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## This Opera House—Part Three

ROBIN BOYD  
sums up on  
the bold and  
beautiful  
Utzon plan

# Sydney, reluctant patron

‘Every nought on the bill will  
thrill the uncultured tourist,  
to whom money speaks loudest’

WHATEVER Sydney expected when it called a competition for its Opera House, no one was prepared for anything like this. The idea which won the international design competition was breathtakingly bold.

Indeed, the effect presented on Joern Utzon's dashing drawings was so way-out that the judges wondered if laymen would be able to understand it. They arranged quickly for a conventional, colored "artist's impression" of the finished building to be done by a Sydney architect before announcing the results.

The design was bold in two ways. The primary way anyone could understand it was the brilliant simplicity of the plan: a giant free-standing shelter erected over two sister auditoriums nestled on a concrete hillside. All the usual tangle of stair and corridors was eliminated in one broad gesture.

The secondary boldness was in the external appearance, the famous sails. Buildings based on a similar idea, a varied repetition of a distinctive element, had been seen before. Utzon had designed some of them in Denmark. But nothing before was quite like this, nor approached its monumental scale.

The Opera House is very bold and is likely to be very beautiful. Some people will deny this. They think it is going to look awful. So be it; beauty is a private thing. But its looks are not what worry most people. They concede its bold beauty. However, before they are prepared to concede also that this is worth the mighty cost, they want answers to other questions. These can be boiled down to three main ones.

First, a practical question: Will it work? They mean, from the practical point of view—acoustics and all that.

Second, an artistic question: Will the exciting vision remain exciting—in other words, is it genuine and not a stunt?

Third, a narrower nationalistic one: What will the whole venture do for Australian art and enlightenment?

Questions in the first category are usually prompted by some nasty remarks made by visiting musicians. These are sometimes repeated now as rumors; in a whisper.

They cannot be taken seriously by anyone who has seen the intensive study being given to the smallest details in the architect's offices on the edge of the water at Bennelong Point. The acoustical design and most of the other interior design details that will determine whether or not the building will be a musical success are barely reaching finality even now, after years of penetrating research, investigation and trial.

### Original

"I would not dare to build this Opera House before seeing a successful full-scale mock-up of almost everything," says Utzon. That is indeed the only correct way to build something as original and complicated as this, although no architect before in Australia has ever been lucky enough to be able to do it.

Books are being prepared on Utzon's methods of arriving at satisfactory results in connection with the acoustics and all other main technical problems, one by one. I think it can be safely assumed that the building will "work" very well indeed.

The second question is not so quickly answered. To some

people there is really no question at all. To them the Opera House is unquestionably a masterpiece, "the most important building in the world today" as a writer in the London Observer said, or "the greatest monument of this century" as another enthusiast put it.

To other critics there is an artistic question, and in most cases it is concerned with the relationship of the exterior vision of glorious sails to the heart of the matter: the real live auditoriums and stages and foyers and restaurants and lavatories that must go inside.

At first sight there is not much relationship at all. A dual personality was inherent in the original concept. The free-standing shell shelter was one thing, the sister auditoriums were separate things. They could almost rattle around inside like a double-yolk egg.

A member of the audience will find his way in by walking up a giant stepped approach into and through the white-of-egg space. Overhead he will see the massive inner ribs of

the "shell" soaring up in a vast arc out of sight over the top of the nearest yolk, which will be the separate, self-contained structure of an auditorium.

Once he enters an auditorium the shell will be lost to sight and he will be in a new world, of timber instead of concrete, warmer, softer and gentler than the stupendous slice of space outside—a deliberate change of atmosphere, or pace, as between acts in an opera, from the awesome to the intimate.

It is typical of Utzon's approach that the change is not as many architects might have made it, from the down-to-earth to the theatrical; this is a change between two different theatrical moods.

### Enormous

Such a violent change of mood might never be artistically acceptable in a smaller, everyday building, but then there is nothing everyday about the function of an opera house and nothing small about this one's

scale. It is probably quite big enough to carry the two different characters with ease.

Nevertheless, there will exist an enormous "roof space" between the squarish auditorium ceiling and the high-flying sails above, unseen and unused by man or beast—except maybe by a lonely maintenance man. This knowledge will continue to haunt an old-fashioned Functionalist like me.

Yet despite the differences of materials and mood between the sails and the auditoriums they shelter, Utzon has given them a subtle family relationship. Just as the sails are made of different segments cut, as it were, from a single sphere, so the profiles of the boxes which enclose the auditoriums will be composed entirely of arcs of the same radius. This will give the fragmentation which is acoustically necessary a discipline and visual unity and a cousinly association with the sails.

