

THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE: POLITICS IN THE CREATION OF AN ICON

ADRIAN CARTER, Associate Professor, Director, Utzon Research Center, Aalborg University, Department of Architecture, Design and Media Technology. Co-Director of the Jørn Utzon Research Network (JURN). Adjunct Professor, University of Tasmania. Visiting Research Fellow, University of Portsmouth.

ROGER TYRRELL, Principal Lecturer, University of Portsmouth School of Architecture. Co-Director of the Jørn Utzon Research Network (JURN). Adjunct Associate Professor, Aalborg University

'It requires an ability to create harmony from all the demands made by the undertaking, an ability to persuade them to grow together to form a new whole – as in nature; nature knows of no compromise, it accepts all difficulties, not as difficulties but merely as new factors which with no sign of conflict evolve into a whole....

It is necessary to be in tune with the age and with the surroundings, to see inspiration in the task itself, if the requirements of that task are to be translated into an architectonic language creating a unity of all the different factors.

At the same time the architect must have an ability to imagine and to create, an ability that is sometimes called fantasy, sometimes dreams'

Jørn Utzon, *The Innermost Being of Architecture*, 1948

For an architect to have the opportunity to realise their dreams, particularly with regards a public project of the stature of the Sydney Opera House, there always needs to be a political vision, initiative and willingness to do drive the project forward. Today it would be difficult to imagine Sydney, without the iconic building that so defines its identity, projecting out into the harbour so dramatically on the promontory of Bennelong Point. Prior though to the building of the Opera House, this remarkable location was merely the location of Sydney's tram depot; a strangely castellated building that attempted to pay homage to the fortification originally built there by Governor Macquarie in 1820, designed by the convict architect Francis Greenway. Even with the opening of the famous Harbour Bridge in 1932, that came to redefine the character of the harbour, the prominent nearby headland of Bennelong Point, was not the only potential site for a proposed Opera House. The idea itself of building an Opera House and the actual eventual choice of location were the result of both creative and political vision, ambition and a leap of faith.

It was the English born conductor Eugene Goossens who on taking up his new position at the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in 1947, promptly suggesting that a city the size of Sydney, should have a *'a fine concert hall for the orchestra, with perfect acoustics and seating accommodation for 3500 people, a home for an opera company, and a smaller hall for chamber music'* (Watson, p40). Having arrived himself in Sydney by flying boat, Goossens was enamoured by the thought of placing a new opera house on this spectacular harbour. However resistance from the Minister of Transport, concerned at the loss of the tram depot, meant that the Council eventually were to consider a total of nine different sites, many in locations that would have greatly limited the architectural potential of the building.

Goossens had himself pragmatically proposed as an alternative location over Wynyard Station in Central Sydney, illustrated by a proposed scheme by the Hungarian born modernist architect Hugo Stossel. Though Goossens did make it clear in an accompanying newspaper article that *'It is not the ideal site for an opera house - I still say Fort Macquarie (Bennelong Point) is - but it is the next best'* (Watson, 2006: p. 42). However it was due to more general planning considerations and the lack of nearby parking, that this alternative location was dismissed by the local authorities. Undaunted, Goossens continued to lobby for the building of an Opera House and ever more determinedly on his preferred site on the harbour. He commissioned William Constable, a theatre set designer who had worked on the design of operas for Goossens, to make a watercolour perspective of the opera house that Goossens envisaged. With its allusions to art deco cinema buildings of the 1930's and somewhat impractical outdoor amphitheatre, given the exposed unpredictably windy nature of the promontory; it is perhaps fortunate for Sydney that this was not the project that was realised.

However, Goossens determined and continued advocacy for an Opera House, began to gain political traction and at a significant level. In Joe Cahill, the then Labor Premier of New South Wales, and previously a boilermaker and trade-unionsist, who nobly believed in the betterment of all; the Opera House found its most powerful champion. Undoubtedly

he was also motivated by the desire for Sydney to readdress the balance in the on-going rivalry with Melbourne, which had gained international prominence by being awarded the 1956 Olympic Games.

