

# “It was like leaving your family”: Gentrification and the impacts of displacement on public housing tenants in inner-Sydney

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## Abstract

In March 2014, the minister responsible announced that all of the approximately 600 public housing tenants of Millers Point and the Sirius Building in inner Sydney are to be moved and the properties sold. Millers Point is probably the oldest public housing area in Australia. The Sirius Building was purpose built for public housing tenants in the late 1970s. The article briefly examines the gentrification process in the Millers Point area. However, the main focus, drawing on six in-depth interviews with public housing tenants who are still residents in the area and 13 who have moved, is an examination of the impact of the government's removal announcement and the actual displacement of residents. What this article illustrates is that the place attachment of most of the interviewees was profound and the removal announcement and the actual move were devastating. Interviewees spoke of deep sadness and anxiety at the thought of leaving what they considered a unique and genuine community. Residents who had moved told of their isolation and melancholy at having lost their local social network. The research shows that the human cost of policies and not revenue should always be the central consideration.

## KEYWORDS

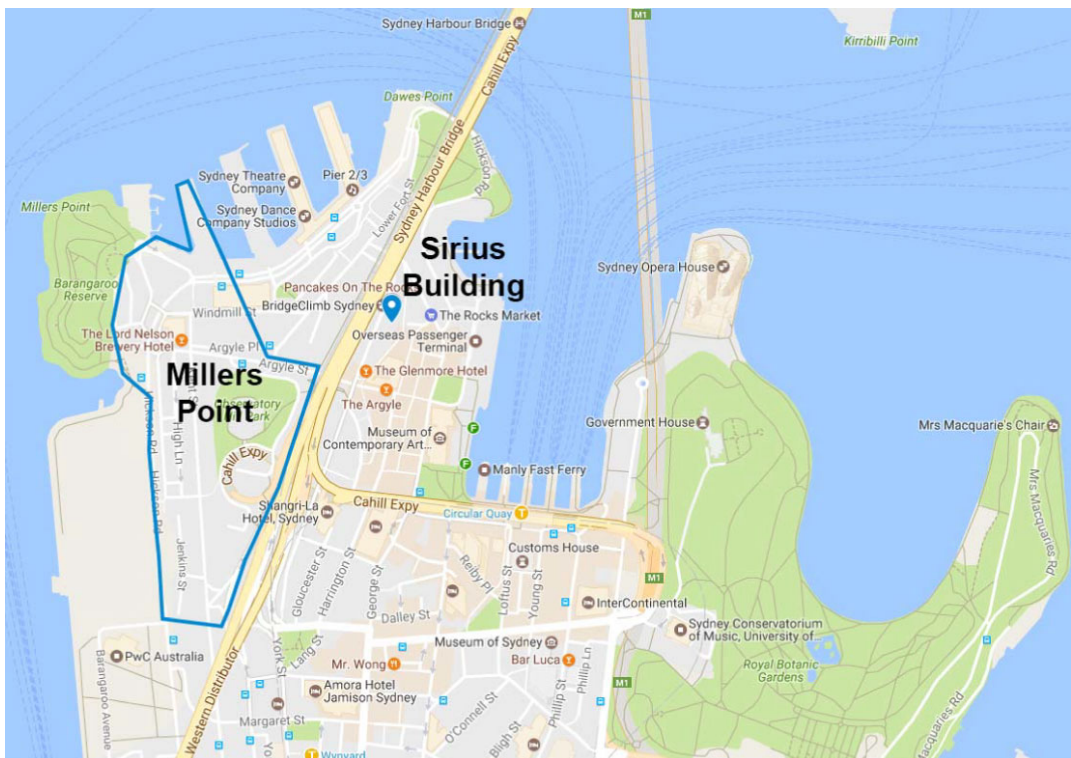
displacement, gentrification, Millers Point, place attachment, public housing, Sydney

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In March 2014, the New South Wales (NSW) Minister<sup>1</sup> responsible for public housing called a press conference to announce that all of the 214 public housing properties (some of the properties had a number of dwellings) in Millers Point and the 79 apartments in The Sirius Building<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 1) were to be sold on the open market and the approximately 600 tenants moved to public housing in other areas. The move was to be completed in two years and was expected to realise at least \$500 million (Hasham 2014). The announcement represented an unprecedented policy shift. I argue that for the first time in Australia, gentrification was to result in the forced displacement of a whole neighbourhood of public housing tenants by a state government, the blanket removal of tenants from an apartment block, The Sirius Building purpose built for public housing tenants and only completed in 1980, and the dispersal of the tenants to a number of areas with no possibility of return. This is unlike the usual displacement of public housing tenants in Australia where the focus has been on deconcentration, an endeavour to create social mix and displacing only a proportion of or no tenants permanently (Arthurson 2012; Arthurson & Darcy 2015).

