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From Protest to Policy: The Rocks Green Bans and the Transformation of Heritage Protection in Sydney

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Abstract: This paper examines the Rocks Green Bans (1971-1974) as a pivotal episode in the history of Sydney's urban planning and heritage protection. The Green Bans, imposed by the Builders Labourers Federation in collaboration with the Rocks Residents Action Group, halted large-scale modernist redevelopment proposed by the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority. Drawing on multi-source archival research, including newspapers, government records, and visual materials, the study reconstructs how grassroots mobilisation challenged state-led planning and reshaped the concept of heritage. The findings reveal three major contributions. First, the Green Bans contested the dominance of top-down modernist planning by legitimising community participation in shaping urban futures. Second, they broadened the notion of heritage beyond architectural preservation to encompass social and cultural values, particularly working-class identity and collective memory. Third, they laid the groundwork for institutional reforms, notably the establishment of the New South Wales Heritage Council in 1977. Beyond their historical significance, the Green Bans continue to influence contemporary debates on redevelopment and gentrification, demonstrating that heritage cannot be separated from principles of equity and justice. This case thus offers enduring insights for participatory planning and values-driven approaches to conservation in rapidly evolving urban contexts.

Keywords: Green Bans; the rocks; heritage protection; participatory planning; urban renewal; social justice; community activism; Sydney

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1. Introduction

Urban renewal in the mid-20th century was typically characterised by large-scale demolition and modernist planning principles, prioritising efficiency, commercial development, and vehicular access over social continuity and cultural values [1-7]. In Australia, this global trend materialised in Sydney through the establishment of the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority (SCRA) in 1970 [8,9]. The Authority proposed transforming The Rocks—a historic working-class neighbourhood adjacent to Circular Quay—into a precinct of high-rise office buildings, apartments, and new roads [10]. For government officials, the area's existing state of disrepair detracted from Sydney's image as a modern metropolis [11]. For residents and heritage advocates, however, the district embodied irreplaceable history, particularly its sandstone terraces, laneways, and early colonial architecture [12]. This tension between redevelopment and conservation gave rise to one of Australia's most significant planning events: the Green Ban.

From 1971 to 1974, the Green Ban sparked intense conflict, with local residents joining forces with the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) to mount formidable grassroots

resistance, effectively halting all development in The Rocks unless community demands for heritage preservation were met [4]. The Rocks became the first site to implement such a ban, setting a precedent for participatory urbanism and heritage conservation in Australia [4].

The Green Ban advocated for planning that served people rather than profit, prioritising community vision, cultural heritage, and environmental integrity over commercial interests [6]. It also redefined the concept of heritage, emphasising the socio-cultural value of everyday urban environments, working-class history, and community identity. Prior to this, heritage conservation in Australia had primarily focused on monumental architecture and elite history [4]. The case of The Rocks provides an opportunity to explore how grassroots mobilisation challenged the modernist planning agenda and reshaped institutional understandings of heritage, participation, and justice in urban governance.

The Green Ban was not merely a historic protest; it was also a catalyst for theoretical and institutional change. By linking heritage preservation with social justice and legitimising community participation as a core planning principle, it offers enduring lessons for contemporary urban challenges. The central research question of this paper is: How did the Green Ban in The Rocks influence the concepts and practices of heritage conservation in Sydney, and what lessons does it offer for contemporary urban planning in balancing development with cultural and social values?

To address this question, the study employed a multi-source archival research methodology, drawing primarily from materials housed at Trove, the City of Sydney Archives, the State Library of NSW, and the State Archives Collection. The investigation focused on documents and events spanning 1970 to 1980, using keywords such as 'The Rocks Green Bans', 'Builders Labourers Federation', 'Jack Munday', and 'urban renewal Sydney'. Sources included newspapers, leaflets, planning reports, and government documents, supplemented by visual resources such as photographs and maps. This paper analyses the conflict through primary sources and planning theory, arguing that The Rocks Green Bans catalysed a new planning paradigm in Sydney—one rooted in local ethical, social, and historical considerations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Urban Renewal and Modernist Planning in Sydney in the 1960s and 1970s

