

THE TRAGEDY IN SYDNEY

The architectural profession in Sydney - indeed in all Australia - was split down the centre during the month that followed Joern Utzon's resignation from the Opera House. About half believed that this was a classic case of art being back-stabbed by philistinism. They argued that Utzon never resigned: he was manoeuvred into an impossible corner by Hughes, the politician, so that he finally gasped out, "I am forced to stop!" This was a cry of despair, but it was misrepresented as resignation by the conservative (Liberal Party) government members - so the argument continues - because they had been out to get Utzon. It was all carefully planned. Before they came to power last year, inheriting the opera house problems from the previous Labor government, they had promised some action on the rocketing costs.

These arguments, with embroidery and variations, were proclaimed in meetings, marches, demonstrations and pamphlets with at least as much emotion as charged the separate but simultaneous public argument on Vietnam. Messages from Geidion, Rudolph, Kahn were read in support of Utzon to passionate conferees. Accusations were hurled at the R. A. I. A. Council for not supporting a member more strongly when he was down. Above all, a principle was invoked: an architect should be allowed to finish his own work, no matter how or what. The fury of the denunciations of everyone not positively for Utzon added fire to the raptures of praise that now flowed over the unfinished building: "... this rare and marvellous, Godfelt work of art," wrote one architect, Neville Gruzman. "I feel myself polluted by what I have seen happen in Sydney... soiled and shamed to know what conniving took place behind our backs..." The movement focussed on a drive to blacklist the panel of architects which the Government proposed to appoint to replace Utzon.

On the other side of the fence stood an ill-assorted group: conservative senior architects who had disapproved all along of the building and of having a foreigner do it, philistines who could never understand the infinite pains which Utzon was taking to perfect his creation and who therefore blamed him - as the Government and public did - for apparent inefficacy, opportunists who hoped for a seat on the panel, sincere doubters of Utzon's methods, and worried seniors of the profession who tried to intercede officially in the hope that both Utzon and the Government would relent a little and find a way to reconciliation.

It was a terrible test for the council of the local chapter of the R. A. I. A. . They voted on the proposal to blacklist the new panel and the proposal was lost. Then the rebels outside counted their strength and demanded a general meeting to call a vote of no confidence in the council. The two sides met head on in a crowded meeting on March 28. Speaking publicly for the first time since his maybe-resignation, Joern Utzon said that he was forced to leave the job after ten months of obstruction from his governmental clients. He said they appeared to have been misled by their advisors. He had asked them to write down any specific complaints about his administration of the project, but they had rejected this request. He said he was prepared to return, but only on the basis of sole architect, and he wanted "the client to get organised. "

The chapter president, Ron A. Gilling, said he and his council always wanted only to see the job completed with Mr. Utzon in charge. They believed "the whole dreadful affair is a great tragedy for our city and Australia, " but there was much loose talk about Mr. Utzon not having resigned. Utzon's own words in his final letter to the Government, "I would not lightly have resigned... ", showed that he believed it himself. There was absolutely nothing, Gilling said, that the Institute could do to prevent other architects from legally taking over the commission.

A vote of confidence in the Institute council was taken. The council won: 369 to 283.

By late April Utzon was packing to return to Denmark. His supporters were calling for formal affidavits from individual architects all over Australia. Their object was to prove the Government's acceptance of the resignation illegal because the Opera House Act of 1960 called for the construction "in accordance with the design prepared by Joern Utzon. " They were not very hopeful of legal victory; it was more a matter of principle. Behind the scenes the Government started recruiting a panel.

Why did the Institute not stand up more strongly for one of its members in dire public trouble, and with whome every architect of goodwill sympathised?

"One real difficulty", said President Gilling, "was that despite all our efforts Mr. Utzon never once sought advice or assistance from his Institute. This is something I will never understand. In fact, the Institute has probably gone too far within its powers to support a member without being asked to. "