

## NOW IT'S NOT AN OPERA HOUSE, BUT IS IT ARCHITECTURE?

Even if it is not to be an opera house it will be a mighty concert hall. It is also already an enormous construction making a dazzling visual splash by the harbour of a great city. In short, whatever else happens now the building on Bennelong Point seems destined to be architecture with a capital A, architecture performed on such a scale and with such bravado as have not been seen before this century in this country and are not seen often in any century in any country. Unquestionably it is spectacular architecture, but for \$50 million one expects more. Is it great architecture?

Just suppose for a moment that it had not struck any troubles. Just suppose Joern Utzon had been left in control, and he and a benign Dr. Darling and a beneficent Mr. Hughes had come to agreement on the interior planning. We are in 1970 and the scaffolding is removed. Now the question again: is it great architecture?

That question was important ten years ago when the competition was judged. This No-opera House, after all, was always first a monument - that is, architecture - and second something to do with music. I should say now that I am on the side of those who believe that the decision to demote the main hall to the lesser role of concert-hall was deplorable no matter what were the difficulties in the way of the multi-purpose hall. This was not a solution to a problem but an unacceptable dismissal of a problem. That is not to say that I worship opera as the pinnacle of art, nor does it deny the existence of popular amnesia. In a few years, admittedly, the memory that it was ever to be an opera house will be practically wiped out, it will be accepted as a concert hall.



Yet the question of its validity and integrity as architecture, now that it is only a concert hall lacking all the suspect enchantment of the word opera, is even more important. After all the heartaches and headaches are over, after the enormous structure is at last somehow opened, that question - 'is it great architecture?' - will rise to the top again, and will remain hanging over the harbour for a century or two.

No one now underestimates the other problems. The acoustics, the seat-spacing, the sight-lines, the circulation: all these challenge the people who are sweating over them. But they are not unsolvable or basic. As one pragmatic Australian to another, I can assure you now that they will be solved all right, mate; and the toilets, too, will be more commodious than in any other opera house or concert hall in the world. These things will look after themselves; they always do here. What we really have to think about now is the architecture. When it is done will this giant construction be a world laughing-stock: the Opera House that never was, the family group of white elephants; or will it be, despite the deflation of the interior function, a thing to lift the hearts and minds of Sydneysiders and to thrill the eyes of open-mouthed visitors?

Protagonists have frequently spoken of the esteem in which the design is held by the great international figures of architecture. The shining star architect of the world at the time of the competition, Eero Saarinen, was of course a key figure in, if not entirely responsible for, the selection of Utzon's design, and he had boundless faith in it. Other architects of unquestioned authority have applauded it. At the height of the painful argument over Utzon's



resignation or dismissal a year ago many of them, including Arne Jacobsen of Denmark and Louis Kahn and Paul Rudolph of the U.S.A., committed themselves in urgent statements designed to help Utzon back to his office. These men have very different personal styles and theories about architecture, but they shared a belief in Utzon's brilliance and capacity. Siegfried Giedion, a renowned historian of 20th Century architecture, wrote a new chapter to his monumental story of the design revolution, Space, Time and Architecture, in which he lavished praise on Utzon, describing him as the leader of his generation, mainly on account of the Opera House design.

Yet it would be wrong to suggest or assume that the great authorities of world architecture have been or are now unanimous in their enthusiasm for the design. They are rarely unanimous about anything, and far from agreement in this case.

Frank Lloyd Wright, two years before his death when the competition result was announced, snapped: 'Australians are not going to let this abomination happen, are they?' The famous Italian engineer, Pierluigi Nervi, probably the greatest living exponent of concrete design (he shaped those fine lower floors of curved, interlaced beams in Australia Square) objected strongly to the lack of a structural basis to Utzon's sails. The no less eminent American engineer and inventor, Buckminster Fuller, damned them less directly with faint praise. He thought that he was glad, on the whole, that the building had been built. 'It will give people simple pleasure,' he said kindly.

None of their remarks can be dismissed as the voice of conservatism. Wright was in no sense a square architect, and both Nervi and Fuller have given



modern architecture invaluable help in its agonising struggle to free itself from the rectilinear box. They have shown it how to exploit the inherent strength of curved forms, as in an eggshell. Between the three of them these men have built almost every geometrically curved shape imaginable - cylinder, dome, sphere, spiral - almost everything except a combination of shells or sails with ridges up the middle. All of their shapes have had a functional and/or a structural basis, and in the case of the two engineers at least a strong economic justification as well. Nervi most keenly denies any artistic or emotional reasons for the sweeping shapes he likes to build. He uses them, he claims, because they are not only structurally but also economically advantageous for the job in hand.