On the 30th November 1954 Joe Cahill convened a conference, attended by members the arts community, architects, planners, business people and politicians. Cahill opened the conference by stating *'This State cannot go on without proper facilities for the expression of talent and the staging of the highest forms of artistic entertainment which add grace and charm to living and which help to develop and mould a better, more enlightened community'* (Watson, 2006: p. 43). Resorting to more colloquial language, he went on to say that *'Surely it is proper in establishing an opera house that it should not be a "shandygaff" (beer diluted with a non-alcoholic drink, such as ginger beer) place, but an edifice that will be a credit to the State not only today, but also for hundreds of years'* (Watson, 2006: p. 43).

Decisively Cahill immediately called for the establishment of a small working committee to take the project further and provide recommendations to the government. The proposed committee was accepted unchallenged and with great expediency met for the first time already a week later. Already by the 21st December 1954, at only its second meeting it considered the site recommendations and general implementation guidelines provided by the also newly established special opera house advisory committee of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA). Though the RAIA advisory committee had considered six proposed sites, it gave its unequivocal support for Bennelong Point, *'We believe this to be an outstandingly suitable site, if properly developed, would provide a setting for the Opera House which would be unrivalled throughout the world'* (Watson, 2006: p.45). They also pointed out the opportunity and benefit of removing an inappropriately placed building from the Sydney waterfront *'it would also provide a wonderful improvement to the Sydney foreshore by the removal of the tram depot... The occupation of this conspicuous headland, so near the heart of the city, by a transport shed is an absurdity'* (Watson, 2006: p.45).

Once he was certain that Bennelong Point was the ideal site, Cahill who was known for his quiet determination, took it upon himself to convince his own Minister of Transport of the necessity to remove the tram depot and the Harbour Board Trust to relocate the planned overseas shipping terminal to the other side of Circular Quay. In announcing the selected location of the proposed opera house, the Sydney Morning Herald applauded the decision and gave due credit to Premier Cahill. *'By its choice of Bennelong Point as the site for Sydney's Opera House State Cabinet performed an act of rare imagination. No finer site for a great theatre exists in the world. Mr Cahill deserves credit for his energy in a matter where he may think that there are few votes to be gained and possibly some to be lost; but Sydney-siders will remember him with gratitude if in a few years time they can share with the citizens of Stockholm and Venice the civilized pleasure of hearing great music in a perfect setting, besides the waters of their own harbour'* (Messent, 1997: p. 84).

Also very significantly for the eventual outcome, the RAIA advisory committee called for an open competition. However the contentious issue still remained of whether it should be a local, national or international competition and even if it should actually be open competition or by invitation only. Advisory committee member Walter Bunning, a local architect and Chairman of the State Planning Advisory Committee, suggested the competition should be national rather than international. As fellow advisory committee member George Molnar recalled later, *'it was Bunning, miserable Bunning, who was all for just to have an Australian competition. That was already a step down because he thought it should be given to Bunning, not to anybody else'* (David Messent, 1997: p.85). Fortunately for the process, George Molnar, an émigré Hungarian architect, lecturer at the University of Sydney, whose students made their own proposals for an opera house and rising political cartoonist; he was very perceptive and publicly forthright in expressing his more high minded, less self-interested, ideals. Writing in The Sydney Morning Herald, Molnar stated his view that *'We want for Sydney the best Opera House that can be built. This must mean an international competition. Apart from getting the best brains to ponder our problems, the worldwide interest centre on the Opera House of Sydney will be a good advertisement for Australia....There is a strong feeling among some of our architects that the competition should be restricted to Australian architects only. They feel that the standard of the profession is sufficiently high to be able to do the job. But that is not the same as getting the best the world can offer. If we feel that we can compete on equal terms with the best architects from overseas, surely that is no reason to exclude them from the competition. And how much greater the glory if an Australian wins... A competition can be public or by invitation. A public competition means more entries, more ideas, a chance for unknown young architects to be discovered. On the other hand, it means more work for the assessors, and a chance that not everybody you would like will take part in it. A competition by invitation, on the other hand, invites only*

those architects whom you expect to have the best answer to your problem... Yet the magnificent, lonely ideas may still escape. (Messent, 1997: p.86). This particular phrase of Molnar *'the magnificent, lonely ideas'* seems so prescient of the brilliant originality of the eventual winning project.

