



*Jørn Utzon*  
*(1918–2008)*

*Image courtesy of Sydney Opera House Trust*

## *Jørn Utzon* (1918–2008)



When Jørn Utzon's concept for the Sydney Opera House won an international design competition in January 1957, his drawings incited flames of dispute in Australian newspapers, and infuriated some of the world's most illustrious architects.

In Chicago, an elderly Frank Lloyd Wright bitterly talked of 'nothing but sensationalism', 'uncharacteristic of Australia', 'picture architecture' and 'a whim'.

Meanwhile, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the modernist most associated with shiny boxes of glass and steel, despised Utzon's white clay tiles and sensually expressive shells.

According to Utzon's biographer, Philip Drew, both Mies and Wright had deigned to meet the young Danish architect on his first pilgrimage to the US in 1949, when he was strongly inspired by their work. But eight years later, the opera house design turned his heroes against him.

Perhaps the maestros instinctively understood that their own great legacies were suddenly at risk of being eclipsed, and that a 38-year-old nobody's once-rejected ink sketch was becoming the planet's most dazzling and profound twentieth-century building.

Since the 1980s, best-of-century architecture awards have rained on Bennelong Point, despite widespread disgust by later admirers that the scheme was only externally built to Utzon's specifications.

After his forced exit from the project in April 1966, three Sydney architects – Peter Hall, Lionel Todd and David Littlemore – accepted the poisoned chalice to interpret his incomplete drawings, and they delivered substantial internal changes, which have been almost universally criticised.

Despite those flaws, Utzon won many international honours for his Sydney achievement, including the Royal Institute of British Architects' gold medal in 1978

and Scandinavia's Alvar Aalto medal in 1982. Yet he was long overlooked for architecture's Nobel prize equivalent, the Pritzker, which is the ultimate arbitration of world's-greatest architects.

When he was finally named as the 2003 winner, twenty-five years after the first Pritzker and three decades after his masterpiece opened, Utzon, then aged eighty-five, was too frail to attend the glamorous festivities in Madrid. One of his two architect sons, Jan, accepted the medal and \$US100,000 from king Juan Carlos at a ceremony attended by the profession's elite.

One rationale for Utzon's extended absence from the Pritzker hall of fame is that his oeuvre of notable completed buildings is numerically few compared with the boom-time outputs of the profession's global stars.

Key works in Denmark are his family house (1952) in Hellebaek, the maritime town in which he was born; the Fredensborg courtyard housing (1962), and the chapel at Bagsvaerd (1976).

He also created the National Assembly in Kuwait (1982) and two houses on Majorca: Can Lis (1973) and Can Feliz (1994). All show his fascination with native building traditions, which he studied closely in countries as diverse as Mexico, Morocco, Spain, the Middle East, Egypt, India, Japan, China and Sweden.

With the Sydney Opera House, Utzon created an original, optically astonishing and permanently unique ensemble, yet he was largely inspired by ancient precedents that have been emulated by other architects.

His design 'paid homage to' (a term commonly used by late twentieth-century architects) the huge stepped platforms leading to the blood sacrifices of Mayan cities, the nail-free complex lock-joints used by carpenters building gaudily painted Chinese temples (for details he consulted a historic kit of eight builders' instruction manuals known as the *Ying Zao Fa Shi*), ceramic tiles handmade in Scandinavian villages, and the simple square column and beam system fundamental to building around the Mediterranean.

Genius always captures and reveals a cluster of opposite or conflicting conditions. In Utzon, observers have noted that he was both politically naive and artistically complex, modest yet self-focused, unusually calm yet bitterly angry, exceptionally intelligent yet an anti-intellectual.

In his architecture of the Opera House, one irony is its perfect genius loci, or sense of place, although Utzon had never visited Sydney when he won the competition. Another contrast is its provocative originality; yet it also is a model of what Utzon liked to call 'vernacular' architecture, meaning a structure of timeless appearance and atmosphere, suited to location.

A third contradiction was the design team's use of computers for engineering the curved shells and plywood ceilings, contrasted by a constant emphasis on manual techniques and humans engaging directly with nature (especially nautical and forest environments).

Unfortunately, Utzon's work on the Opera House and career aspirations shrivelled after his calamitous battle with the NSW government in 1965–66. Following several years of controversies about construction delays, cost blow-outs and taxpayers' money, and in the thick of a dispute about crucial changes to the two performance halls, Utzon lost his political champions when Labor lost the May 1965 state election.