It is common knowledge that no such consideration moved Utzon. The motivation for his sweeping shapes was frankly artistic. Structural considerations came a poor second, even if in the end they forced the art to bend their way - geometrically instead of freely. Functional considerations hardly entered at any stage.

The essence of the Utzon concept was the separation of the sails or outer covering from the functional-acoustic surrounds of the halls. He planned this separation primarily so that the inner enclosures could take any shape which acoustics dictated without interfering with or affecting the monumental outer covering. He could have made the outer covering of practically any material and any shape: a lumpy glass box, or series of glass boxes like a family group of office buildings, or a number of domes, or vaults. He could have put the whole thing into an elaborate sort of coffin: a flat roof over the



Or he could have made  
the outer covering hug  
the inner one in the  
ordinary way.

top and a row of columns or arches around the perimeter. This was the fate that befell each of the three halls in New York's Lincoln Centre. But Utzon, let us remember, was designing his competition entry in a mood of imaginative abandon in the middle of the 1950 decade, an era of high excitement in the structural engineering field.

How glorious it was to live in the second half of the twentieth century, when any shape, however strange or big, could be constructed by the back-room boys of engineering! Thanks to the new miracle of shell-concrete any vision in an architect's dream could come to life! That is what many of the best people at the time thought. So Utzon planned to build the covering over his halls as concrete shells. He was too sophisticated to try to cover the complex of halls and restaurants with any single package shape. He planned instead a closely related family of shapes.

Because he knew the building was to be beside a deep harbour and he had seen pictures in the competition conditions of sailing boats cutting up crisp white foam on dark water under the bridges, he thought no doubt of the shapes of billowing sails. Because he had to contend with the usual huge loft for scenery hanging over the opera stage, he thought in terms of a main sail, high enough to hide this embarrassing functional necessity, and of jib sails, wrapping over the lower parts of the auditoria, receding from the main sail. Perhaps because he was a Dane the sails finished up looking slightly reminiscent of Viking helmets.

It is painfully well known now that the back-room boys could not construct the shapes that Utzon dashed off in his inspired moment. (Part of



the trouble was the sharp ridge down the centre of each shell. Shells abhor sudden bends. Imagine a hen's egg with knife-edge styling. It would crack long before it reached the breakfast table). We know that the constructional problem was solved eventually by reshaping the sails with geometrical discipline into parts of a sphere, and making them of repetitive ribs, not as shells. In the opinion of some people the stiffer spherical shapes have removed the spontaneity and thus spoiled the effect. Perhaps. But in any case the external appearance as now built is breathtaking enough - strong, fresh and beautiful enough - to be the pride of any city. This is not questioned, except by a few arch-conservatives, but skin-deep beauty is not the issue.

The more persistent question is whether it is reasonable and right to build such an enormous thing of such little functional consequence. We must ask, what is this beautiful thing? If we call it sculpture we should consider the number of Rodins, Caiders, Moores and Michelangelos which Sydney might have bought with the same amount of money. If we call it architecture we question the very foundation of the architectural philosophy of the 20th Century. And this is indeed what Utzon has done.

The international architectural scene is split at this time into two factions. There are those who believe that building forms should be dictated by economics and technology even to the extent of having computers determine the basic plan and form. On the other hand there are the artist-architects, those who still like to see visions and conceive ideas. The Opera House has been one of the world's most influential buildings in bringing this debate to a head, for



it is bigger and more conspicuously Art-architecture than any other building of its period.

Its period, <sup>(was a turbulent one for architecture.)</sup> the nineteen fifties, <sup>^</sup> The competition was held at the height of an era of great shapes when Eero Saarinen, the decisive member of the judging panel, was at the <sup>peak</sup> ~~height~~ of his career and just starting work on the greatest shape of his life, the TWA terminal building at Kennedy Airport in New York. He gave that building wings, symbolic of flight, and it became known as the Giant Bird. Saarinen, working under pressure, managed to form his visions into completed buildings reasonably quickly. His ideas were more or less flash-frozen. The Opera House was less fortunate. In eleven long years since the competition, while the sails laboured to completion, the fermentation of world architecture threw up a new mood and attitude. Saarinen died, but in his last works he demonstrated such a strong return to a rational functional-structural discipline as to suggest that he had renounced the Giant Bird and had got the great shapes out of his system. Today numbers of architects abroad and at home respond again to the old truism that a building's design should grow from the inside out, and they are seriously disturbed by the aesthetic challenge to the intellect set up by the spectacle of the Opera House. The sheer irrelevance of the beautiful sails in relation to the interior functions and even to the atmosphere of an opera house or a concert hall is, to say the least, disarming.