During the mid-twentieth century, numerous global cities, including Sydney, adopted proactive urban renewal strategies aimed at guiding and regulating urban development. These strategies typically focused on urban development controls, land-use zoning, transport improvements, green belts, and new towns [13]. In Sydney, this era was marked by modernist planning, often neglecting local voices in The Rocks [14]. The government regarded these older working-class neighbourhoods as obsolete, seeing them as dilapidated slums to be demolished. By the 1960s, Sydney's commercial office building boom had peaked, prompting the state government to target The Rocks as a potential source of revenue [7]. By the 1970s, the New South Wales government and the SCRA, established in 1970, proposed plans to demolish much of The Rocks' historic district, envisioning high-rise residential apartments and office spaces in line with international modernist urban design trends.

The Government Gazette of New South Wales, available via Trove, contains the appointments of members to the SCRA as established by the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority Act, 1968, published on 12 December 1969 and 20 March 1970. This legislation created a centralised public authority responsible for managing the redevelopment of The Rocks area. As outlined in the Act and its regulations, the SCRA was empowered to oversee comprehensive redevelopment of the precinct, including land acquisition, planning, and construction approvals (see Figures 1 and 2).

SYDNEY COVE REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY ACT, 1968

HIS Excellency the Governor, with the advice of the Executive Council, has been pleased to make the following appointments of Members of the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority, constituted under the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority Act, 1968, for a term of seven years, from 12th January, 1970:

W. W. Pettingell, Esquire, C.B.E., B.Sc. (Chairman).
D. O. A. Magee, Esquire, B.E. (Director and Deputy Chairman).
W. R. Bunning, Esquire, A.R.I.B.A., A.R.A.I.A., A.I.S.T.C.
W. M. Leonard, Esquire, D.F.C.
J. C. C. G. Humphrey, Esquire, LL.B.
Alderman L. E. McDermott.

(M. 69-21)
(6657) P. H. MORTON, Minister for Local Government.

Figure 1. Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority Act, 1968 错误!未找到引用源。.

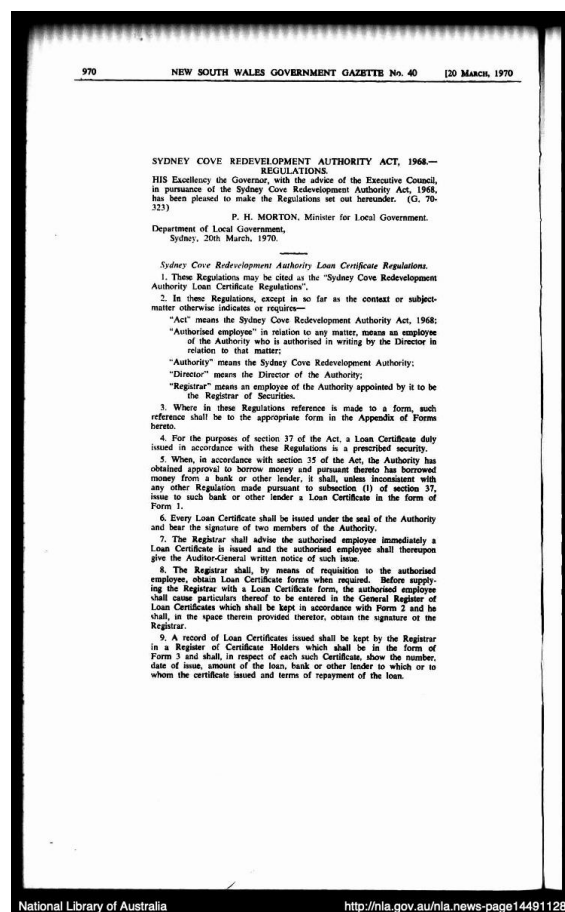


Figure 2. Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority Act, 1968-Regulations 错误!未找到引用源。.