That such an original and outstanding project as Utzon's could be conceived and actually realised, is very much thanks to the persuasive views of Molnar and similarly open, internationally-minded colleagues; who in this case prevailed over, what would so often in such a situation is, invariably parochial self-interest and short term gain. Also most importantly by having a very open, transparent process the resulting project avoided the mediocrity that invariably results from various degrees of corruption and cronyism.

The RAIAC recommended that there be four assessors for the competition and that two of them should be from overseas, comprising it was suggested *'one of a modern outlook and one of a conservative outlook'* (Watson, 2006: p. 46), the final choice being the modernist Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen and the British architect Professor Leslie Spence, together with the local assessors, the Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney, Harry Ingham Ashworth, who had long supported Goossens vision and as a regular member of committees acted as the chair of the assessing panel and The Government Architect, Cobden Parkes. Once the conditions of the competition had been prepared with assistance from other local Sydney architects, a 25 page competition booklet, with black and white images of Bennelong Point that hardly did justice to the magnificence of the site, was prepared by mid-February 1956 and released, with a closing date for submissions of the 3rd December 1956. Given the relative remoteness of Australia at that time, a remarkable number of competitors, 881 from 45 different countries, registered for the competition. In itself suggesting that, following the Second World War, many in the world were beginning to see Australia as a land of opportunity, rather than as previously, a colonial backwater.

Eventually 222 entries were submitted, of which one of the very last, entry 218, was by the Danish architect Jørn Utzon. Arriving late in Sydney, it is widely recounted, (though disputed by some), that Eero Saarinen found Utzon's scheme amongst those proposals that had already been considered and rejected by the other assessors. While it seems that Martin found merit in Utzon's scheme, it was certainly Saarinen, not surprisingly given that he was at that time working on the not dissimilar TWA terminal in New York, who was Utzon's most emphatic advocate to the extent of even sketching the waterfront elevation and an aerial perspective explaining the podium, to convince his fellow jurors of the brilliance of Utzon's concept. With acute foresight Saarinen's waterfront elevation bears an uncanny resemblance to the Sydney Opera House as it appears today with its more spherical and upright shells, than that originally presented in the competition drawings by Utzon.

However it was Utzon's vision, alone among all the many competitors that recognised that this unique site needed to be understood in terms of its surrounding landscape and that it required a sculptural solution, rather than conventional orthogonal design as was the norm among the other entries to the competition. Without having visited Sydney, Utzon realised from the study of topographic maritime charts and photographs that Bennelong Point could be seen from many high vantage points around the harbour and therefore the design of the roof, the *'fifth facade'* was so significant to this particular site.

Utzon's appreciation of the context of the site was far more profound than merely the creation of a prominently located, expressive artistic statement, *'a magnificent doodle'* as described by Australian art critic Robert Hughes (Murray, 2003: p. 10). With an expertise gained through his passion for sailing, Utzon was able to appreciate the particular morphology of the Sydney harbour basin, through his reading of maritime charts. The special character of the headlands and promontories that define the Sydney Harbour, which due to geological uplift, rise up just prior to falling into the sea, is emulated in the forming of the podium. Originally it was even intended that the podium would be clad with the local sandstone, of which the site was largely composed, an intention that would have further emphasized its character as an artificial landform, but was later abandoned for technical reasons. The podium, with its origins in the ancient architectural idea of the raised platform that Utzon had experienced at the Mayan temples of Mexico, becomes in Sydney a continuation and evocation of the local natural terrain, building as designed landscape, in a manner similar in intention to the approach of the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, for whom Utzon had worked briefly.