Nickolaus Pevsner, the eminent English architectural historian, explained his reaction to the sails this way: 'I want my emotions to be created in an opera house by the power of music - not by the architect's mood. I do not want



to be bowled over before I have even handed in my coat at the cloakroom.'

Yet at the back of the mind of practically every architect who has criticised the Opera House hovers a qualifying thought. This is the unquestioned <sup>sensitivity</sup> ~~brilliance~~ and integrity as a designer of Joern Utzon. Even if the whole idea of separating the functional intestines from the outer skin <sup>seemed</sup> ~~is~~ untenable, <sup>(until 1966)</sup> there was always the knowledge that Utzon <sup>was in charge and</sup> would be able to make the separation as painless as possible. His own sure hand would direct the interior into artistic cohesion with the sails. With the infinite care which marks all his work he would shape each detail so that the interior as a whole, even if not a close natural relative of the exterior, would make a compatible marriage with it. Then together they could have produced architecture.

Utzon has an almost uncanny sense of what looks 'right' - right, that is, to a sophisticated citizen of the 20th Century. Some architects, more technical or intellectual in their approach to design than he, have no such visual sense. They know if something works, but they really do not know if it will look right to others until it is finished and others tell them.

It takes many kinds of good architects to make a good city, and the good architect which Mr. Davis Hughes picked to follow Joern Utzon was so different from Utzon that he might almost have belonged to a different profession. Peter Hall is an architect of a new generation which experienced in its youth the Expressionist excitement of Eero Saarinen's era of shapes and lived beyond to return to first principles. Peter Hall is a Rationalist architect like those who pioneered the Functionalist movement near the beginning of this century. From the moment of taking over he made it known that he had no pretensions to



being another genius. He likes to see reasons for every effect architecture displays. This is not to suggest that appearances mean nothing to him. He was in fact disappointed to discover so few spatial effects to thrill him when he first investigated the interior plans which he took over from Utzon.

It is perhaps not generally recognised that the first major decision to be made since Utzon left, the dismissal of opera and ballet from the main hall, had great architectural significance on top of the rap it gave to the performing arts. It took the wind out of the Utzon sails by removing their one tenuous functional justification. It eliminated the reason for the high main sail, that giant climactic loop of concrete that was to house or hide the scenery left above the stage of the main auditorium. Now that it is only a concert hall there is no longer any need for flying scenery, thus no need for the main sail which was the <sup>culmination</sup> ~~climax~~ of Utzon's design.

Peter Hall clearly does not picture himself as a new broom. He admires and respects Utzon. He has promised not to change anything that Utzon has already built, and has no wish to destroy arbitrarily anything Utzon has already planned. Yet by nature and training and every circumstance he will inevitably solve every problem that has arisen since he took over, and every one that arises from now on, differently from the way Utzon would have solved them. His solutions will certainly be more rational, more predictable, and probably much more in line with the consensus in world architecture at this time. The interiors he creates may even be to many visitors more attractive than those which Utzon might have done. Yet they may be as remote from the giant white <sup>sails</sup> ~~shells~~ above them as a Viking helmet from khaki overalls.



The more Peter Hall works on shaping the intestines the more he is likely to divorce them emotionally and visually from those huge loops of outer skin that are waiting to receive them. The decision on the concert hall indicates that Mr. Davis Hughes also has set his feet on a path that, despite anything he intends, will further alienate architecturally the part already built from the parts yet to be built.

Thus the fate of the building on Bennelong Point begins to become clear. It will eventually be a splendid modern concert hall, just as the Government of New South Wales has promised. Peter Hall can be trusted to design that and Davis Hughes can be expected not to stint the money for it now. It will be a handsome interior. Likewise the Utzon shells, completed, gleaming white, their open ends filled in somehow, will remain no less breathtaking than they are now: a beautiful exterior. Yet <sup>interior and exterior,</sup> inside and outside are now divorced and can never make <sup>we</sup> architecture. The halls where ~~we~~ will hear the music will always be haunted, overshadowed, by this thing of gigantic irrelevance: this <sup>beautiful</sup> series of figuratively and almost literally empty shells.

(End)