The main focus of this article is not on the causes of this policy shift, but rather on the impacts the removal threat and actual forced displacement have had on the public housing tenants from Millers Point and the Sirius Building through the state-led gentrification process. This study, drawing mainly on 19 in-depth interviews with present and ex-tenants, examines the devastating impacts and contributes to the limited research on the topic (Atkinson 2004; Newman & Wylie 2006; Atkinson et al. 2011; Twigge-Molecey 2014). In addition, it suggests that the wholesale

**FIGURE 1** Map showing location of Millers Point and the Sirius Building



removal of public housing tenants from Millers Point and from the Sirius Building represents a new phase of state-led gentrification in Australia. Historically, public housing has been a bulwark against gentrification in Australia and elsewhere (Shaw 2005; Ley & Dobson 2008). The actions of the deeply neo-liberal NSW government suggest that in Australia this is no longer the case.

The article first reviews the research on gentrification, displacement and its impacts. It then contextualises the study, briefly sketching the history of Millers Point and the Sirius Building. The build-up to the announcement that the public housing tenants are to be moved is then discussed and the methodology for the study outlined. This is followed by the main part of the article. Drawing on the in-depth interviews, it first examines the impact of the minister's announcement that all of the public housing tenants were to be moved and then investigates the consequences for tenants who have moved.

## 2 | GENTRIFICATION, DISPLACEMENT AND ITS IMPACTS

Gentrification involves the transformation of an area from a predominantly working class low-income locale to a middle class or high-income locality (Marcuse 1985; Lees et al. 2008; Butler & Hamnett 2009; Slater 2009). It is linked to globalisation and major shifts in the economy — a central feature being deindustrialisation, i.e. a shift from manufacturing to services in advanced economies (Smith 1986; Bounds & Morris 2006). There is also a strong cultural and aesthetic dimension. Gentrification usually involves the reimagining of an area that historically was not viewed as desirable by the middle classes (Zukin 1987; Watt 2008). The inward movement of the middle classes to these historically low-income areas is accompanied by the refurbishment of old homes and the establishment of new outlets for consumption geared towards residents with substantial disposable income (Zukin 1987; Hamnett 2003; Butler & Hamnett 2009). These activities can certainly revitalise areas that have declined significantly in regards to housing, population and facilities (Hamnett 2003). In Sydney, an example of this phenomenon was the revitalisation of Pymont-Ultimo in the 1990s when federal, state and local government combined forces with developers to revive the fortunes of the area (see Bounds & Morris 2006). State-led gentrification has become a central driving force of gentrification in more recent times as economic restructuring and inter-city global competition for investment and revenue intensifies (Lees et al. 2008; Watt 2008).

### 2.1 | Gentrification and displacement

Gentrification invariably also has adverse consequences. In most cases, it is accompanied by the displacement of long-established low-income residents (Marcuse 1985; Newman & Wyly 2006; Slater 2009). In his seminal analysis of gentrification and what he labelled “revanchist urbanism”, Smith (1996: xviii) concludes that:

*“Revanchist urbanism . . . embodies a revengeful and reactionary viciousness against various populations accused of ‘stealing’ the city from the white upper classes. Gentrification, far from an aberration of the 1980s, is increasingly reemerging as part of this revanchism, an effort to retake the city”.*

In the 20 years since Smith wrote this, neoliberalism and gentrification have become a lot deeper and globally pervasive (Lees et al. 2008; Jou et al. 2016).

The process of displacement can take a range of forms and usually involves low-income, long-standing households being placed in situations that makes it exceptionally difficult if not impossible for them to retain their footing in the area concerned (Hartman et al. 1982; Marcuse 1985; Newman & Wyly 2006). In the case of private renters in a lightly regulated private rental sector or what Kemeny (2006) has called a dualist rental market, untenable rent increases or eviction by the landlord is not unusual. In an area undergoing gentrification, a lack of rent control will almost certainly result in rents being increased to untenable levels for low-income households. This is due to increased demand and the influx of high-income households who have the means and are prepared to pay high rents to reside in what is perceived to be a highly desirable neighbourhood (Marcuse 1985; Paccoud 2015). Alternatively, the increase in land values makes it far more likely that landlords will embark on renovations or sell their property to high-income incomers. In their study of gentrification in Melbourne and Sydney, Atkinson et al. (2011) conclude that the “most vulnerable of the residents being displaced ... are private renters either in lower status occupations or not in the labour force” (Atkinson et al. 2011: 2). In the interviews they conducted with displaced residents “the main issue raised ... was the link that they made between increasing numbers of high-income households and subsequent, often dramatic, rent increases that made their tenure unsustainable” (Atkinson et al. 2011: 3).

