

Malice in Blunderland

By FRANCIS EVERS

UTZON AND THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE: Statement in the Public Interest, by E. Duek-Cohen, Morgan Publications, \$1.20.

FIFTEEN MONTHS after Joern Utzon's enforced withdrawal from the Sydney Opera House project confusion among the public at large remains rife.

So effective has been the whispering campaign against this great architect that, without any case having been made out by the New South Wales Government, many otherwise well-informed citizens still persist with the view that Utzon was largely responsible for cost rises, delays and administrative inadequacies throughout the past nine years.

The truth of the matter is otherwise. Mr Elias Duek-Cohen, a Sydney architect and town planner, has done us all a service with this, the first book to appear on the Opera House affair.

As one who has made no secret of his support for Utzon, I applaud Duek-Cohen's courage in preparing an excellent guide for those still at their wits' end to understand just what happened and why at Bennelong Point.

It is a savage comment itself on the architectural profession of New South Wales, and indeed a large section of the Sydney Press, that Mr Duek-Cohen has had to subsidise the publication of his own book.

Utzon's position at last is made clear in a readable and rational account of the central issues.

All sources are documented. There is a generous display of cartoons by Petty and Molnar and some of the best photographs I've yet seen of the Opera House taken from numerous angles and at various stages of construction.

But the most valuable aspect of this short book is the coherency of the case put for Utzon.

Whatever anyone might think of this complex project, Duek-Cohen's book is essential reading.

In about 100 pages of body type he covers the whole gamut of accusations and counter-accusations made by pro-Utzon and anti-Utzon elements.

The Government's point of view rests largely on its attempt to cut costs (made a political issue at the last State election) and to rationalise administration.

The latter aim was welcomed by Utzon himself, whereas the attempt at cost-cutting by a minister (who now denies he ever intended any such thing!) has left us without Utzon's services and has resulted in a further spiralling of costs, delays and, we now know, the certain mutilation of Utzon's overall conception.

It's all in this book: a detailed account of who was responsible for delays and estimates, not Utzon primarily; a chapter on Utzon's practicality; the background to the Government's action which led to Utzon's departure; and a useful account among the appendices of the resignation issue; the stories of the plywood mock-ups Utzon was prevented from having done; the seating question in the major hall,

and Utzon's resignation and aftermath.

Utzon himself has best summarised the awful shemozzle in one eloquent phrase: "Malice in blunderland."

His own wish for a public inquiry was ignored by Davis Hughes and his Government.

Perhaps they knew the truth of Utzon's claim: "I would welcome a public inquiry—the deeper they dig the more good they will find."

Utzon had given the minister a completion date of December 1969 and an estimate he was prepared to keep to, if allowed to proceed according to his plans, of \$50 millions.

Davis Hughes is on record in Hansard confirming that with this project delays seriously affect ultimate costs.

If Mr Hughes and his Government wanted the best building, to be completed as cheaply and quickly as possible, they set about things in a most destructive way.

Of all architects, Utzon is an artist, as Professor Giedion of Zurich has pointed out: he is, on the evidence, anything but impractical.

There is no excuse whatsoever, at this late stage, for not inviting him back to complete his great building.

However forlorn the wish, it is to be hoped that, now that passions have cooled somewhat, reason and the interest of a great building — being built with lottery money — will yet prevail.

In due course the complete account will emerge. It is a disgraceful story of intrigue, political machinations, intimidation and cowardice.

As the president of the NSW chapter of the Institute of Architects said at the time: "If the whole truth were told too many heads would roll."

Mr Gilling was in an unenviable position. It is a pity he and his colleagues did not fight for a Fellow of their institute.

But then, the most charitable conclusion would seem to be that a lack of spine all round and a concomitant lack of concern for justice and matters of principle were the reality.

Utzon in my view, and it seems in the view of Duek-Cohen, had the cleanest record of anyone. He was thrown to the wolves.

So also was his great building, now the responsibility of a rural MP and the Government architect, above a team of architects themselves dividing responsibility between them.

Posterity will of course, never forgive the spoliation of what would have been Australia's first mammoth architectural masterpiece.

Time, that great deadener, will demolish the claims of all the little men who lent their names and influence to the effective dismissal of Joern Utzon.

Mr E. Duek-Cohen, together with a handful of his professional colleagues, here upholds the reputation of the profession of architecture in New South Wales.

The unhappy thought remains that perhaps Sydney after all never wanted, and does not deserve, possibly the greatest and certainly the most unique opera and theatre centre designed this century.