



This Opera House — Part One



ROBIN BOYD begins a series on the architectural sensation of Sydney, which has thrilled, dismayed and bewildered the public as its cost has risen.

The vision and the anger

IN a century given to architectural sensations and controversy, the most sensational and controversial building ever, anywhere, is the high pointed one on Bennelong Point. While still only half-built, it has already had many seasons: as a glorious vision, as an engineering conundrum, as a political issue, and as an economic headache.

When it eventually becomes an opera house, will the sensation and the controversy continue? Or will "that great effigy," as Joan Sutherland called it, eventually justify all the trouble and temper and money and intellectual effort that it has devoured?

With the change of the New South Wales Government and new estimates of its irrepressible cost, the controversy has flared up again and shows signs of reaching a crisis. Angry words have been used in the Legislative Council: "monstrous . . . scandal . . . incensed . . . dreadful." "Have we become the golden horn of Utzon's Utopia?" demanded Mr A. E. Armstrong, a Country Party member, and he called for a royal commission.

Growth

Members of the Labor Party, which began it all, now turn to attack the Liberals who inherited it. Parliament as a whole seems lost in the technicalities and uncertainties — torn between goodwill towards the magnificent vision and exasperation at the inexorable, apparently endless, growth in the cost.

"£50 million," forecast Mr Armstrong, apparently making his calculation by taking the last figure thought of and doubling it.

The Sydney public — and indeed the whole of the Australian public, which feels a vicarious involvement — seems merely bewildered. It is not yet exasperated. One gets the impression that most people still want to believe in the Sydney Opera House and are not over-concerned at the money, since this is extracted so painlessly.

Eight years ago Sydney fell in love with the vision of this building. After the prize-winning plan in the competition was announced there was a moment's pause while breath was caught. Then came a wave of enthusiasm for the glorious sails flying over the Harbor.

When Time magazine and other international journals approved and praised, Sydney swelled with pride. There was no question about it. Culture may not be Sydney's everyday dinner, but one spectacular world-famous bash at it was worth every penny of £4 million.

But now the question is: how much more than £4 million is it worth? Or, is any vision worth £25 million — plus more (probably). And so we have arrived at the time for painful reckoning.

Soaring

Can one evaluate this building now, half-finished? It is quite unfair to try to — no artist can bear a critic looking over his shoulder while he is still working. Yet there seems to be a necessity, under the circumstances, for someone to do it.

Trying to place the Sydney Opera House in the world of the 20th century, I must say that I think it is not now what it was at the beginning. It started life as a fine, free soaring of the human spirit in the architecturally optimistic 1950s, and it developed into an intense intellectual exercise in the soberer 60s.

But even if it were to change character subtly again before it is finished, this would not

necessarily be detrimental to the end result. What we have here is a phenomenal thing in the modern world of catalogued prefabricated building products and mass-production techniques and fixed sum tenders and computer-organised, critical pathed, carbon-copied building contracts.

Here we have what is virtually improvised architecture. Such an idea could never be tolerated in the world of humdrum construction, of office buildings and home units. But perhaps it can be accepted, just once in a lifetime, as a way to realise a vision.

It can be tolerated only if one has complete confidence in the man operating it. Since personal criticism of the man in this case, the architect, Joern Utzon, has increased with each rise in the estimate, it is necessary to say something about his calibre.

Influence

Joern Utzon is an exceptionally fine architect. There are very few other architects of or about his age in the whole world with higher international prestige.

He is known throughout the architectural world as the brightest star of the strongest new movement to come from Europe since Gropius and other pioneers launched our modern

architecture there two generations ago.

He has had a compelling influence on the architectural youth of all Scandinavia and other parts of the Continent. A Norwegian, Norsberg-Schulz, wrote in World Architecture last year: "Today Utzon practices in Australia but he is still a catalyst to the young generation of Norwegian architects."

Honor

Sigfried Giedeon, the given of international architectural critics, is adding a new chapter to a new edition of his famous opus, Space, Time and Architecture. It is titled Joern Utzon and the Third Generation. Giedeon eulogises Utzon's work, devoting several pages to the Opera House. He regards it as representative of the best and newest.

West German architects are awarding Utzon this year their highest honor, specifically for his design of the Opera House. He has turned down numerous invitations to the U.S.