As mentioned, historically public housing tenants have been spared displacement in the gentrification process; governments have been reluctant to forcibly displace public housing tenants. Freeman and Braconi (2004: 51) conclude that public housing has the advantage of “anchoring ... [public housing tenants] to gentrifying neighbourhoods”. What is noteworthy about long-established public housing tenants in New South Wales is that *de jure* their security of tenure is virtually guaranteed (Fitzpatrick & Pawson 2014) and they cannot be forced to move by increasing their rent as their rent is fixed at 25% of income. Any displacement of public housing tenants thus requires direct pressure by the government housing authority. The displacement of public housing tenants on such a massive scale by the NSW government and the selling off of their homes on the private market, does appear to represent a new phase in the gentrification process in Australia. As neoliberalism and the fixation with balancing the budget intensifies, the public assets that are acceptable to privatise expands (see Levy 2012).

## 2.2 | Gentrification, the impact of displacement and place attachment

Research on the impacts of displacement due to gentrification indicates that for the households affected it is often traumatic (Hartman et al. 1982; LeGates & Hartman 1986; Atkinson 2004; Atkinson et al. 2011). A major challenge for low-income private renters is finding a new home that is adequate and affordable (Atkinson et al. 2011; Murdie & Teixeira 2011). They often find they have to move to inadequate or overcrowded housing or to areas far from their original home where they have no social networks (Newman & Wyly 2006; Atkinson et al. 2011). Atkinson et al. (2011: 47) found that a number of the interviewees in their study had suffered “serial displacement” due to rent increases in the areas they had moved to and that “this kind of serial migration clearly posed major psycho-social problems for those affected”. Private renters, especially if they are older, are sometimes forced to move in with children (Newman & Wyly 2006). In New York City, some displaced have landed up in homeless shelters (Newman & Wyly 2006).

Displacement can evoke a feeling of grief and anger as residents are forced out of their homes and familiar neighbourhoods (Chan 1986; Marris 1986; Slater 2009). Older displaced residents are particularly vulnerable. A Swedish study of 22,579 people, 65 and older, found that for older

people moving residence did not necessarily have any adverse impacts. However, the forced or involuntary moving of older people for the purposes of “urban renewal” can lead to premature death: “the death rates among those who were evacuated or moved permanently due to urban renewal were higher than among non-movers and among those who moved for other reasons” (Danermark et al. 1996: 217).

A key concept utilised in this study to explore the impact of displacement is place attachment. As Manzo et al. (2008: 1856) conclude in their review of gentrification and displacement in the United States, “Among the most notable impacts is the disruption of the community ties and place attachments that are at the foundation of well-functioning communities”. Despite globalisation and mobility, local ties continue to be crucial in many neighbourhoods (Robinson 2009). Place attachment helps us understand the trauma that Millers Point/Sirius Building tenants experienced in the aftermath of the announcement and after moving, as it refers not only to the attachment to the neighbourhood and physical setting but also to fellow residents and the way of life in the area concerned (see Alawadi 2016). Social ties are a key feature of place attachment and invariably the stronger the social ties in a neighbourhood, the stronger the place attachment (Kohlbacher et al. 2015). Certainly, in the case of Millers Point and the Sirius Building the place attachment and social ties of many tenants were extremely strong. Shumaker and Taylor (1983: 233) define place attachment as “a positive affective bond or association between individuals and their residential environment” and it goes hand-in-hand with a perceived strong sense of community (Scannell & Gifford 2010). When the bond between the individual and the residential environment is broken due to displacement, the implications can be deeply distressing as it means that they lose crucial social ties and a way of life (Alawadi 2016). This is especially so in the case of low-income more vulnerable individuals and households (Atkinson et al. 2011).

