

THE UTZON EFFECT

What does Jørn Utzon mean for Sydney architecture? Naomi Stead considers a recent series of talks and reflects on the Utzon legacy.

Leon van Schaik has recently argued in his book *Design City Melbourne* that, for all its great qualities, Jørn Utzon's Opera House has made little impact on the architectural culture of Sydney. In fact, he writes provocatively, it has had "as much consequence for the local design culture as if it were from Mars". There is, however, a definable streak in Sydney architecture that suggests otherwise, as was very evident in a recent series of talks. Convened by Eoghan Lewis, each of the four talks was presented by different speakers around the theme of "celebrating the work and influence of Jørn Utzon". The talks coincided with Utzon's birthday and the ongoing work at the Opera House, including the opening of the new western loggia. The events are part of the long-running "Slide Night" series, organized by Lewis and Simeon King, but this focused series on Utzon was a new initiative which, in collaboration with the Historic Houses Trust, formalized the discussion in the more plush institutional venues of the Museum of Sydney and The Mint.

Lewis is a prominent figure in local discourse and education and is well known in Sydney as the convenor of the Sydney Architecture Walks. If the intention there is to understand architecture and the city by *walking* around them, there is a neat analogy with his intention in these Utzon events – to "talk about the object by talking around it", to approach Utzon's major work circuitously. Accordingly, the four talks were framed as a kind of loose before-and-after, beginning with "The Bayview Houses", followed by "Utzon vs. the Liberal Government", then "After Sydney: Denmark, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Majorca" and finally "The Legacy". The aim was to generate a "pointy" local debate about this seminal building, a discussion both topical and critical, and thus to examine Utzon's significance for this city and for twentieth-century architecture.

The series opened, appropriately enough, with Richard Lepplatrier, who worked for Utzon from 1964 to 1966, and who was deeply influenced by that period. While the talk was ostensibly about the unrealized Bayview houses that Utzon designed for his family, and James Weirick discussed these in a lengthy introduction, it seemed more an occasion for storytelling about Utzon's life and work in Sydney. This first event was sold out, and the audience sat riveted, giving occasional little hums of empathetic

agreement or clicking tongues in surprise; this was not your usual architectural audience. They liked what they got, however, as Lepplatrier recounted Utzon's lessons – what it was to be in "a group of young people working for this amazing man". There was a palpable nostalgia in Lepplatrier's account of those idyllic days, forty years ago, when he and Utzon would go sailing, and a poignancy in his wistful comment that "it was just so nice ..."

The second talk, by the venerable triad Elias Duek Cohen, Bill Wheatland and Sylvia Lawson, detailed the minutiae of the political and legal processes that preceded and followed Utzon's departure from the Opera House project. Bill Wheatland in particular, as the architect left to "clean up" Utzon's affairs and to pursue his court case for unpaid fees, was in a unique position to observe the architectural and ideological machinations. This talk gave a sense that oral history was being performed before our eyes. It is commendable that the Historic Houses Trust has recorded these discussions and will archive them online.

The third talk was given by Alex Popov, who worked for Utzon for ten years and was probably the closest to him of all the speakers, in both personal and professional terms. Perhaps because of this familiarity, his was a refreshingly matter-of-fact presentation, which retained a critical acuity sometimes lacking in the others. His presentation of the work "after Sydney" was illuminating – it sometimes seemed that Utzon was cursed, with almost every major project in the years following his leaving Sydney being stymied in one way or another. The Zurich Schauspielhaus, for instance, which Utzon won in an international competition, was abandoned overnight after seven years of documentation.

The fourth and final talk was the most indicative of the impact Utzon has had on the local scene, as it largely focused on the concept of influence and, by extension, on genealogy. Chris Bosse of PTW, Peter Poulet and Peter Stutchbury each addressed the theme of nature and its role as an inspiration and source for architecture. For me the most revealing moment of the whole series came in Stutchbury's presentation, when he recounted an anecdote that Lepplatrier had already told three weeks earlier. The story was about sailing on Pittwater and Utzon pointing out a

particular cloud formation rising up and over a headland. While this moment had clearly been something of an epiphany for Lepplatrier, what is really interesting is how the very same story was retold by Stutchbury, one of Lepplatrier's own students. This telling and retelling of stories passed down from generation to generation is precisely what writes history into myth.

Perhaps it is now impossible for a public audience to talk about the "Great Dane" without a strange intellectual rowdiness emerging – an anxious desire to loudly cheer the hero and throw tomatoes at the villains. At one point, James Weirick referred to "the Opera House tragedy", and there is indeed something of the theatrical epic here, complete with Greek chorus and wailing. Hushed reverence is mixed with a surprisingly vehement – albeit to me rather misguided – vilification of Hall, Todd and Littlemore, who took over the project after Utzon's departure. There is an almost palpable sense of communal guilt, apology and a fierce wish for redemption. In Sydney today, it is perhaps not possible to be clear-eyed and critical about Utzon and his legacy. The subject is so overdetermined and overwrought, both the quasi-religious hagiography and the cynicism are so thick – the trees press so close it may be impossible to see the forest.

In this context, Lewis's decision to circle the Opera House without directly addressing it seems very wise. But van Schaik's question of the building's consequence for Sydney architecture remains. It seems to me that this impact is quite distinct, but that it is less a formal influence and more one of architectural attitude, design process and personal connection. Genealogy maintains a very firm grip in Sydney architecture, and there is a privileged lineage which springs from a handful of "masters", including Utzon, and leads down through several generations of disciples. The fact that many of these figures have held influential teaching positions, and indeed have been great teachers, has perpetuated this reverential emulation, continuously passing it down. It has fundamentally inflected what we know as Sydney architecture today.

NAOMI STEAD IS A SENIOR LECTURER IN ARCHITECTURE AT UTS.

THE RECORDINGS OF THE UTZON TALKS ARE ONLINE AT WWW.HHT.NET.AU/ONLINE_FEATURES/AUDIO. SYDNEY ARCHITECTURE WALKS CAN BE FOUND AT WWW.SYDNEYARCHITECTURE.ORG