The sense of a continuous landscape is also maintained within the interior, with the grand processional movement of the audience up the podium and around the concert halls, providing at the same time stunning elevated views of the harbour and its famous bridge. This approach effectively raised the experience from that of the everyday, creating a sense

of a festive event upon what has become Sydney's Acropolis. To achieve this effect Utzon, alone among the competition entrants, made the brilliant, but site overreaching decision to place the two halls side by side, rather than end to end. Contained within the podium of Utzon's original design for the Opera House was what was intended to be a central pedestrian passage between the halls, with an intended character reminiscent of an Arab bazaar. This passage led to a sheltered exterior plaza at the end of Bennelong Point, where the full horizontal panorama of the Sydney harbour would suddenly, dramatically would have become apparent.

The elegance of Utzon's plan was further complimented by the simple organizational clarity of Utzon's section. In a manner similar to Kahn's principle of served and servant spaces, Utzon located all of the normally rear-of-house functions below the auditoria within the mass of the podium, leaving the space under the ethereal billowing sails entirely free for the performance and needs of the audience. Seemingly floating above the podium, the Opera House's signature sail-like roof shells were expressed by Utzon in his conceptual sketches as being like clouds, both as experienced in nature and the abstract representation of Chinese temple roofs. The shimmering, ever-changing appearance of the shells is one of the most evocative architectural surfaces ever created, which justifies the comparison as the other Taj Mahal (Yeomans, 1973). Early on in the design process, Utzon had realised that a roof of white tiles would emphasise the sculptural character of the building, particularly at night and his aim was to achieve an effect similar to that of the *'combination of matt snow and shining ice'* (Frampton, 1996: p. 275) through the use of two different types of glazed ceramic tile. Such tiles of the character and the demanding quality that Utzon required did not at that time exist and it was to take three years of technical development in collaboration with Utzon before the Swedish manufacturer Höganas were able to produce tiles that were suitable. However, importing of special tiles all the way from Sweden was later to give politicians the basis for complaint.

The development of the tiles was one of the many technical achievements that were made during the development of the Sydney Opera House, that were fundamental to its successful realisation. The greatest, almost insurmountable challenge was however the determination of structural geometry and construction of the shells themselves. The prior work of Robert Maillart, Felix Candela and Pier Luigi Nervi certainly played a role in opening Utzon's imagination to the new technical and aesthetic possibilities of large parabolic reinforced concrete roof spans, as did the recently designed Radiohuset concert hall in Copenhagen by Wilhelm Lauritzen, which informed his competition proposal. While the use of natural analogies to segments of oranges and the structure of palm fronds, provided models for resolving the complex construction challenges of realising the roof in terms of a spherical geometry, it is however the experience of his father's work with the design of yachts, making models of curvilinear boat forms that undoubtedly gave Utzon such a creative authority in creating these iconic forms.

Utzon's insistence on prototyping and constantly reworking ideas to improve upon them was also something instilled in him by his father Aage, who throughout his life was continually modifying the designs of his boats. Utzon made mock-ups and prototypes of virtually all elements of the Sydney Opera House, achieving ingenious means of pre-fabrication; as in the production of pre-cast tile lids to clad the shells developed in collaboration with Arups the structural engineers. While working closely with the local firm of Ralph Symonds, Utzon developed uniquely innovative design solutions for the interiors of the halls, the corridors, for built-in seating and most remarkably the structural mullions of the glass walls, all using bent plywood much to the dismay of Arups. The plywood mullions were to have been elegantly articulated like wings of a bird in flight, with the external depth of the mullions creating a seemingly kinetic striated screen of light and shade, effectively eliminating the reflections on the glass walls. The subtly and elegance of Utzon's designs for the glazed walls is contrasted today with the aggressively angular and protruding forms that were realised by the architects that eventually took over from Utzon following his forced early departure from the project.

The use of prototypes, while not conventional practice in Australia at the time, was relatively widespread in the Nordic countries, where the large-scale programme of social building had encouraged the industrialization of the building industry following the Second World War. Utzon's experimentation and prototyping, in search of the optimum solution, combined with his use of foreign contractors, did not endear Utzon to the more jingoistic Australian politicians and local contractors, used to more traditional methods of working.