Suddenly, he was in the sights of a new Liberal minister for public works, Davis Hughes, who began a campaign to terminate his contract. By forcing arguments and delaying fee payments, Hughes engineered the architect's resignation on 28 February 1966. Hughes thus won a mythological place in the history books and, in one Australian opera so far, as an ugly force of evil who vanquished a handsome prince of goodness.

But long before Hughes took the oath, it was obvious that Utzon's perfectionist and experimental approach to architecture would challenge Sydney's famously pragmatic culture and building industry mentality of 'she'll be right, mate'. He also looked and spoke more elegantly than many blokes he dealt with, and did not align himself with powermongers in the eastern suburbs (his family preferred the north shore).

Complicating that culture clash was Utzon's lack of experience as the leader of a major development. An idealist not a pragmatist, he temperamentally tended to avoid aggression and superfluous meetings by keeping his core studio physically distant from clients, builders and sub-consultants.

Some associates were perturbed by his tendency to go AWOL on regular holidays and study tours.

As an artist striving for 'the edge of the possible', but without a great aptitude for mathematics, Utzon also struggled to clarify accurate details of his geometrically ambitious structure. While the design challenges today could be solved with computer programs, his team (in Denmark initially and Sydney later) were out of their depth on several technical problems regarding the design of the roof.

The great Finnish engineer Ove Arup helped to solve some crucial strategies during the Danish design prototyping phase, but was not personally available to tackle the construction difficulties in Sydney, and directors of this company now agree that his team here was not as talented. Some critics believe that the world's finest engineer of ferro-cement structures, Pier Luigi Nervi, should have been consulted.

In his 2001 book about the project, *Utzon's Sphere*, Japanese engineer Yuzo Mikami who worked with Arup and Utzon in London, Hellebaek and Sydney wrote:

I only wished that Utzon had been more articulate in defending himself from the political pressure and that the people who were closely associated with him, including the Opera House Trust, were more helpful in protecting him.

He should have realised that in sharp contrast to his brilliance and confidence in design and related artistic matters, he was rather naive and almost ignorant in dealing with political matters.

He was also extremely vulnerable to malicious attacks which he had never experienced in Denmark, where artists are generally highly respected and protected by the people and the society.

That lack of respect infuriated many architects in Sydney and some conducted a passionate campaign to mythologise Utzon's post-departure reputation and force the state government to bring him back to complete the project. Several years before the 2000 Olympics, leading public figures finally began to extend olive branches on behalf of the state government and Utzon was persuaded (and finally paid) to sign a new contract to work with son Jan and Sydney architect Richard Johnson on guidelines for future alterations of the building.

Although he never returned to visit his completed masterpiece, a cordial detente was achieved with successors of his tormentors.

Although forever associated with Sydney, he only lived in Australia for three years: 1963–66. Afterwards, he divided his time between two seaside locations: Hellebaek, his birthplace north of Copenhagen, and the Mediterranean island of Majorca, near the Spanish coast. In both places, he built wonderful houses for his family: wife Lis, daughter Lin, and sons Jan and Kim.

Utzon, born to Aage Utzon, a well-known naval engineer and physical fitness devotee, and his wife Estrid, grew up with an older brother, Leif, and a younger sibling, Erik, in the larger port of Aalborg, where his father directed the shipyard and taught his children hunting, sailing, biology and yacht design.

After meeting two artists, Paul Schroder and Carl Kyberg, on summer holidays, Utzon's interests turned to art and he began creating sculptures. Instead of becoming a naval architect like his father, he decided to study architecture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, graduating in 1942.

With several friends, he fled to Sweden (neutral during World War II) to find work. His first job was with the Stockholm office of architects Hakon Ahlberg, then he moved to Finland to work with its modernist genius, Aalto. By this time, he was also inspired by an outstanding Norwegian, Gunnar Asplund.

This Scandinavian childhood and training gave him a humane and natural approach to design, while his broad understanding of primitive cultures invested his architecture with universally delightful qualities.

After falling in love with Mayan temples in Mexico, he began to raise some of his key buildings on masonry platforms, lifting the ground plane to create a special place for viewing the landscape. Above the platform, either the roof or walls were simply, yet powerfully, expressed.

Most importantly, all his compositions were precisely designed to dance to the daily nuances of sunlight, shadows, clouds and rain. An acute sensitivity to nature and people was Utzon's genetic source of both inspiration and eternal virtue.

Utzon is survived by his wife and three children.

*Associate Professor Davina Jackson*

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