The new wave which Utzon represents is perhaps best described as an aesthetic renaissance in modern architecture. After the early period of austere Functionalism and the more recent quest for symbolic or "significant" forms, this new movement is searching for more purely visual qualities:

visual orderliness, visual coherence, forms which have meaning, strong forms which are not just fit for physical purpose like old-time Functionalism, but for spiritual and social purpose as well.

There is room for debate as to whether or not this movement is likely to find its Utopia. But there can be no doubting its strength, sincerity and importance as a major modern architectural movement. Joern Utzon, both as a free creative spirit and as an intellectual, is a leader of this movement. There can be no question about his dedication to his art in general and to the Opera House in particular.

And there can be no question that his credentials justify Sydney giving him a good spin and a fair go.

Integrity

As a perfectionist, Utzon believes no doubt that nothing matters so much as the need for this building to be made as faultlessly as possible, that the only mistake which he or anyone else could make would be any move that might harm the end result. No doubt the alarms and excursions around the rising cost worry him for fear they might boil up into action that could destroy the integrity of his concept, even at this late stage.

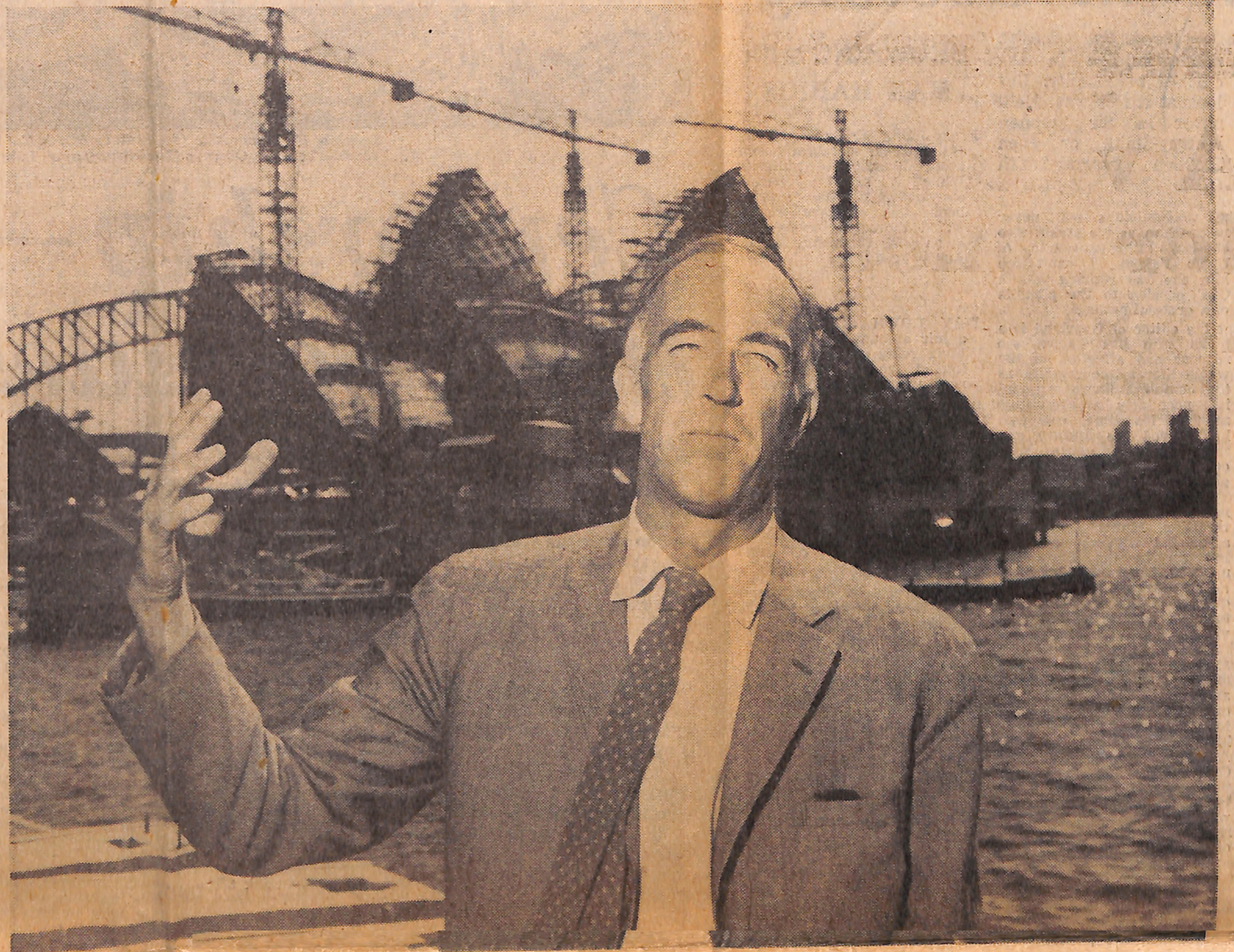
Perfectionism is not an especially popular or traditional Aussie quality. This country can offer no more striking cultural contrast than the old Australian be-in-it gambling spirit that keeps the Opera House lotteries going, and the newer Australian intensity and artistry that make so many lotteries necessary.