These planning proposals followed previous top-down interventions in The Rocks, including slum clearance after the 1900 plague outbreak, when the government justified demolition on public health grounds [17]. Unlike earlier attempts, the 1970s redevelopment plans faced resistance due to their scale and the threat they posed to the physical and cultural heritage of one of Sydney's oldest European settlements [18]. The district's sandstone architecture, alleyways, and traditional working-class fabric constitute a rare and valuable urban archaeological site, sharply contrasting with surrounding modern buildings [19].

2.2. The Origins and Impact of the Green Bans

The proposal to demolish parts of The Rocks provoked strong opposition from local residents and heritage advocates, most notably the BLF [20]. In 1971, the BLF imposed the first Green Ban on all SCRA projects in The Rocks [21]. An article titled "What the NSW builders labourers are doing" from the Tribune (8 February 1972), available via Trove, described the situation:

"In keeping with its policy, the union in NSW has operated bans on four projects: the Intended A. V. Jennings 'development' which would, with Government approval, have destroyed the last bushland (Kelly's Bush) on the Parramatta River... The AB & OWF has been joined, in some cases and to varying extents, by other unions [22]."

The BLF led local construction workers in refusing to participate in projects that damaged the environment, destroyed historical sites, or undermined community interests. This marked a fundamental shift in union engagement with urban development, redefining construction workers as advocates for community interests and participatory urban governance [23].

The Green Ban movement concluded by the end of 1974 [19]. While it successfully safeguarded most of The Rocks' heritage buildings, the area ceased to be a working-class neighbourhood and was redeveloped by the SCRA as a historical tourist precinct [24]. Today, The Rocks is a national heritage site and ranks as Australia's second most popular tourist destination after the Sydney Opera House.

An article titled "What are the Green Bans" from the Tribune (22 January 1974) summarised the origins and significance of the movement:

"During the last two years the Builders Laborers' Federation of NSW has widened its definition of the legitimate scope of union activity to a consideration of conservation and environment issues. The first 'green ban' was imposed in 1971, at the request of residents of the area, on a piece of harbor frontage bushland, Kelly's Bush... Since then, the Builders Laborers' Federation has imposed more than 40 green bans [25]."

Through alliances between trade unions and communities, the refusal to participate in contentious development projects safeguarded the environment, historical heritage, and housing rights, advancing a model of urban governance centred on citizen interests. The Green Ban movement not only prevented uncontrolled urban development but also catalysed broader reforms in Australian planning legislation [26,27].

2.3. Community-Led Urbanism and Participatory Planning

The Green Ban movement marked a critical point in Australia's shift towards community-led urbanism and participatory planning. An article titled "Backing Munday and union" from the Tribune (21 November 1972) described:

"On the morning the Munday case hearing resumed, copies of a Defend Jack Munday Committee leaflet were distributed at city railway stations and elsewhere. The leaflets said that 'The reason? The Builders Laborers, helped by a few other unions, have put a spoke in the developers' wheel, checking their destruction of the environment. Big money is involved.' ...Outside the court building itself, builders laborers and others demonstrated with placards over the charge."

This demonstrates how unions and residents resisted redevelopment through leafleting, protests, and marches, defending both homes and the principle of community participation. The Green Ban movement halted redevelopment and reshaped urban power dynamics by affirming the legitimacy of public opposition to state-led projects [4,11]. It represents a moment when the principles of participatory planning-inclusivity, empowerment, and local autonomy-were practised on a large scale [28].

Urban theorist Patsy Healey describes participatory planning as a communicative process incorporating diverse stakeholders into shared decision-making [29]. The BLF exemplified this paradigm by integrating community aspirations directly into construction

decisions, championing the slogan 'people before profit' [19]. An article titled "Back Them Against Land Grab" (Tribune, 1 February 1972) reported:

"Meanwhile, in the Rocks (the historic area of Sydney's first settlement) a public meeting is to be held on Wednesday this week to discuss the campaign for the people's rights in the face of the multi-million Government-sponsored East Rocks 'redevelopment.' Builders' laborers continue their ban on all work in the area, supported by other unions. Two attempts by employers to proceed with demolition work last week were blocked by local women, who stood in the way and halted the attempts."

