

Hard line on the needy puzzling

Experience of homelessness not forgotten as proposal for units to house elderly runs into opposition



"DO YOU still write for the *Wentworth Courier*?" the shopkeeper asked, as he gave me change for a bottle of milk.

When I replied that I did, he launched into a tirade about redevelopment.

No, he wasn't objecting to the majestic old trees being felled on Anzac Pde, or the controversy surrounding the Bondi Pavilion, but to the building of a block of units on our street to house the elderly homeless of Darlinghurst.

"What's wrong with that?" I asked, surprised by his hostility towards the proposal. "You'll get more customers."

He shook his head so vigorously I thought it would fly off. "Those kinds of people don't buy anything. And when they do, they go to the supermarket."

Urban Goddess

Mandy Sayer



Noticing that I was unconvinced by his argument, he began listing other reasons why the apartment building should not be constructed, the most puzzling of which was his contention that the ambulances from St Vincent's Hospital will be blocked from their routes – due to all those old, formerly homeless people clogging up the road with their Zimmer frames and wheelchairs.

I bagged my bottle of milk and left the store with my dogs to take them on their usual afternoon walk. As we strolled past the car wash business that will be demolished to make way for the

units, the whiff of leaking petrol took me back to my own days as a homeless teenager.

My mother, baby brother, and I were on the run for 18 months from her violent de facto husband, camping in various shelters and refuges in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide.

Sometimes we slept on overnight trains, or on the couch of a newly-made friend. For six months we squatted illegally in an abandoned apartment block.

When our family was finally resettled by the Department of Housing in a three-bedroom walk-up, the

sense of relief – and safety – was palpable.

I led the dogs into the adjacent churchyard and allowed them off their leashes. They leapt across the grass and ran towards three women who were camped out near a sandstone alcove.

One was peeling an orange, another was doing a crossword; the third was rummaging through a bag of clothes, muttering that she was trying to find a warmer cardigan.

I gazed at their weathered faces and realised they were all over 50, and each had absolutely nowhere to go. Yes, between them they had some rudimentary bedding, some bottled water, and a tinny transistor radio – but as for those pesky Zimmer frames and wheelchairs, there was not one to be seen.