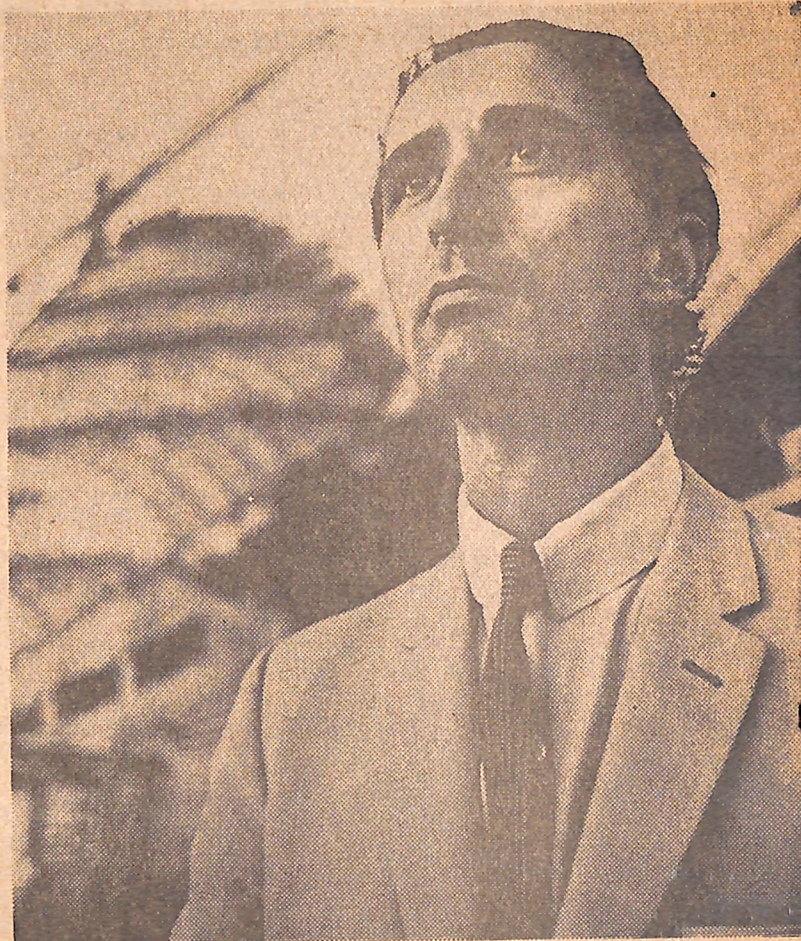


Brave man, said Utzon

HOW PETER HALL DECIDED TO TACKLE THE OPERA HOUSE JOB



Photograph by STUART MacGLADRIE

PETER HALL: First, a few questions had to be answered.

LAST Tuesday morning, about five hours before the announcement that he was to be architect in charge of design at the Opera House, 34-year-old Peter Hall picked up a telephone in the Government Architect's office and rang Joern Utzon at Palm Beach.

He had met Utzon only twice: once at Hellebaek (Denmark) eight years ago, and once at the architect's meeting in the Town Hall last month.

The first meeting took place when Hall, who had been a final-year architecture student at Sydney University when Utzon won the Opera House competition, was travelling on a post-graduate scholarship. He had hoped to work with Utzon at Hellebaek but Utzon felt that Hall could not stay long enough to make his employment there worthwhile.

Their second encounter was at last month's extraordinary general meeting of the New South Wales Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, at which Hall, like most of his contemporaries, voted against a motion of confidence in the Chapter Council.

He spoke to Utzon for only a few seconds, and wished him luck in his dealings with the Government.

Telephone call

That was the extent of Hall's acquaintance with the man whose design function he had now, after much thought, decided to accept. On Tuesday morning he was given Utzon's telephone number by the artist Owen Tooth. Tooth telephoned Mrs Utzon first and asked whether her husband would talk to Hall if he rang. She said he would. Their conversation, which was a long one, went in part as follows:

Hall: Mr Utzon, my name is Peter Hall, and I've been asked to take on the design part of your job.

Utzon: You're a brave man, but I don't think you can do it.

Hall: I can't do it as well as you. You're cleverer than I am. That's why I'd prefer you to do it. Will you go and see the Minister again?

Utzon: No, it is best that I go away now. But I will always be ready to come back any time the Government is willing to let me return in sole charge.

Mr Hall closed the conversation after Michael Nicholson, president of the Society of Sculptors and Associates, had entered his room carrying Utzon's correspondence file. Nicholson had obtained the file from Bill Wheatland, of Utzon's staff, and Hall had agreed to look at it before allowing his appointment to be announced.

It was a large file. Mr Hall read some of the letters, but he did not regard them as relevant to his decision because he himself was not disputing the point which Mr Nicholson and others said the file demonstrated—Utzon's competence.

During the previous three weeks Mr Hall had had several meetings with the Minister for Public Works, Mr Davis Hughes; the Director of Public Works, Mr J. C. C. Humphrey; and the Government Architect, Mr E. H. Farmer. He had looked through some of Utzon's drawings, and had spent two half-days walking over the site.

Not being pressured

"The first thing I wanted to be satisfied about," Hall said yesterday, "was that Utzon was not being pressured off the job. The conclusion I reached was that he was not.

"Secondly, had he in fact resigned? He had. Nobody questions this any more. Thirdly, had he had an opportunity to return to the job? The answer I got was 'Yes,' and it was amplified to 'He has at no stage asked to return to the job.' I was satisfied with these answers.

"Fourthly, I wanted to decide whether this was a job that interested me personally. This may sound a sort of proud thing to be

saying, but it isn't meant like that. If I was going to do it, I had to feel right about it. Finally, I had to decide whether the conditions under which I was to do the design work were satisfactory."

Peter Hall—slim, dark-haired and rather puckish in appearance—lives in a renovated house at North Sydney with his wife and two young children. Mrs Elizabeth Hall studied architecture herself for four years, has designed women's clothes, and is now the operating agent here for the Finnish clothing firm Marimekko.

Percentage payment

Mr Hall will be responsible for design directly to the Government Architect. The other two members of the panel—David Littlemore, who will be in charge of supervision, and Lionel Todd, in charge of contract documents—will in matters of design be responsible to Mr Hall.

All three architects will be paid a percentage of the total cost, just as Utzon was. Collectively, their percentages will amount to Utzon's average of about five per cent (six per cent for work done with consultants, and four per cent without).

Until the Government Architect receives Utzon's drawings (which are being held by Utzon's solicitors, Nicholl and Nicholl, until final settlement by the Government), Mr Hall will not know exactly how much design work remains to be done. But he feels certain that he and the staff which he must engage will face an enormous task during the next three years.