### 3 | THE CONTEXT

Millers Point is recognised as the oldest public housing area in Australia (Fitzgerald & Keating 1991). Most of the dwellings are terrace homes (the high density and physical structure of the area facilitated close contact between residents) built for workers who worked on the docks at the turn of the century. Many tenants have a relationship to the area that goes back three or even four generations (Fitzgerald & Keating 1991; Mazzoldi 2014). The homes were built and managed by the Maritime Services Board.<sup>3</sup> (MSB) and tenancies were passed down through families. The continuity and homogeneity of the residents contributed towards the creation of a strong and unique working-class community and intense place attachment as outlined in the assessment of significance linked to Millers Point being declared a heritage site in 1999. The assessment states:

*“Its public housing and its development into a Government corporate town were probably the first such developments in Australia . . . It is occupied in part by descendants of its earlier communities and retains a strong community spirit . . . Its unity, authenticity of fabric and community, and complexity of significant activities and events make it probably the rarest and most significant historic urban place in Australia”.*  
(NSW Government 1999)

In the mid-1980s, the MSB handed the homes to the government housing authority and the inter-generational transfer of homes was halted. At the time of the announcement in 2014, there were approximately 580 public housing tenants in Millers Point in 293 dwellings — the total population of Millers Point was just over 1000. Nearly half of the tenants were aged over 60,

20% had been in Millers Point for more than 20 years and about 45% had been in the area for less than 10 years (Reilly 2013; Mowbray 2017).

In the 1970s, the neighbouring area, The Rocks, faced redevelopment and the removal of public housing tenants but major community resistance and the Green Bans halted the destruction (Darcy & Rogers 2016). The Green Bans refers to the decision by the NSW Builders Labourers Federation not to allow any of its members to engage in the redevelopment plans for the area. However, prior to the Green Bans a number of public housing dwellings were demolished and in 1975 the Sydney Cove Development Authority agreed to rehouse the displaced public housing tenants in a newly constructed building, the Sirius Building in The Rocks (Pickett 2013). In 1980, the Sirius Building with 79 apartments was completed. It was designed in consultation with potential tenants and is viewed as a superb example of brutalist, modernist architecture providing high-quality public housing for older tenants, single parents and families. It has a variety of apartments so as to encourage a mix of tenants and meeting rooms and common areas to facilitate the creation of a community. In 2016, the Heritage Council unanimously recommended that the Sirius Building be given heritage status, the chairperson commenting that the Council based its decision on the “aesthetic significance” of the building and that “It had a rarity for social housing buildings for this particular period” (McNally & Code 2016).

#### **4 | GENTRIFICATION AND THE BUILD-UP TO THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT PUBLIC HOUSING TENANTS IN MILLERS POINT AND THE SIRIUS BUILDING WERE TO BE MOVED**

The build-up to the NSW government’s announcement in March 2014 that all of the public housing tenants in Millers Point were to be moved, was premised on five inter-related phenomena — a dramatic increase in land/house prices in inner-city areas in Sydney, deindustrialisation, decline/abandonment, a substantial increase in luxury developments/gentrification and a fervent neo-liberal government determined to privatise public assets wherever possible. Like many other major cities in advanced economies, Sydney has experienced a dramatic increase in house prices relative to incomes. In 1985, the average home was about 3.5 times average annual earnings, in 2015 it was 11.4 times (Wade 2015). In Sydney, the closer homes are to the Central Business District (CBD) and harbour, the more in demand and expensive the area. Millers Point and The Rocks are within a short walking distance of Sydney’s iconic Sydney Harbour bridge, the Sydney Opera House and the CBD (see Figure 1) and have become two of the most expensive and sought-after areas. The 130 properties sold in Millers Point by March 2017 had realised a total of \$370 million, with an average selling price of \$2.846 million (NSW Government 2017).

The gentrification process in Millers Point began in earnest in the late 1990s when the Maritime Services Board gave the go ahead to two major construction companies to redevelop the Walsh Bay wharves into an upmarket residential, office and commercial area. The Walsh Bay wharves are located at the foot of Millers Point and are the wharves where most of the males in Millers Point laboured for much of the 20th century. The wharves thrived mainly on the back of the wool trade but by the 1970s were no longer functioning. The \$650 million development, completed in 2004, made Walsh Bay one of the most upmarket and expensive areas in Sydney.

An ominous development for the public housing tenants was the announcement in 2009 that Lend Lease, Australia’s largest construction company, had won the right to develop Barangaroo, the 22 hectare site that was the former port adjacent to Millers Point. The area was to be

redeveloped as a high-end office, hotel, entertainment and residential precinct. A casino/hotel that will be Sydney's tallest building when completed, was a highly controversial late addition. The Barangaroo Development Authority, which is a part of the NSW government, has described the \$6 billion development as "one of the most ambitious urban renewal projects in the world today" (Barangaroo Development Authority 2016).

