

High-rise for 600 students approved for Redfern's The Block

By Megan Gorrey
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Plans to build high-rise accommodation for up to 600 students at The Block in Redfern have been approved by an independent panel as part of a controversial bid to redevelop the inner-Sydney site.

The proposed 24-storey tower would not have "significant adverse social or cultural impacts" on the area that was once home to Redfern's Aboriginal community, the Independent Planning Commission said.



The proposed development at The Block would house up to 600 students.

Instead, the commission said the project would provide 62 affordable homes for Indigenous people, at least 110 beds for Indigenous students, and retain the area's culturally significant wall art.

The commission on Monday approved the latest plans, subject to conditions, for a higher tower than had first been proposed to be built on the vacant block opposite Redfern station. But the plans for student housing have been met with vehement opposition from some Aboriginal residents, who fear they are being forced out of the area.

"This is the death knell for our community in Redfern," Wiradjuri elder and local opponent Jenny Munro said. "They want our image here, but they don't want us."



Wiradjuri elder Jenny Munro at the tent embassy in Redfern. She opposes plans for high-rise student accommodation at The Block.

The Aboriginal Housing Company, which owns the land, and developer Deicorp last year boosted the lucrative student housing portion of the proposed development, known as the Pemulwuy Project.

They had proposed a multi-tower development up to 16-storeys high for 500 university students, in addition to the affordable housing for 62 Aboriginal families, a gym, retail and a childcare centre. The commission's report said residents had voiced concerns that the revised plans, which included the 24-storey tower, would cause over-shadowing and traffic problems in the area.

"The commission acknowledges the cultural significance of the development site to the local [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] community," the commission's report said.

"The commission also acknowledges the community's concerns raised at the public meeting regarding the need to ensure continued housing for [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] people within the development site and the potential social impacts of the student accommodation."

However, the panel found that the proposed development "will not substantially alter the impact of the Pemulwuy development on the neighbourhood, from that of the approved development".

"The commission considers that the proposed development provides an opportunity for urban renewal to respond to the area's emerging urban context."

In October, the Department of Planning warned it had not been shown concrete evidence that the 62 affordable homes promised for Indigenous families would be part of the \$70 million development.

City of Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore on Monday said the project would "deliver 62 affordable homes for local Aboriginal people, and a minimum of 110 beds for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students". Cr Moore said that she was "excited to see this project finally become a reality".

Newtown Greens' MP Jenny Leong said the state government should invest in public housing for Indigenous residents in the Redfern area without making it contingent on private development.

"We will literally see the Aboriginal housing on The Block overshadowed by large-scale student accommodation," Ms Leong said.

"What is unknown is how long will this remain student and affordable housing? How will any of that be regulated or monitored, and how long into the future?"

The approval of the revised plans signals a significant step forward in the transformation of the precinct, which has been slated for redevelopment by the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) for nearly three decades.

Those plans have been repeatedly delayed by setbacks and changes, and surrounded by controversy.

For more than a year an Aboriginal tent embassy occupied the grassed area in front of The Block's Aboriginal flag mural to protest the gentrification of the area and the erosion of its Indigenous links.

The protesters accused the AHC of prioritising the project's commercial aspects over the promise to build homes for Indigenous families.

The embassy decamped from the site in 2015, after Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion brokered a peace deal between the activists and AHC, amid court action to remove the protesters.

That battle prompted the federal government to commit \$5 million to the project's Aboriginal housing component.

A wire fence around the site warns trespassers to keep away.