

Community meeting at The Block shut down as anger spills over

Lisa Visentin
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and on The Block will be handed to a student housing provider under a 99-year lease, it was revealed at a fiery public meeting on Thursday.

About 200 people attended the Redfern Community Centre to hear the AHC explain its plans to build a 16-storey student accommodation building on The Block as part of the site's redevelopment, called the Pemulwuy Project.

But attempts to win community support for the project were defeated and the meeting called off, as former residents of the historic site accused the Aboriginal Housing Corporation of selling out the community.

Many members of the Aboriginal community were in the audience, including former residents of The Block, and founders of the Tent Embassy protest which occupied the site for more than a year until August 2015.



Protesters, pictured outside Redfern's Community Centre on Thursday night, say the battle for The Block has begun again.

Soon after the meeting started, audience members – irate at the AHC executives and the new plans being proposed – interrupted proceedings, accusing the AHC of

mismanagement and demanding the Aboriginal people who founded The Block be heard.

After repeated attempts to regain control over the proceedings, which was to include a slide show presentation, AHC chairperson Alisi Tutuila said: "We are actually going to have to call off this meeting."

The meeting was expected to be tense.

Two weeks earlier, the AHC unveiled its revised plans for the \$70 million Pemulwuy Project. The proposed six-storey student accommodation facility, which was to be built alongside a new Aboriginal housing precinct on The Block, had been raised to 16 storeys.

The unit block would house 522 students, instead of the 154 students catered for in the original plans.

As Ms Tutuila outlined the details of the revised plans on Thursday, which centred on granting student accommodation provider Atira a 99-year-lease over the propose site in exchange for an upfront payment of rent, attendees at the meeting grew restless.



Artist impression of the new 522 room student accommodation facility to be built as part of the Pemulwuy Project at The Block in Redfern.

The leasing arrangement, Ms Tutuila said, would enable the AHC to deliver the project in one stage, while remaining financially independent without having to "hand over a legacy of debt to the next generation".

Under this model, which was developed by accounting firm KPMG, the student housing component will fund the building of 62 affordable homes for indigenous people, which the AHC maintains is the primary goal of the Pemulwuy Project.

"At this point there is no other money available to build the affordable housing," Ms Tutuila told the audience.

But as AHC general manager Lani Tuitavake took to the microphone, attempting to frame the significance of the Pemulwuy Project as the realisation of The Block's Aboriginal history, members of the audience erupted.

"You do not have the right," one person yelled. "You don't speak for black people. You sold us out."

By the time an architect from Turner & Associates had assumed the microphone to explain the design of the student precinct, the organisers had lost control of the meeting.

A founding member of The Block's Aboriginal community, Lyall Munro, who was among the meeting's interjectors, then assumed control of the microphone.

"This has become emotive. However, it's been an emotive situation for many, many years."

Addressing the AHC executive, he said: "Your plan is not a reflection of our plan."

Mr Munro's speech touched on the deep divisions between the AHC and sections of the Aboriginal community, which have emerged in the decades since the Whitlam government granted the AHC \$500,000 to purchase land on The Block in 1972.

AHC's critics believe the company is now a private operator which has long since jettisoned its community organisation roots.

"I'm not shocked it ended this way," Nathan Moran, CEO of the Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council said. "On so many levels this project fails the community."

Ms Tutuila said AHC organisers were disappointed they were forced to cancel the meeting.

"I was approached by a number of community members after the event who also expressed their disappointment to not hear the presentation in full."