Ironically, given that Utzon following his design of the Sydney Opera House was to be dogged for the rest of his career with the reputation of being an expensive architect, it has been shown that in almost every case where he was given free rein, as noted by Alexander Kouzmin *'his method of experiment and collaboration produced a cheaper and more practical solution'* (Weston, 2002: p. 180). In fact a refined frugality of approach is characteristic of much of his work that is most

apparent in designs for housing systems and the design of his own houses on Mallorca, which use the humblest local material and most simple traditional forms of construction to create architecture of outstanding timeless simplicity. *'Utzon's desire to push the boundaries of architecture ensured that the building of the Sydney Opera House became a test bed for new technologies in construction. His interest in the use of repetitive elements arose from the need to prefabricate the sections of the roof shells and was at the forefront of thinking about the manufacture of buildings. The use of computers was in its infancy, but the roof shells could not have been created without them and computers were also used for the first time in the positioning of elements of the roof during construction. The use of epoxy resins for jointing precast concrete, sealants, laminated glass and planar glazing had never been attempted before on such a scale. The Opera House story also raised questions about the need for changes in the management of major contracts, and advanced considerably the concept of project management in the construction industry'* (Murray, 2003: p. xvi). As Peter Murray points out in *The Saga of Sydney Opera House*, *'Architecture at the edge of the possible inevitably generates difficulties of timing, technology, of cost, and stretches the patience and relationships of those involved. The building of Brunelleschi's fifteenth-century dome for Florence Cathedral, still the largest masonry dome in existence, contains striking resonance with the story of the Opera House. It was the result of a competition. The dome used previously untried construction techniques and Brunelleschi, like Utzon, never saw his masterwork completed'* (Murray, 2003: p. 137). In Utzon's own mind's eye however the Opera House was complete, he had *'solved all the problems'* as he expressed to Jack Zunz of Arups in early 1962 (Murray, 2003: p. 139). Invariably the reality of a built work cannot live up to the perfection as envisioned by the mind of the architect. In part this explains the lack of necessity and also reluctance on Utzon's part to return to Sydney to see his incomplete and adulterated masterpiece.

Following the results of the competition, the building of the Sydney Opera House had been very rapidly set in motion by the Premier Joe Cahill without legislative formalities being fully in place and with an understanding that the project was not precisely budgeted and was from the outset significantly under-funded. This was done for reasons of political expediency and Cahill's determination to ensure that the building be realised. Undoubtedly this cavalier approach is the reason the building stands there today, but it also laid the seeds of what was to become a political controversy in the years to come. From the very outset, unexpected difficulties with the site due to poorer geological conditions than were anticipated required more extensive foundations and ensured that the project would go over the budget, before work on the building above ground was even started.

The initial expediency of the project, lack of thorough preparation and costing prior to commencing building, together with the complexity, technical challenges and innovation required, all conspired to keep escalating the costs of the Opera House that stoked political outcry and condemnation. In May 1965, a Liberal and Country Party coalition came to power in New South Wales, in part with a mandate curbing the costs of the Opera House, ousting the previous Labor Government after 24 years in power. Initially Utzon, the eternal optimist, was hopeful that this change of government would be positive, putting an end to the stasis that had halted the progress of the Opera House, due to the distraction and inability of the Labor Government to take effective decisions in more than a half year leading up to the election.

With the change of government, there continued to be plenty of empty public rhetoric about the Opera House that served well to deflect attention from well-founded accusations of corruption and connection to organised crime associated with the new Premier, Robert Askin and his government. Rather than progress with Opera House, ever more administrative bureaucracy was imposed requiring Utzon's office to spend much of their time making reports to be made that served to further delay the process; which became so wearing for Utzon and his staff, that for three of Utzon's most experienced architects it was the last straw and they left the project within a period of month (Drew, 1999: p. 300).