Millers Point borders and overlooks Barangaroo and it is likely that the key players involved in the development were keen that the public housing in sight of Barangaroo be removed or extensively renovated. This view is given much credence by the remarkable statement in October 2012 by the then NSW Finance Minister when he announced that the government was considering selling off public housing in Millers Point as the homes were perceived to be not compatible with the Barangaroo development:

*"Much of the Land and Housing Corporation's portfolio at Millers Point is poorly suited for social housing, being heritage-listed older houses which cannot be modified to meet modern requirements ... Inevitably, when considering the future of Millers Point, the government needs to consider it in the context of all of the surrounding areas, including the Barangaroo redevelopment area".*  
(in Tovey 2012)

The announcement in March 2014 that all of the public housing tenants were to be moved was thus not a total surprise. The government went to great lengths to justify the blanket displacement distributing a 17-page media package to journalists on the day of the announcement (Darcy & Rogers 2016). In her media release, the minister stated that the properties "will be sold, due to the cost of maintenance, significant investment required to improve properties to an acceptable standard, and high potential sale values" (Goward 2014). A key and powerful part of the government's legitimisation exercise was that the revenue accrued from the sale would be used to build 1,500 new social housing dwellings.

The most recent blow for the Millers Point/Sirius community (July, 2016) has been the decision by the NSW Environment Minister, to reject the request by the NSW Heritage Council for the Sirius Building to be heritage-listed (Muller 2016). The minister made it clear that the government's aim was to sell the building to a developer who would have the right to demolish the building and claimed that a heritage listing would diminish its value by \$70 million (Saulwick 2016).

By March 2017, despite an intense campaign by the tenants themselves and support from the City of Sydney council, the opposition Labour Party, The Greens and union support (see Darcy & Rogers 2016) about 540 tenants had moved and only around 40 tenants were left in Millers Point and the Sirius Building (Mowbray 2017). The government had succeeded in its quest to displace tenants through a multi-pronged strategy. The key strategy was a threat to terminate the public housing status of tenants if they refused two formal offers of alternative public housing accommodation (personal communication from Redfern Legal Centre). For most tenants, almost all were dependent on government benefits, surviving in the private rental market was unthinkable. Another strategy was to offer tenants pristine public housing in areas they wanted to move to (most were settled in areas within 10 km of the CBD), and the implicit threat that if they refused an offer they may lose the possibility of ultimately accessing decent, well-located accommodation. At the same time, it was evident that many of the homes in Millers Point were becoming difficult to live in due to the housing authority not carrying out basic maintenance. The government's "victory" was also made possible by the failure of the opposition to galvanise enough public support. The hegemony of a neo-liberal perspective meant that a large proportion of the citizenry felt that the public housing tenants in Millers and the Sirius Building had no

right to housing in such a sought-after area and it was time for them to move on.<sup>4</sup> The government's statement that the revenue generated would be used to build an additional 1,500 social housing dwellings certainly helped dissipate opposition.

## 5 | METHODOLOGY

The paper draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 residents (including one couple) who have moved from Millers Point and six residents who have thus far (September 2016) resisted the move. Interviewees were recruited with the assistance of the Redfern Legal Centre, the Millers Point Community Working Party, Friends of Millers Point and through word of mouth. Ethics permission was obtained through the Research & Innovation Office at the University of Technology Sydney.

In regards to the interviewees who have moved, seven were female and six male; three were under 50; three were between 50 and 64; four were between 65 and 70 and three were older than 85. Ten of the interviewees lived in single person households; two were partnered and only one household had dependent children. All of the residents interviewed who still lived in Millers Point or the Sirius Building were female and lived by themselves. The youngest was 63 and the oldest 89. Three of the interviews were phone interviews. The remainder were conducted face-to-face.

For residents who have moved away, the number of years that they resided in Millers Point/the Sirius Building, ranged from 2 to 63 years, with an average of 29 years. For those who are still residents in Millers Point/Sirius Building, the number of years that they have resided there ranges from 30 to 84 years, with an average of 63 years.

In the case of interviewees who had moved, the semi-structured interviews covered the following themes — accommodation in Millers Point, why they decided to move, everyday life in the new area compared to life in Millers Point, perceptions of the new area, accommodation in the new area, social ties in the new area, family support, the health impacts of the move and how residents saw the future. Interviewees who had not moved from Millers Point were asked about their history in Millers Point, perceptions of everyday life in Millers Point, their accommodation, social ties, the impact of the announcement that they would have to move, why they have decided to resist the move, the removal process and how they saw the future. The software package NVivo was used to organise the data.