At the time, residents convened public meetings to defend their rights and oppose government-led redevelopment. The Green Ban not only halted demolition but also protected The Rocks from central business district encroachment, fostering a sense of belonging among residents as integral city members [30].

2.4. Heritage and Conservation in Urban Planning

The Rocks Green Ban shifted Australia's approach to heritage from a narrow architectural focus to a broader cultural and social perspective. By linking historic building preservation with residents' rights, it helped establish a values-based model of heritage conservation that influenced later statutory reforms, including the establishment of the New South Wales Heritage Council in 1977.

This shift parallels international developments. In New York, urban activist Jane Jacobs opposed Robert Moses' urban renewal plans in the 1960s, advocating for the protection of Greenwich Village and community life [31]. Similar to The Rocks, these efforts framed conservation as civic resistance rooted in local identity, memory, and democracy. In post-war Europe, heritage work increasingly emphasised everyday urban environments rather than monumental buildings [32]. The Rocks Green Ban thus aligned with global trends recognising the political and cultural dimensions of urban conservation, setting a precedent for participatory heritage practices worldwide.

3. Empirical Historical Account

3.1. Redevelopment Plans and State Interests

In the early 20th century, The Rocks was characterised by dense, narrow alleys, weathered sandstone terraces, corner shops, and working-class residents [20]. Historical photographs of Cumberland Place illustrate this urban fabric, showing children playing barefoot in the streets and neighbours gathering on eaves and in alleys, highlighting the social intimacy of a closely knit community (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Cumberland Place, the Rocks 错误!未找到引用源。 .

However, as urban planning became increasingly standardised, the close proximity of buildings, lack of green spaces, and deteriorating facades led authorities to label The Rocks as 'unsuitable for modern living' [33]. By the late 1960s, this view laid the groundwork for government-led large-scale redevelopment. The SCRA, established in 1970, adopted a vision prioritising high-rise commercial development and automobile access, while giving little consideration to heritage protection or social continuity [14]. The City of Sydney Strategic Plan of 1971 proposed zoning changes and road expansions that would have entailed the demolition of most residential and historic structures. The proposed maps clearly demonstrated the demolition of the historical heritage to make way for modern high-rise office buildings and infrastructure (see Figure 4).

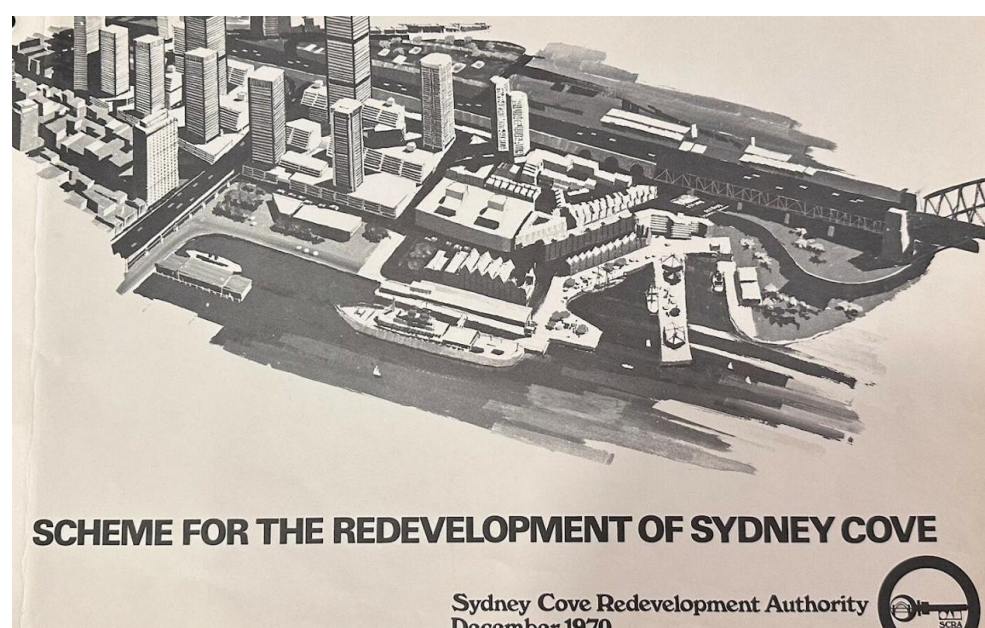


Figure 4. The Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority Scheme 1970 错误!未找到引用源。 .