More critically for Utzon, the Opera House, the ex-Country Party Leader Davis Hughes, was now the new Minister of Public Works with the self-assumed total responsibility for the Opera House. Davis Hughes had previously gained a position in the Royal Australian Air Force, by falsely claiming as he continued to do, that he had completed a Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Tasmania, later becoming a Deputy Headmaster of Armidale School, before entering politics full-time in 1950 and by a narrow margin becoming leader in May 1958 of the New South Wales Country Party. However he was reluctantly forced to relinquish the position, after the Labor Party revealed his fraudulent education claims and that he had gained previous positions through deception in the lead up to the New South Wales State election of March 1959. The RAAF Assessing Officer's report on Davis Hughes, had been very prescient in describing his character *'he has a certain guile that enables him to impress one to an extent beyond the actual value of his actions and, or, words. His efforts are often designed to focus favourable light on himself and to this end he will be quite impervious to the effects,*

or feelings of others. Due to his ego and tendency to understate other's ability and by his actions he loses considerable prestige and status' (Drew, 1999: p.306).

Certainly Davis Hughes never forgot or forgave the Labor Party for revealing his deception and while he had no sincere interest in architecture or the arts more generally. The position of Minister of Works, gave him what he took to be total control over what had been the initiative of the previous Labor premier and also the opportunity to publicly regain glory and rehabilitate himself politically. From the outset Hughes was determined to oust Utzon (Drew, 1999: p. 311) who he tried to portray as an impractical dreamer. Hughes refused to approve funding of Utzon's prototypes of the acoustic ceilings and consistently ignored requests for fee payments to Utzon's office, making his continuation untenable at that time. Utzon's letter of withdrawal from the project until funds were forthcoming was taken immediately as a letter of resignation, which was not Utzon's intention. There were vociferous protests in support of Utzon from leading international architects and academics, as well as Australian architects, including Utzon's staunch ally Harry Seidler and students; though not all the members of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and partners in larger firms who feared a loss of commissions by taking a stance against the government. As Mogens Prip-Buus, a Danish who worked closely with Utzon, wrote at the time *'We are living in an environment of hatred and malicious gossip – as these are the only means they can find against us, as there is nothing professional to criticise. The Association of Architects is openly split over this. I call this show "Malice in Blunderland".'* (Prip-Buus, 2000: p.113) Utzon was not reinstated as he presumed he would be and within two months he had left Australia, never to return.

Despite Hughes avowed aim to curb costs on the Opera House, he demonstrated no such control over the Australian architects that took over the completion of the building. The subsequent work made without Utzon, not only considerably escalated the costs of the building, which effectively doubled as a result (Watson, 2006: p. 155). In addition, the project took many years longer to complete than anticipated and decisions taken in this period adversely affected the external appearance of the building, with the insensitive redesign of the glazing and revised design of the auditoriums, which has greatly diminished the overall experience of the interiors.

Though these decisions were made by competent architects, they lacked insight into Utzon's single minded vision and misrepresented his intentions, compromising what should have been a coherent work of architecture. In 1995 the 'Unseen Utzon' exhibition, with computer visualisations created by Philip Nobis, for the first time publicly presented Utzon's original designs for the multi-faceted and vibrantly coloured auditorium interiors of the Opera House, as he had intended. The exhibition further fuelled the public support for Utzon's renewed involvement in his building. In August 1999, more than thirty years after he left, Utzon was engaged as a design consultant, in collaboration with the renowned Sydney architect Richard Johnson by the Sydney Opera House Trust, due in much part to the dedication of the Trust's Chairman, Joseph Skrzynski. After so many years it was once again Utzon's role to determine the design principles that should guide all future development, refurbishments and redesign of his building.

While Utzon's wider influence in Australia is not immediately discernible or physically tangible beyond the realisation of the Opera House, though he certainly has inspired many individual architects; it was the building of the Sydney Opera House that realised the full potential of Sydney Harbour and gave Australians a sense of pride in their own unique multi-cultural identity. They could at last cast off the shackles of the stultifying conventions of the old motherland. Though Utzon has long been recognised as an architect of genius, it has previously been difficult to place him and the Sydney Opera House in a historic context or within a specific movement. It is only in recent years that Utzon has been more fully appreciated for his significant contribution to modern architecture and the continuing inspiration his approach to architectural design represents.

Jørn Utzon's work was emblematic of a Scandinavian culture that has long prided itself on the attainment of quality in architecture and design, through the simple, honest yet noble synthesis of form, material and function, motivated by humane social values. His Scandinavian sensibility and integrity of design continued the legacy of the earlier, great Nordic architects Asplund, Korsmo and Aalto. To this specific cultural background Utzon though combined a profound fascination for the ancient legacies of the Mayan civilisation, China, Japan and the Islamic world, a sense of architecture as art, inspiration from nature and an innovative approach to the use of technology, in relation to specific context and conditions.