## 6 | THE IMPACT ON PUBLIC HOUSING TENANTS OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT THEY WERE ALL TO BE MOVED

The focus is on the psychological distress the announcement evoked. In order to understand the impact, it is necessary to take cognisance of the strong sense of community and place attachment that have prevailed in both Millers Point and the Sirius Building historically. The longevity of residence, the homogeneity of the residents, the physical structure of the area and the design of the Sirius Building all combined to create the foundation for strong social ties, mutual assistance and intense place attachment. Many of the interviewees portrayed Millers Point “as like a family”.

Strong place attachment was especially so in the case of interviewees whose association with Millers Point went back three or even four generations. Age was also a major factor. In the case of older residents who had had a long association with the area, the announcement evoked enormous



anxiety and distress. Their place attachment was extremely strong and the thought of moving was shattering. Not only did they have strong social contacts, but the assistance of their neighbours for everyday tasks like shopping and assistance when ill, were often crucial. In contrast, tenants who had been in the area for a relatively short period of time and who did not have strong ties in the area generally had little problem moving. Their place attachment was minimal and the homes they were offered were usually in far better condition than their homes in Millers Point.

Noteworthy is that even some of the more recent residents found the announcement that they would have to move profoundly unsettling. They had developed strong social ties, “loved the community” and their place attachment was substantial.

The announcement evoked intense anxiety and stress amongst all of the interviewees. Tenants spoke about falling ill, hardly eating, difficulty sleeping, having to consult their doctor and a counsellor and becoming more and more reclusive following the announcement. A third generation Millers Point resident in her early sixties, spoke of her enormous distress in the days following the announcement:

*“Well I couldn’t eat or sleep for over a week. If I tried to eat, I was sick. At that time I was job searching. I had to take time off from that so I had to go and get a medical certificate . . . After that I had counselling cos I couldn’t handle it”.* (Cheryl)<sup>5</sup>

Cheryl felt that having spent her whole life in Millers Point, the expectation that she should now move was unacceptable. She has refused to move and in March 2017 was still living in the family home in Millers Point. Almost all of her neighbours had succumbed to the pressure imposed and had moved.

Joan, 68 years old at the time of the interview, had had a similar response to Cheryl. She had been living in the area for over 50 years and had been in her present home for 25 years. Her home was impeccable and it was evident that she had devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to making her home comfortable. Following a family tragedy when she was much younger, the community had given her enormous support. Her place attachment was intense:

*“I don’t think I’ve been the same person [since the announcement], emotionally you know. I’ve been a bit of a nervous wreck. I’ve been angry and can’t sleep. Been to the doctor . . . So you just think, ‘What’s life all about?’ So you have your depression and you have your sleeplessness and you have yeah, and all you seem to talk about when you run into anyone is all about this”.*

Like Cheryl, Joan has refused to move despite being put under enormous pressure by the state government’s housing authority.

Residents were extremely concerned that they would be separated from their community and placed in an area where they would not know anybody:

*“My daughter kept saying, ‘Well move’. I said, ‘I don’t want to move. I can’t move’. I said, ‘I wouldn’t know how to live anywhere else’”.* (Cheryl)

A central factor contributing to stress and anxiety was the uncertainty. Long-established tenants were placed in a situation where they had no idea what the future held. Neville and Marie had lived in the same house in Millers Point for 35 years:

*“It was at the time [just after the announcement] it really you know I went to the doctor and I got sleeping pills . . . I just couldn’t sleep at night you know thinking, ‘Where are we going to end up?’”* (Neville)

They decided that they would not be able to withstand the uncertainty and decided to move about six months after the announcement.

Margaret had lived and worked in Millers Point for 25 years. She worked at one of the pubs in Millers Point and her social connections were extensive. The thought of having to leave the area totally destabilised her. She became more and more reclusive and ultimately moved into her bedroom and lost her emotional attachment to her home and Millers Point:

*“That was home and then in the end they had me that way that I was just living in my bedroom. I wasn’t enjoying the house at all anymore . . . That’s how they got me in the end . . . Like it didn’t feel like home. In the end I didn’t want to be there. They just made it feel like it wasn’t mine anymore”.*

She moved about a year after the announcement.

