of better opportunities in a new home, Millers Point residents have heard many stories that tell a different tale about what being relocated is really like. Some were initially positive about moving, and for others the idea was palatable as they were hoping for a house without steps or somewhere bigger, to be closer to family or with a yard for their dog.

"But even for these people, it seems, forced eviction has been a very negative experience. The new house often has problems, apparent only after moving in; and some have been surprised at what it means to be in a place where no one knows your name. For those for whom Millers Point was very important for their well-being it seems that it has been at best traumatic, sad and a massive change, resulting in unexpected new stresses and loss. At worst it has resulted in tragedy."

She goes on: "We have seen a dramatic spike in hospitalisations, serious injury and illness and, indeed, the process is killing people as predicted. Within weeks of the announcement an elderly neighbour who was somewhat reclusive but functioning well, having lived with her son in Millers Point for over 30 years, took her life. A woman who had been battling cancer for some time and living in a house with mould that Housing NSW never remedied was moved out of her home on the Wednesday, went to hospital on the Friday and died on the Monday. We have lost at least three others ..."

A film by Blue Lucine and produced by Helen Barrow and Tom Zubrycki entitled 'Millers Point: Community or Commodity?' was released at Parliament House on Thursday, 19 March 2015 and documents the struggle of the residents. You may view a clip [here](#).

The Millers Point Public Housing Working Party (check [here](#) and [here](#)) has been waging a valiant campaign to save some of the housing stock for the older and long term residents. The Working Party have the support of Alex Greenwich who is their local Independent MP, many in the Australian Labor Party and The Greens, but, also very importantly, Reverend Fred Nile, leader of the Christian Democratic Party and a key member of the current NSW Legislative Council.

The Working Party organised a [report](#) by SGS Economic Planning which provides an alternative way forward and submitted this to the NSW Government. They are asking, at the very least, that the workers' flats be retained as public housing. They are also supported by the [Friends of Millers Point](#) group. Amongst its patrons are the likes of Jack Munday, Eva Cox and Anthony Albanese.

Inner Sydney Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service, auspiced by [Redfern Legal Centre](#), with the support of City of Sydney, has been running a service for tenants affected by the relocation. Since the service began in May 2014, advocates have assisted over 160 tenants, providing advice about their rights, attending interviews and inspections with FACS Housing, and helping to prepare correspondence and appeals. Read more about this [here](#).

Following the NSW State Elections on 28 March of this year, residents had some hope that things would change, because a new Minister for Social Housing, the Hon. Brad Hazzard MP, was [talking to the residents](#). Previous Ministers had declined to take up the invitation. However, negotiations are moving very slowly and the FACS Housing Relocation Team is still going 'full steam ahead' in asking the remaining tenants to move out. In the meanwhile, Minister Hazzard is [reported as saying](#) that he supports a mix of social and affordable housing in developments of public land involving private developers. Only time will tell if he believes that this should apply in Millers Point.

The sale of properties in Millers Point and The Rocks remains an important topic of discussion in the NSW Parliament. In May of this year Alex Greenwich, Member for Sydney, submitted a series of questions to Minister Hazzard about the welfare of tenants being relocated. You can read Mr Greenwich's questions, as well as the brief responses the Minister provided, [here](#). And on the last day

of August of this year, as part of the Budget Estimates process, the Legislative Council's Standing Committee No. 1, submitted 22 questions to Minister Hazzard.

While his [answers](#) were far from comprehensive - referring, for instance, to the soon-to-be-published 2014-15 FACS Annual Reports - he did report that 99 new housing units funded through the sale of properties are underway in suburbs outside of the City of Sydney. He also clarified that no funds from the sale of properties at Millers Point have been ploughed back into the City of Sydney local government area, or the nearby inner-western suburbs of Sydney. But, overall, the 2015 Budget Estimates process has done little to assure tenants and other interested parties that the NSW Government welcomes scrutiny over its sale of public housing in Millers Point and The Rocks.

Back to our text from Exodus 20:17. A great injustice will have been perpetuated if the remaining residents of Millers Point, many of whom are elderly, are required to leave their homes and Millers Point becomes an enclave of the wealthy. The NSW Government must pull back from enticing others to covet their neighbour's house.