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EDITORIAL

## *Guardian of Sydney's heritage was a man ahead of his time*



### The Herald's View

March 10, 2021 — 5.30pm

It was fitting that NSW held a state funeral on Wednesday for Jack Munday, the trade unionist and environmentalist who deserves much of the credit for what Sydney looks like today.

Mr Munday, [who died last year](#), led the so-called “green bans” movement in the 1970s, which prevented the destruction of priceless heritage architecture by property developers.

If he and his comrades at the militant Builders Labourers Federation had not organised picket lines and occupations to stop demolition, the Rocks, Kings Cross and Woolloomooloo would have been flattened for high-rise office towers. Centennial Park would have been obliterated under a sports stadium. Glebe and Ultimo would be freeways. The Botanical Gardens next to the Opera House would be a car park.

At the memorial service, which was delayed by the pandemic, Sydney's lord mayor Clover Moore described the attitude to demolishing heritage before the green bans as “gleeful”.

Mr Munday's legacy is a complex one. He was a militant trade unionist and communist and at the time his actions were viciously opposed by property developers, the NSW Liberal government of Robert Askin and by the editorial pages of the *Herald*. Green bans were often not genteel affairs. The federal government eventually facilitated the takeover of the NSW BLF by the supposedly more pliant national branch of the union in 1976.

But looking back now, it is time for the *Herald* to say that Mr [Munday got some very big things right](#). He established the principle that governments should protect heritage and consider the broader environment before granting development approvals.

The Wran government in 1976 started the process of legislating these sorts of safeguards. Mr Munday's leadership inspired similar alliances between unions and conservationists all around the world.

While Mr Munday was a global figure in the 1970s, the issues he brought to the fore back then are still very current.

Building unions have recently slapped a new [green ban on Willow Grove](#), the unique 19th century stately home that the NSW government wants to demolish, move and rebuild nearby as part of the construction of the proposed new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta.

While most people reject the destruction of pre-Federation heritage buildings, many, including [Treasurer Dominic Perrottet](#), question whether the same protection should be extended to some mid-20th century buildings, which have been at the centre of several recent battles.

### **The union giant who helped shape the city of Sydney**

It is ironic that heritage campaigners, including Mr Munday himself in his later years, battled to save the [Sirius building](#) in The Rocks even though it is the sort of brutalist concrete architecture that the BLF fought against in the '70s.

Similar debates are now raging over the [Ryde City Council](#) building and the [MLC building](#) in North Sydney, both built in the '60s in high international style.

In general, the *Herald* agrees with Mr Munday that the interpretation of heritage cannot stop where it was in the 1970s. We must aim to preserve significant representative versions of all of Sydney's history, not just the Victorian piles that most people think of as historic.

While it is unthinkable now, who knows what future generations might think of the Sydney Opera House, but from the moment it was built it was clear that Sydney cannot be Sydney without it and that many other buildings of its vintage must be protected.

#### [City life](#)

### **'Sydney remains in his debt': City mourns loss of 'visionary' Jack Munday**

There is no easy answer to these questions and sometimes the cost will outweigh the benefits of protecting buildings of marginal artistic and heritage value. Planners and architects have to craft solutions that balance all these issues.

But if Mr Munday proved one thing, it is that there are times when this city must stand up for its heritage and the preservation of all its unique and beautiful history for future generations.