The single women interviewed had strong place attachment. They spoke about how safe they felt in Millers Point and their intense fear of being moved to an unsafe situation:

*“But as I said, I mean it was my home. I loved living there. I felt really safe there and it [the announcement and subsequent pressures to move] was a completely traumatic experience . . . It took a real health toll. Not sleeping, unable to concentrate . . . I was smoking like a packet a day. I was smoking about eight a day before all that started . . . I’m normally a great sleeper. I was sleeping 3 hours a night . . . I couldn’t do anything. I became a bit obsessive at times like just anxious to the verge of panic attacks . . .”* (Carol)

Single parents thrived in Millers Point. Heather was a single parent with two children. She had received constant support from her neighbours after moving to Millers Point and had a great affection for the area. The announcement precipitated serious depression:

*“After the announcement . . . for 2 weeks I just remember I didn’t want to get out of the house [but] I had to . . . It was like a grey cloud literally. It felt like, everything is so grey. And then I thought of harming myself, of doing something drastic and I thought I’ve got to make sure that I let people know why . . .”*

## 7 | THE IMPACT OF BEING FORCED TO MOVE FROM MILLERS POINT

As mentioned, for residents whose place attachment was minimal, moving from the area was not necessarily an issue. However, for almost all of the interviewees who had a strong connection to the area, displacement has been a harrowing experience. The key consequences of displacement were anxiety, depression, loneliness and a profound sadness at the loss of community. Interviewees felt that in Millers Point they were part of a community. They had regular social contact and social connections they could rely on. Overnight these were stripped away: “It was like leaving your

family” (David, 86 years old). David had lived in the Millers Point area for 68 years. He desperately missed the companionship he had had and the social assistance. When he was ill, neighbours would bring him food and ensure he was okay. Not surprisingly, his place attachment was deep:

*“It [Millers Point] was like one big family. Everyone knew everyone and if anyone was sick they’d help out and if you didn’t see someone in the traps or in the street they’d be asking how they are . . . I found it very good in Kent Street. You sit out there and read the paper and people would come past and have a yap and all that . . . Just being able to walk down the street to the pub and you always know someone there. Have a couple of drinks, walk around the streets and bump into someone . . . Yeah. You could always go down the road and meet someone to talk to . . . We each knew each other’s interests and you knew what to talk about. Those friendships build up over time. It doesn’t happen overnight”.*

I asked David how his friends who had moved from Millers Point were faring. He emphasised the loneliness of their situation:

*“They miss Millers Point. They’re all isolated like me. Like Peter knows no one where he is. He says people that live around him they swap ‘Good mornings’ and that’s about it”.*

The loss of community was a persistent theme. Almost all of the interviewees viewed Millers Point as a genuine and unique community where people watched out for one another:

*“Millers Point . . . they accepted you there. I don’t know. It was just a really good, strong community. They looked after each other there and you know a lot of us talk about each other and everything but everyone was there to help”.* (Margaret)

Asked what she missed about Millers Point, Carol responded,

*“The community, the community feel. That’s the main thing and the characters that were down there. You know it’s [the area she has moved to] just nothing. It’s a ghost town”.*

The loss of community was deeply felt by Wendy who lived on her own:

*“I miss being able to walk out the front door and know people. I feel a lot more lonely . . . I wanted a nice place, but I also just wanted a bit, like you say before to be connected. I got a beautiful place, but I’m not connected. . . . It [Millers Point] was a comfortable place. I never felt lonely”.*

Marie reflected on everyday life in Millers Point compared to her situation:

*“People don’t mix [in the area they had moved to] . . .you know . . . [In Millers Point] you couldn’t walk out the door without bumping into somebody you know and you’d say, ‘Look, I’ve really got to go. I’ve been talking to you for half an hour’. You don’t have that here”.*

Barry was 90 when he was moved from Millers Point. He had lived in the area since 1954 and had moved into the Sirius Building in 1980. He had no social ties in the area he had been moved to and desperately missed the few social contacts he had had in the Sirius Building:

*“When you are old you can’t make friends with young people. I understand it because I have seen it many times. And the old people? Well, they have their own way . . . A good relationship with someone of your age, it’s very hard. And when I left Sirius a few people of my age or a little bit younger but they’re gone so I’m on my own and here there’s no one . . . No, I’m on my own here. I think there won’t be any connection . . . or you know someone who you can trust”.*

Like other older displaced tenants, the government housing authority gave Barry no support after he moved.