In 2003 Jørn Utzon was awarded the architectural profession's equivalent of the Nobel Prize, the Pritzker Architecture Prize. As Ada Louise Huxtable, the American architectural critic and member of the Pritzker jury commented *'It has taken half a century to understand the true path of architecture in our time, to pick up the threads of continuity and the signposts*

to the future, to recognize the broader and deeper meaning of 20th century work that has been subjected to doctrinaire modernist criticism and classification, or tabled as history. In this light, the work of Jørn Utzon takes on a particular richness and significance.’ (<http://www.pritzkerprize.com/2003/announcement>) As a fellow Pritzker juror, Frank Gehry recognised Utzon’s considerable achievement in creating of creating ‘*a building well ahead of its time ... the first time in our lifetime that an epic piece of architecture gained such universal presence*’; publicly acknowledging that his Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao would not have been realised without the precedent of Utzon’s Sydney Opera House.

With his humane Nordic approach, Utzon primary concern was not the creation of an iconic monument, but rather a grand public space and a gathering place for the city. Despite it not being his intention, Utzon can be seen to have precipitated a tendency since towards iconic architecture, so favoured by aspiring politicians. The popular universal recognition of Utzon’s unfinished masterpiece in creating an identity, not only for Sydney, but for all of Australia has inspired politicians elsewhere to seek to emulate its iconic status, with their own architectural icons. However the understanding that the lasting success of the Sydney Opera House, was result of the integrity of the architectural vision, its specific relation to context and the tectonic consideration of its actual making, rather than pure image; as so many recent want to be iconic buildings seem so superficially concerned with. Also more importantly the lessons of the political debacle, that forced Utzon to leave his building uncompleted, have still not been learned. Again and again the potential of high-minded visions are degraded by political and individual ambitions, corruption and self-interested mendacity; reducing so much to mediocrity.

All architecture is in some form a political act and most particularly when it is a public building. While being a very humane, socially concerned architect, Utzon was a reluctant and naive politician. A shy, retiring man, who when not trying to do the best work he could, would rather spend time with his family than socialising with the powerful and promoting himself, which left him politically vulnerable. Also undoubtedly Utzon’s own integrity provoked an adverse reaction in those that were lacking in this regard. As a foreigner this was further compounded by the xenophobia of what was then still a very insular provincial backwater. However the reason the Sydney Opera House is so loved and Utzon so well regarded today, is precisely because of his unique architectural vision, and that while being quite capable of finding pragmatic, technically feasible and tectonic solutions to its realisation, was not prepared to compromise his own and his works integrity.

That the Sydney Opera House is the most outstanding building of the Twentieth Century, is because of the remarkable original political vision and that despite the later detrimental political machinations, enough of Utzon’s architectural genius and integrity was actually realised in a sufficiently unadulterated form, as to be able to lift the spirits and hearts of others. As Utzon so poignantly quoted Goethe with regards his own feelings about working on the Sydney Opera House ‘*Give me work to which I can devote myself totally and with love and skill – then it is no longer work, it becomes art and an expression of love*’ (Møller/Udsen, 2006: p.37)

Perhaps the most important dimension of the Sydney Opera House is that despite Utzon having never visited Sydney prior to the competition entry, it is a building that is fused to the particularity of its place. The podium conceived as designed landscape, the shells emblematic of maritime forms that surround it, the tectonic resolution of structure and cladding are resonant of this particular place. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, this sense of ‘placeness’ has informed the international iconic recognition of the building, the City and indeed the country. In many ways the Opera House is the visual symbol or brand of Sydney evidenced through the propagation of its image in advertising, postcards, key rings, coffee mugs, table mats, dishcloths, T-shirts and the contemporary art posters of artists such as Ken Done, as well as in various forms of miniature reproduction in crystal, as salt and pepper pots, a lamp and now as collector’s model in Lego. As Peter Murray states ‘*As Joe Cahill’s successors struggled with the political implications of escalating costs, they would not have known that the investment would be paid back many, many times over in terms of tourism, goodwill and national confidence*’ (Murray, 2004: p.154). It is this idea of building as brand that has been seized upon by politicians across the world.