This planning reflected modernist ideals that viewed heritage buildings as obstacles to progress, failing to acknowledge the cultural and historical significance of the existing built environment. Social cohesion and community heritage were largely overlooked, sparking intense opposition and laying the groundwork for the Green Ban movement.

3.2. Community Mobilization and the Emergence of Green Bans

In response to the redevelopment plans, local residents organised resistance [34]. Facing the imminent threat of eviction and demolition, the Rocks Residents Action Group (RRAG) was formed in the early 1970s. The group gained attention by holding public meetings, distributing leaflets, and connecting with sympathetic unions and activists across Sydney.

After a year of unsuccessful lobbying, RRAG sought the assistance of the BLF, a construction workers' union committed to social justice. The BLF agreed to impose a 'green ban' on any development work in The Rocks not approved by the community [30]. This collaboration between residents and workers marked a turning point in urban planning [4]. Unlike traditional protest actions, the Green Bans had material impact: without labour, no construction could proceed [35].

Photographs of the May Day march on George Street in 1973 vividly capture the mobilization, showing residents, union members, and supporters holding banners advocating for the Green Ban (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. May Day March 错误!未找到引用源。 .

The BLF's Green Ban represented a new form of urban activism, placing moral and social values above economic interests, challenging top-down, profit-driven planning, and affirming residents' rights to shape their cities.

3.3. Conflict and Negotiation

The Green Ban led to direct conflict between the community and the New South Wales Government and SCRA. Reports in the *Tribune* (30 October 1973) documented residents' collective resistance to forced demolition. The text and images reflect the intensity of the situation:

"So some 80 people, including three pensioners and two juveniles, were hassled to the lock-up. The group arrested also included the local barmaid, who, in the middle of pulling beer, rushed into the street to protest at police pushing around a group of children. Some of the younger participants from Victoria Street gave the police a run for their money over the top of the buildings with one remaining up a tree for the rest of the day [33,36]."

Although the bans effectively halted construction in key areas, they provoked political and media criticism portraying residents and the BLF as 'anti-development'. The SCRA published advertisements asserting that the union obstructed essential projects, claiming:

"This is not a green ban in The Rocks, it is a red ban inspired by a union which places itself above the law. It has nothing to do with conservation. The Rocks Authority was set up to preserve the environment in The Rocks and improve this previously depressed area for the benefit of all Australians... The Authority has repeatedly guaranteed that residents' rights in resettlement will be protected. THIS MATTER IS NOT THE ISSUE." [30]

In turn, the BLF argued that political authorities deliberately provoked conflict to consolidate power. Despite tensions, a public notice board became a space for negotiation among residents, unionists, and planners. While the government did not abandon redevelopment entirely, public pressure resulted in compromise. In 1974, parts of The Rocks were rezoned as conservation areas and a heritage listing process was initiated, safeguarding numerous buildings. The Green Ban was eventually lifted, but its success preserved the historical heritage of The Rocks and influenced planning policies throughout New South Wales.

3.4. Heritage: Protection, Planning Reform and Heritage Recognition

The Green Ban not only protected specific urban areas but also spurred broader evolution of heritage and planning policies in New South Wales. Before the Green Bans, heritage was narrowly defined, prioritising colonial landmarks while overlooking social, cultural, and working-class history embedded in areas such as The Rocks [3]. The movement redefined heritage as a social value linked to community identity.

In 1974, following sustained public and union pressure, part of The Rocks was rezoned as a conservation area, halting large-scale demolition. This laid the foundation for a more inclusive heritage framework, including the establishment of the NSW Heritage Council in 1977 [37]. Reporting at the time, such as the 1974 article "Round the Rugged Rocks" in *Now*, highlighted the firm resistance of residents and the BLF against piecemeal development.