The latter qualities may be only dimly understood by many lottery ticket buyers. Yet they undoubtedly realise that the intense artistry is there, and that it is at the root of the cost increase, and that it is ultimately taking money from practical necessities such as hospitals and homes and dams.

Yet the ticket buyers tolerate it. No matter how loud some politicians cry in despair, Australia—through Sydney—has accepted this one manifestation of the artistic spirit, to the sum of £25 million, at least. It has given Joern Utzon a phenomenally fair go.

It has given him a design problem of a scale and importance such as architects' dreams are made of, in every country, in every civilisation since Egypt.

Yet it has also put him in an invidious position. No architect would choose — and certainly Utzon didn't — to work under such ambiguous conditions as he has been given. The cost uncertainty today reflects a long line of indecisive thinking.



UTZON AND HIS OPERA HOUSE . . . brightest star

‘ Culture may not be Sydney's everyday dinner, but one spectacular bash was worth every penny of £4 million. Is it worth £25 million? ’

The difficulties began with the very conception of the idea a decade ago. Sydney decided to take a big plunge for culture by building a grand opera house. Sydney wanted it to be of "world standard." She was as proud as that, but rather predictably did not have the little extra bit of confidence necessary to believe that she had the resources at home to make it of "world standard."

In the best of humble colonial traditions it was decided to hold a world-wide competition and to appoint judges from England and the U.S. to put the local judges on the right track.

All this international advice had the desired result of uncovering a brilliant and original design. However, it was not the way to get a practical answer to the problem of building cheaply and reasonably quickly in Australian conditions. In selecting Utzon's design, the overseas experts could hardly have cared less about Australian conditions or the budget set by the NSW Government. But Sydney was now all enthusiasm and impatience.

A start had to be made immediately. So, long before the design of the main structure was settled, work had to begin on the first stage, the foundations.

Now, it is well enough known that one should have a plan for constructing a roof before one pours its foundations, even when building something as familiar as a suburban villa.

Troubles

The Utzon design of concrete sails was not familiar anywhere in the world. They floated the project into unknown waters. No one at the time anticipated the enormous structural difficulties that lay ahead for this design, but everyone concerned accepted the challenge in good spirit. It was an unwritten condition of the contract which Sydney entered, with eyes wide open, that nothing old, safe or familiar would do.

And so the design and construction of the second stage of the project, the great sails, pressed on. One by one the problems were confronted, and

were solved, by ingenuity, imagination, and truckloads of money.

Now it was high time to consider the problems of the interiors of the building, the fittings and finishes and equipment. But as the costs grew on the second stage, leaving far behind the original target (it was never an estimate) of £4 million, the Government seemed reluctant to commit itself to anything more any sooner than it had to. So decisions on the third stage were postponed. It was like putting a roof on the villa before a bathroom was planned.

Models

This can be done, but it is not the best way to keep control of building costs. To this day some major items of interior construction are only glints in Mr Utzon's bright eye, or are schematic models not designed in any detail. That is why the cost still cannot be finally calculated. Similar prevarication has left the question of car parking still hanging on the edge of the opposite cliff.

This is not the approved or usual way to run any building project. It is normal to plan practically everything before breaking ground. With this piecemeal method the costs could be expected to get out of hand even using conventional construction.

No architect would choose to work under such conditions, and Mr Utzon cannot be blamed for them. Sydney's own pride and impatience were partly to blame.

And yet, even if all this is accepted, even if a cost increase of, say, two or three times the target could be tolerated, still some questions call for answers. How could any construction turn out to be so expensive? And will it all be worth the troubles in the long run?

MONDAY:

Where the money went