

Gentrification or marginalisation? Indigenous residents split over Redfern plan

A proposed Pemulwuy Project extension would give the Block a 16-storey student complex leaving just 62 homes for the community it was meant to serve



Two men walk past a wall painted with the Aboriginal flag in Redfern's Block, home to the first urban Indigenous land rights claim in Australia. Photograph: Paul Miller/AAP

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In the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern, residents, developers and Indigenous activists are pondering a drastic change to the skyline.

The suburb's historic Block – the first urban Indigenous land rights claim in Australia – has been earmarked for a dramatic new extension to an already contentious development, which some residents say will hasten the gentrification of a suburb with a strong Indigenous history.

Under a proposal lodged late last year by the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC), the site will accommodate a student accommodation complex of 16 storeys and more than 500 dwellings, in what the City of Sydney called a “significant departure” from previously approved plans.



An artist's impression of the proposed student accommodation complex to be included in the Pemulwuy Project at The Block in Redfern. Photograph: Supplied

When the Pemulwuy Project was first approved in 2012, it was capped at six storeys, yet it drew an intense and prolonged protest. In 2014, activists occupied the site with a tent embassy, demanding more social and affordable housing for the suburb's long-term residents.

The standoff was ended with a \$5m pledge from the Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, to fund the construction of 62 affordable homes.

But the AHC chairwoman, Alisa Tutuila, said government funding has stalled, and with no proposed increase in the number of low-rent homes, opponents of the \$70m development say the new plans will accelerate change in Redfern.

“They’re acting as a private developer not a community organisation,” said tent embassy organiser and Wiradjuri elder Jenny Munro. “If they can build 500 housing places for students, they could build a lot more houses for our people. This is being driven by profit, and that’s the problem. The community misses out badly.”



Wiradjuri elder and Redfern resident Jenny Munro at the Block's tent embassy in 2014. Photograph: Dean Lewins/AAP

The University of Sydney students' representative council's student housing officer, Jenna Schroder, said it was "disappointing the project has not seen an increase in the number of affordable dwellings for Indigenous residents".

"The Pemulwuy Project offers nothing special or affordable for students with its rent prices, preying on the international student market like many residential buildings in the area," she said.

But Tutuila said the proposed increase in student housing was the only feasible way to deliver low-rent homes.



A boy walks past a sign at the Redfern Aboriginal tent embassy in 2015. Photograph: Paul Miller/AAP

“There has been no specific government funding to cover the entire precinct of affordable housing. The \$5m grant is actually still in negotiations with the minister’s office, and in saying that, doesn’t cover the whole cost,” she said.

“That’s why we had to re-engineer this model, so it will allow us to yield off the extra height to build the affordable housing and the commercial precinct at once. The revenue from this model will allow us to build more affordable housing and future developments in the Sydney area.”

A letter from the AHC to the New South Wales Department of Planning and Environment put the blame on “insufficient funds [from] the various levels of government and philanthropists”, saying the AHC was “required” to fund the project with other means.

The AHC has owned the land around the Block since 1973 and Tutuila said she is “very confident we have overwhelming community support – both from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities”.

But Munro said she had been “excluded” from the process. She confirmed she would be making a submission to the council opposing the development and urged other members of the Aboriginal community to do the same.

The NSW planning department said the AHC had been issued environment assessment requirements for the project, which would require it to justify the proposed scale.

If the project receives more than 25 objections after it is put on public display, or if the council objects, the department will refer it to the independent Planning Assessment Commission.

The suburb also faces huge changes through the Central-to-Eveleigh revitalisation program, a high-density development project that includes a new metro railway station in nearby Waterloo and homes for an estimated 29,000 to 56,000 new residents.

The Waterloo public housing estate will alone accommodate 5,000 new private homes and 14,000 new residents, which the Sydney lord mayor, Clover Moore, labelled the densest residential development in Sydney.

In December, UrbanGrowth NSW, the government body overseeing Central-to-Eveleigh, made a submission in support of the Pemulwuy expansion, saying it supported “integrating new high-density mixed-use buildings with existing neighbourhoods and places”.

Geoffrey Turnbull, from the Redfern-Waterloo community organisation RedWatch, was optimistic about the impact the Pemulwuy development would have on local residents.

“We won’t know until we see the final diagrams and where those shadow diagrams go, but the afternoon sun will have as good as no impact on other developments,” he said.

“In an ideal world it would be nice to have delivered on the project as it was put together, however they haven’t been able to get funding and this seems at this point the only way. It’s not the ideal outcome but it’s far better than just nothing happening.”

Tutuila told the Guardian that further information on the project’s timeline would be available at a public meeting on Thursday, but Munro has vowed to fight the development.

“We have a grave situation in relation to housing in our community. Our population in Redfern has gone from 40,000 when I came here as a young woman in the 70s to less than 300 now. It’s all deliberately designed to push the black community out, that’s what gentrification is about,” she said.

“Our community will be moved out because of the pressure applied by both the public housing provider and the one Aboriginal housing provider the community historically relied on.

“If they think 62 houses will cater to the Aboriginal community in the inner city, they are living on Mars.”