

Jørn Utzon

Born 1919

It is not without a sense of pathos that one learns that Jørn Utzon has been awarded this year's Pritzker Prize, architecture's equivalent of the Nobel Prize. Like the final act in a Greek tragedy, Utzon's victory is Pyrrhic. At eighty-four years of age, the Danish architect is finally being showered with the honours and adulatory publications deserving of years before.

But not before he designed the Sydney Opera House (1957-73), arguably the best-known public building of the twentieth century and suffered for the greater part of his career because of it. As one of the Pritzker prize jurors, Frank Gehry, remarks:

Utzon made a building well ahead of its time, far ahead of available technology, and he persevered through extraordinary malicious publicity and negative criticism to build a building that changed the image of an entire country.



The Australian architectural profession can share in the celebration of Utzon's award but it must also share some historic shame. When Utzon left Australia in April 1966 never to return and with his masterpiece unfinished, the local profession, despite protestation, were powerless in Utzon's final hour of need. For those Australian architects, engineers and industrialists who worked and collaborated with him – Peter Myers, Richard Leplastrier, Bill Wheatland and Ralph Symonds and others – this prize is vindication of their faith. The same can be said of the many Sydney architects like Harry Seidler who were Utzon's outspoken champions throughout the controversy. It must be said, however, that Utzon was himself not without blame in all of this, carrying his artistic pride before him, principles held aloft, he was unwilling to compromise at any cost. Yet history has proved him right.

In many ways, Utzon's career charts the tragic path of postwar modernity – from selfcritique in the early 1950s, through practical if uncertain realization, and finally to critical and revisionist redemption by the end of the century. The 1956 competition for the Sydney Opera House gave Utzon the project of the second half of the twentieth century: to achieve the promise of monumentality, which prewar modernism had not realised. His Kingo (1957-60) and Fredensborg (1962-63) courtyard houses became seminal alternatives to the *seidlung* and forecast the retrieval of place. His Bagsvaerd church (1968-76) gave Kenneth Frampton the built example for his theory of critical regionalism. His National Assembly Building in Kuwait (1971-83) gave new meaning to the image of governance in the Middle East. His unbuilt Asger Jørn Art Museum in Silkeborg (1963-64), semi-submerged and amoeba-like in section, still remains one of the most intriguing reflections on the nature of enclosed space.

Utzon's seminal piece of theoretical writing appeared in *Zodiac 10* in 1962. "Platforms and Plateaus: Ideas of a Danish Architect" indicated Utzon's rich formal inspiration that was not the machine but the human-built plateaus of Aztec architecture and the timber platforms of Japan. It was paralleled by his developing interests in Islamic architecture and the tectonic workings of the twelfth-century Chinese building manual, the *Ying-tzao-fashih*, which lay behind rationale for the structural and detail systems of the Opera House. In 1967 Sigfried Giedion in his fifth edition of *Space Time and Architecture* cast Utzon in the role of the next titan of modernism. It was a tragic spell. Today, amongst young architects, historians and theoreticians, Utzon's career trajectory is held aloft as an artistic ideal – but as a practice ideal it seems tragically out of touch with a brutal and mercenary political and construction culture.

Like many heroes, Utzon's self-imposed exile on Mallorca has completed the poetry of his extraordinary career. He and his buildings have, rightly, defined the meaning of legend in the history of twentieth-century architecture.

Edited extract from an article by Philip Goad (Professor of Architecture at the University of Melbourne), published in *Architecture Australia*, May/June 2003.