A number of the interviewees found that the loss of community precipitated anxiety and depression. Carol, who was in her early 50s and single, found the move particularly difficult:

*“And then when I got here kind of I was happy to leave Millers Point by that stage because I just wanted to put all the stress behind me. But then I got here and I just went you know, I just got really depressed when I moved in here. I’m just starting to emerge from it now. I’ve been here 4 months . . . It’s been awful. I really felt completely traumatised . . . I think you go through a grieving process once you leave . . . It’s just really sad”.*

## 8 | CONCLUSIONS

The interviews clearly showed that the human cost of displacement through gentrification is potentially dramatic, especially in an area where many of the residents have strong place attachment. This is especially so in the case of older residents who have lived in the same neighbourhood for most or all of their lives. Many of the older residents who had moved from Millers Point/the Sirius Building lost their familiar neighbourhood, home and social ties. Their limited mobility made it extremely difficult for them to retain social ties over distance. The result was dangerous levels of isolation. As Danermark et al. (1996) illustrate, forced displacement of older people is potentially life-threatening. However, it was not only the older residents who found the move traumatic. Younger interviewees also spoke about feeling traumatised after the removal announcement and their subsequent move.

The residents who have resisted the move have for the moment retained their homes and some social ties but the pressure on them is intense as the authorities continue to pressurise them to vacate. There is an underlying fear that they may lose their public housing status if they continue to resist. Their resistance is premised on strong place attachment and a perception that Millers Point/the Sirius Building is a central core of their lives. They are deeply fearful of the implications of being moved.

If the current selling trend continues, it is estimated that the sale will realise about \$680 million, about \$180 million more than the government’s initial projection of \$500 million. Tenants have posed the obvious questions — why can the government not use some of this largesse to repair the public housing dwellings in Millers Point and allow those residents who want to remain in their homes, to stay? Another crucial question is why is the building of more public housing dependent on the sale of public housing in Millers Point and the Sirius Building? This question is made more pertinent in light of the NSW government’s budget surplus of \$3.4 billion dollars in 2015–2016 and the substantial revenue from stamp duty (stamp duty is accrued from house sales) — \$8.9 billion in 2016–2017 (Nicholls 2016).

The critical theorists warned of the implications of only utilising “instrumental reason” in the formulation of policy, arguing that you need to always take account of the human cost of any policy implementation. As Brenner (2009: 202) states, “They argued against the societal generalisation of a means–ends rationality oriented towards the purposive-rational . . . an efficient linking of means to ends, without interrogation of the ends themselves.” As illustrated, in the case of Millers Point and the Sirius Building, the focus primarily on the revenue that the sale of the public housing stock will generate has resulted in enormous suffering.

Fainstein (2010) defines a just city as a city that is premised on democratic decision-making, the maintenance of diversity and social mix and the minimisation of inequality. The displacement of Millers Point residents has been a profoundly undemocratic process. There was no prior discussion with residents and subsequent requests for a genuine dialogue and compromise have been largely ignored.<sup>6</sup> The move will exacerbate the already deep and growing spatial divide between rich and poor in Sydney and the social mix that was a feature of Millers Point will be obliterated along with its rich history. A major concern is that in this age of deepening neo-liberalism, the Millers Point/Sirius Building displacement could be the start of a major state government offensive against public housing tenants in other sought after gentrifying/gentrified areas.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Australia has three levels of government — federal, state and local. Sydney is located in New South Wales. The New South Wales state government is responsible for policy around public housing in Sydney and for major urban projects.

<sup>2</sup> Cred Community Planning was commissioned by the Land and Housing Corporation which is part of Family and Community Services to conduct a study into the impact that the sale of Millers Point would have on residents. The Sirius Building was never part of the Social Impact Assessment (Reilly 2013). Social housing properties included in the sale include a number in Dawes Point and The Rocks which are adjacent suburbs. When people talk of Millers Point, they often include the area of Dawes Point.

<sup>3</sup> The Maritime Services Board was formerly known as the Sydney Harbour Trust established in 1900. Its main function was to manage Sydney Harbour. The wharves around Millers Point were a central part of the Sydney Harbour and homes were built for the workers and their families.

<sup>4</sup> This was evident from the comments of readers in response to opinion pieces on Millers Point in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the most liberal Sydney daily newspaper.

<sup>5</sup> All the names used are pseudonyms.

<sup>6</sup> In November 2015, the government agreed to renovate existing stock in Millers Point and create 28 apartments (24 were one-bedroom, one is two-bedroom and three are three-bedroom) to accommodate Millers Point residents who are refusing to move. However, most of the residents had moved at the time of this announcement and most of those still in Millers Point felt that the units were too small and not suitable for older, more frail residents. By August 2016, only 13 of the units had been occupied.

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