

Once around 'the Block' in Sydney

Contributed by Dr Tony Gilmour, CEO, Housing Action Network.

My home neighbourhood of Redfern, on the edge of inner-city Sydney, is seldom out of the news. In 1993, Prime Minister Keating delivered the Redfern Park Speech, often held to be one of the greatest in Australia history. He said: "We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice."

The most infamous corner of Redfern is 'the Block'. Following the eviction of Aboriginal tenants by white landlords in the early 1970s, the Whitlam Government funded the Aboriginal Housing Company to buy houses. While the move provided much-needed affordable housing, over time, the area declined. By the 1990s, drugs and violence had become the norm. Tabloid newspapers and shock-jocks railed against the Block and, implicitly, urban Aboriginal culture.

Mundine the battler

For 30 years, Mick Mundine has been the driving force behind the Aboriginal Housing Company. Mick is a battler from a family of battlers. His brother Tony is a boxer, and he is uncle to former world boxing champion Anthony Mundine.

I was somewhat daunted at the prospect of meeting Mick, but his disarming candour put me at ease. We chatted about us both living in Redfern, and Mick's elevation to life membership of the Australasian Housing Institute. The conversation shifted to politics and planning.

For a decade, the Aboriginal Housing Company shadow-danced with the Labor State Government over redeveloping the Block. Plans were drawn up and committees established. The relationship eventually soured, hitting a low in 2005 when the Minister for Redfern-Waterloo, Frank Sartor, told Mundine on Koori Radio to "bring his black arse in" to see him. An apology did not heal the rift. Mundine remains convinced the government wanted to move Aboriginal people out of the area to pave the way for massive residential and commercial development.

Warrior spirit?

The irony is that to preserve cultural identity in Redfern, the Aboriginal Housing Company began, from the mid-2000s, to adopt the way of the white fellas and become a property developer. The 'Pemulwuy Project' will provide 62 affordable rental homes for Aboriginal people on the Block. Appropriately, Pemulwuy was the name of the Gadigal warrior who fought the invasion of the English settlers.

Beyond providing housing for Aboriginal people, the \$60 million project will "beautify the community and change the image of Redfern" (to use Mundine's phrase). Artists' impressions of the finished project show a neighbourhood full of pavement cafés, happy cyclists and grand vistas. No longer will Redfern be Sydney's ugly backyard.



As with so many visionary schemes, the devil is in the detail. While state government provided some seed funding and approved the concept plan in 2009, detailed planning consents have not been granted, and there has been a surprising level of community opposition. Funding remains a problem.

Success with a competitive bid under the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) is positive, though will only generate just over \$6 million. According to Mundine, the banks will not fund the massive shortfall, despite high land values that can be offered as security. Furthermore, efforts to transform the Aboriginal Housing Company into a contemporary 'growth' community housing organisation have stalled. Registration has been refused, to date, due to non-compliance with a variety of procedural issues.

Café society

In Redfern, the march of gentrification is palpable. Latte society looks set to engulf the Block.

What should be the role of an Aboriginal housing organisation? Unless government funds the Aboriginal Housing Company, there will need to be a partnership with a private developer or a commercial community housing provider. It will be hard to prevent dilution of the Company's distinctive values.

Although Australia's expansion of the community housing sector has been impressive over the last decade, the approach could be characterised as 'one size fits all'. Organisations receiving capital funding have to professionalise, build development capacity, and raise private finance. But this may not work for the Aboriginal Housing Company. Perhaps, after all, there are schemes that still require traditional full-grant funding, with Aboriginal people responsible for tenancy management and community development.