Many cities have thus subsequently sought international recognition through the construction of iconic buildings’, the Guggenheim in Bilbao by Gehry, the Burj al Arab (Atkins) and the Burj Khalifa (Adrian Smith) in Dubai, ‘the Shard’ (Piano) and ‘the Gherkin’ (Foster) of London, all seek to provide branding to the cities in which they were constructed. In many cases the design appears to be driven by superlatives that reinforce the brand image. In the case of the Burj Khalifa it is

'the tallest building in the world'. In the case of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the Burj al Arab and 'the Gherkin' in London we might argue there is something in the unique form that reinforces the brand.

This branding is driven by the political will of the contemporary city state. In a world of increasing horizontality and fluidity, we might posit that the role of the politician and national and urban level is to encourage inward investment and tourism and in contemporary parlance that is achieved through branding. We can have no doubt of the economic impact of the projects identified; the Guggenheim for example has significant positive economic impact upon Bilbao, making it a destination. The projects in Dubai signify cultural shifts manifested in built form.

Yet in semiotic terms these icons may be viewed as empty signs; signs devoid of substance and meaning other than that of being a sign. Unlike the Opera House these icons are not rooted in the specificity of place, and are thus unable to signify anything other than their existence. The Opera House has earned its iconic status as although its genesis may have been driven by the political will to gain international recognition; the architect through his intuitive sensitivity for place designed a building that endures as a semiotic sign because it represents substance; cultural substance and relationship to place.

There is clearly potential for architecture and the body politic to conjoin in making significant buildings signifying the particularity (or brand) of a particular place. However, if such commissions are to carry the enduring meaning of the Sydney Opera House, the body politic must be courageous and informed and search for substance as well as form.

References

- Antoniades, A. (1992) *Poetics of Architecture: Theory of Design*, New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold
- Drew, P. (1999) *The Masterpiece*, South Yarra Victoria, Hardie Grant Books
- Frampton, K. (1983) *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*, published in Foster, H (1985) *Postmodern Culture*, London, Pluto Press
- Frampton, K. (1995) *Studies in Tectonic Culture*, Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press
- Frampton, K. (2003) *On Jørn Utzon* in Mullins, M. and Carter, A. (ed.) *Proceedings of the Utzon Symposium: Nature Vision and Place*, Aalborg University
- Gelernter, M. (1996) *Sources of architectural form*, Manchester University Press
- Giedion, S. (1982) *Space, Time and Architecture, (Fifth Edition)*, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press
- Holm, M, Kjeldsen and Marcus, M (ed.) (2004) *Jørn Utzon: The Architects Universe*, Humlebaek, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art
- Messent, D. (1997) *Opera House Act One*, Sydney, David Messent
- Murray, P. (2004) *The saga of Sydney Opera House*, London, Spon Press
- Møller, H. S. and Udsen (2006) *Jørn Utzon Houses*, Copenhagen, Living Architecture Publishing
- Pallasmaa, J. (1996) *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, London, Academy Editions
- Prip-Buus, M. (2000) *Letters from Sydney*, Hellerup, Edition Bløndal
- Saarinen, E. (originally published 1948, reprinted 1985) *The search for Form in Art and Architecture*, New York, Dover
- Sudjic, D. (2005) *The Edifice Complex. How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World*, London, Penguin Books
- Utzon, J. (1963) *Platforms and Plateaus: Ideas of a Danish Architect, Zodiac 10*, Milan, Edizioni Comunita
- Watson, A. (ed.) (2006) *Building a masterpiece: the Sydney Opera House*, Sydney, Powerhouse Publishing
- Weston, R. (2002) *Utzon: Inspiration Vision Architecture*, Hellerup, Edition Bløndal
- Yeomans, J. (1973) *The Other Taj Mahal*, Camberwell Victoria, Longman