A plaque placed on Argyle Street near the 1973 protest site commemorates the leadership of the BLF and the role of community action (see Figure 6).

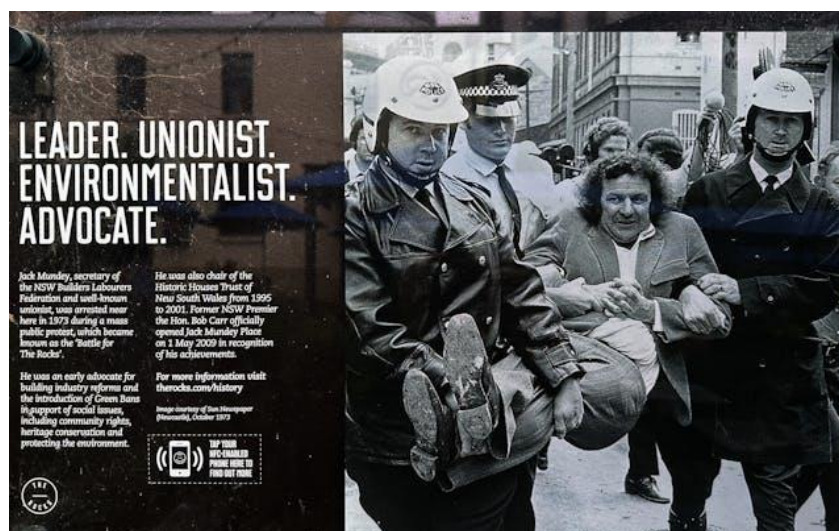


Figure 6. Plaque on Argyle Street near the 1973 protest site 错误!未找到引用源。 .

The Rocks Green Ban set a precedent for future urban activism. Residents' action groups and community forums became central to participatory planning. The precinct was spared demolition and became a renowned heritage site precisely because its cultural identity was preserved.

4. Conclusion

The Green Ban across The Rocks precinct from 1971 to 1974 represents a paradigm-shifting moment in Australian planning history, heritage conservation, and public activism. What began as grassroots resistance to the modernist redevelopment plans of the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority (SCRA) transformed into a broader movement, redefining the ways in which planning and heritage could coexist. By combining the industrial influence of construction unions with the social advocacy of local residents, the Green Ban effectively halted redevelopment that would have obliterated Sydney's oldest neighbourhoods.

This research identifies three key contributions of the Green Ban. First, it challenged the top-down modernist planning orthodoxy dominant in mid-twentieth-century Sydney, demonstrating the limitations of approaches that overlooked the cultural and social dimensions of urban space. Second, it expanded the concept of heritage beyond narrow architectural definitions to include broader social and cultural values, showing that preserving working-class suburbs and collective memory is as vital as protecting sandstone terraces and colonial streetscapes. Third, it highlighted the capacity of grassroots coalitions

to institutionalise change, as evidenced by heritage reforms in New South Wales, including the establishment of the Heritage Council in 1977, and influencing international discussions on values-based heritage governance.

The contemporary relevance of the Green Ban lies in its demonstration that heritage is inseparable from questions of fairness, belonging, and social justice. In a time when cities globally face pressures of rapid redevelopment and gentrification, The Rocks case underscores the importance of participatory governance in heritage management. It illustrates that heritage conservation is not solely about preserving buildings, but also about safeguarding cultural identity and the everyday experiences of the community. The precedent set by the Green Ban remains instructive for planning debates, particularly in balancing economic development with cultural sustainability, and in ensuring that urban change does not come at the cost of community displacement.

Ultimately, the Green Bans at The Rocks were not merely protests against redevelopment; they were proactive efforts to redefine redevelopment itself as a mechanism for renewing planning objectives and valuing cultural heritage. By bridging cultural conservation and social justice, the movement left a lasting legacy on both planning theory and practice. Future research can build on this inquiry through comparative studies of global heritage-related social movements, shedding light on how grassroots activism can foster more equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive urban environments.

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