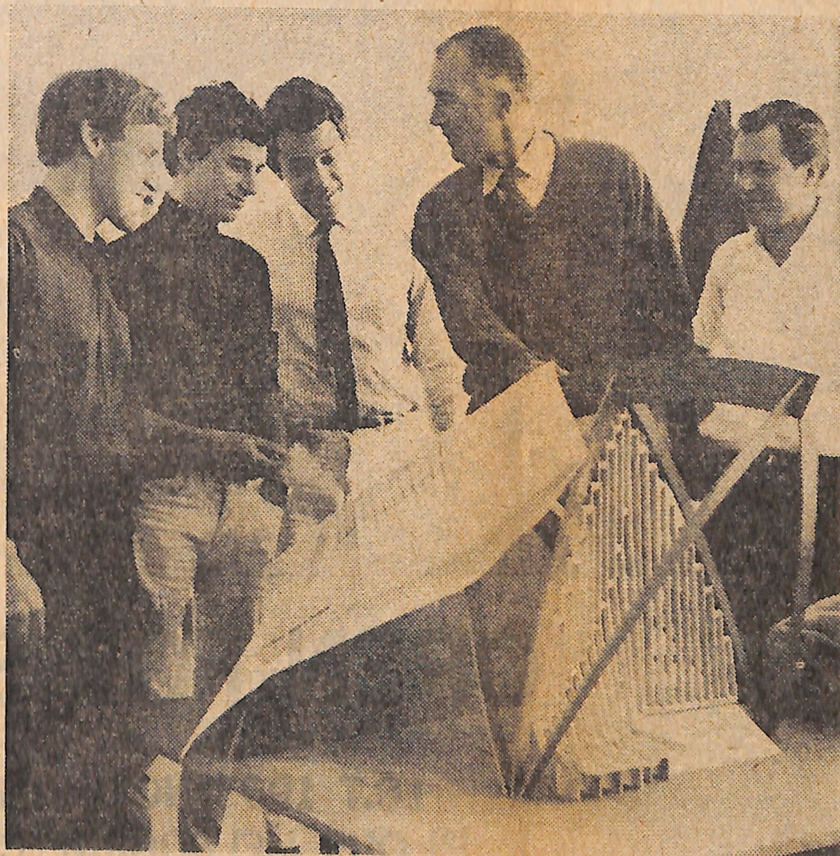
A third hall and other facilities are tucked into the great sub-structure.

Every element of the design

has clearly been subjected to piercing examination and has gone through a long period of growth and variation. The most obvious change from the original design—more so than the subtle geometrical change to the shapes of the sails—is in the vertical screens that close the open ends of the sails. These were originally suggested as giant horizontal louvres. Now they are glass screen walls which swing out at the bottom like draped curtains, expressing eloquently that they are not self-supporting but are hanging from the concrete.

### Polish

One of the things that this building will do for Australia will be to set a new standard in meticulousness, in the most diligent attention to details. Its great consumption of money and time undoubtedly will be reflected in a polish that is rare in the modern world and hardly known here.



UTZON AND HIS  
TEAM OF ARCHITECTS

"The cost has the whole world smiling," said Mr A. E. Armstrong, the Opera House's most outspoken critic on the NSW Country Party benches. "When the final cost is known," he forecast, "the smiles will turn to outright laughter."

I beg to suggest the opposite. The high cost is much more likely to impress the rest of the world no end, if that is important to Sydney. Every nought on the bill will thrill the uncultured tourist to whom money speaks loudest.

And every extra million will impress the cultivated people of the world who had no idea, before this spectacular proof soared into the sky, that Sydney was so enlightened, so emancipated from petty practical concerns by its high standard of living, that it could afford to lavish money and time on such a flight of the human spirit.

This will be one of the select few world representative buildings of the 20th century. It will be the subject no doubt of many

searching criticisms by musicians, artistes, architects and others, just because it is serious enough to be so criticised.

I don't think there can be the slightest doubt as to its ultimate importance. And it is a glum but generally accepted fact that no work can achieve such pre-eminence by quick or cheap methods.

Australia has rarely before experimented, or pointed a new way, or taken a dare in matters of art. It was high time we did. The only disaster or tragedy that could happen now would be a last-minute collapse of faith in the outcome of the Opera House, followed by some action that might stop the full realisation of the idea.

### Cheaper

While Sydney has labored on, other cities have planned, built and opened opera houses almost as big and costing only a fraction of the price. Los Angeles, for instance. It has a new one, done more or less in the style of Melbourne's Southern Cross Hotel — it was by the same architect. Sydney could have built three or four like this for the money and would have excited no one, raised no one's spirit, given nothing to the future.

By accident, unexpectedly, reluctantly, Sydney is creating one of those heart-moving, non-material ornaments of society which happen throughout history once a century or so. Although she didn't plan it this way, she has taken on the role of rich patron to a fine artist, and will live to be proud of the fact.

The whole thing does her great credit. Sydney really should try to look happier about it, and pass on now to thinking harder, about how she will adequately use the great facilities.

THE END