BUILDING A MASTERPIECE
The Sydney Opera House
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Paul Keating's lifelong interest in architecture and design encouraged the editor of *Building a Masterpiece* to invite him to launch her book in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Jørn Utzon's nomination as winner of the NSW Opera House competition. Paul Keating sees Utzon's Opera House as more art than architecture, describing the design as timeless, earthy and utopian. He claims Utzon's creation is not simply the greatest building of the twentieth century but one of the greatest of all history.

Whatever was pedestrian about Sydney, and God knows so much has always been, we have always rejoiced in the extraordinary natural beauty of its harbour and its maritime environs.

The high points of its built form—the colonial ones such as Greenway's St James' Church and environs, Barnet's monumental Bridge Street, St Mary's Cathedral and Sydney University—as well as the twentieth-century residential and commercial buildings such as the Astor, the AWA Tower and many others we could mention, could, in one form or another, be seen in other cities around the world.

Sydney dropped the veil of me-tooism when it built the Harbour Bridge. At the apogee of the industrial age, the Labor government of New South Wales made the almighty gesture of spanning the north and southern shores of the harbour with this utterly grand and monumental structure, book-ended by pairs of completely resolved granite pillars.

From that moment on, at least in world terms, that great arch defined Sydney and, for the most part, Australia, as the world had come to know it and indeed us.

It was Sydney's Eiffel Tower, its greatest engineering feat, and built in much the same manner.

But it was more than that. It was a declaration of the importance of the public domain and its primacy in the scheme of things. And in an era when one found one's identity in the common quotient with one's peers, it was cause for rejoicing of a kind that an insular and uncertain place, bound by the modesty of its circumstances, had not previously had.

In the sweep of any nation's history, 30 years is not a long time.

But that was the time between the decision to go ahead with the construction of the Harbour Bridge and the decision to build the Sydney Opera House.

Perhaps not remarkable in itself, but remarkable, as it turned out.

Those 30 years took Australia from the age of iron and steel to the age of concrete, with all its beguiling plasticity.

Those 30 years, in Sydney at least, saw the advent of the steel-frame building and its Cubist march across the city's golden masonry.

'Free at last', cried the architects, 'of the limits imposed by brick and stone; now the sky is the limit'. As the First World War brought down the monarchies across Europe, from that point on, cities and their architects would celebrate the liberation by turning their backs on the decoration and forms which represented so much of the autocratic past.

Function, simplicity and utility took the ascendancy, while materials were employed in a form of exhibitionism which slaked from façades all remnants of the architectural forms and motifs that existed down through the ages.

Architecture in this mould, today, has many names; modernism and postmodernism come to mind. But whatever it is, it holds as uppermost, one single tenet: that everything that happened in architecture before it is irrelevant.

It was in and from this milieu that Jørn Utzon's revolutionary Opera House emerged—so completely and remarkably.

Not only does Utzon refuse to let the materials divine his design, he moulds them to a naturalism which his genius understood would allow him to draw from an entirely new order.

As surely as the gothic of the middle ages brought its rules and inspiration from nature's florilegium, Utzon's 'shells' drew their inspiration from nature and, in their building, from the perfection of nature's sphere. In one leap, Utzon bounded from the new modernism with its naïve geometry and stultifying righteousness, to an entirely new framework of his own creation.

Somewhere in the Utzon head came inspiration for this. For his building is, without doubt, more art than architecture. Some creativity in that brain of his, inspired by nature, or some set of passions, brought this conception into being.

Architecture is not an art. It is a taught medium. Students, certainly these days, sit down and learn rules. They then translate those rules to particular tasks but, more often than not, only a modicum. The artist, of course, knows no boundaries. Art is infinite. It is not deductable; it defies containment.

Utzon's building, like all great art, never weakens. No matter how often you see it or from what angle you look at it or in what light it is cast, it always hits you in the heart because it is simply so good.

It is, without any shadow of a doubt, the greatest building of the twentieth century and one of the greatest of all history. Because it devolves to a new and ingenious order which its creator himself divined.

It begs, I think, an important question: does everything truly great about architecture find its origin in nature? Or at least spring from it?

The ancient Egyptian orders with their bud-like, tension-filled capitals and the Greek ones with their relieved flowering represented the highest architectural ideals of all humanity and did so until the second quarter of the twentieth century. The Egyptians with their Pyramids built with a simplicity of form beyond improvement while the Greeks, with their temple pediments and logarithmic loggias, borrowed from nature's rules to instruct themselves in perfection. In progression, Rome's Pantheon gave the world its first half-hemisphere with its ocular view of the heavens.

Nature not only feeds us, it informs and inspires us. Could the judging panel in 1956 not understand that it was present at the creation of something new and utterly revolutionary? Something each judge recognised as being novel but possessing resonances each had experienced or could identify with?

Just as the Royal Society could not mistake the stodgy Turner in his ruffled black suitcoat and concussed top hat for the great and new art that was in his power, so, too, Ashworth and Saarinen and their fellows could not mistake real genius, no matter the modesty of its origin. For their perspicacity, we thank them sincerely.

As we especially thank Ove Arup for applying his creativity in seeing Utzon's conception to reality. Utzon, unlike Blondel or Ledoux, would not have survived on paper. Utzon had to go real. University students and graduates around the world would not, these days, be researching through the Sydney Opera House competition entries or debating why Utzon did not win, had Utzon not got to build his edifice. I doubt that he would even have ended up in texts about classicists, such as of Friedrich Gilly who, by the way, did a modernist reductive loggia in 1796 much more resolved than the one Utzon himself did here recently.

No, Utzon had to get his building into the sky.

He was in the form business. He was not in the music business. All this talk over the years about the tragedy of him not completing the interior belies the fact that what Utzon, more than anything else, would have wanted to see was those magic forms and silhouettes become a reality.

Like most people, I should have liked to have seen him execute his design through to completion. But I don't think many of the great buildings, whether they were Michelangelo's or Christopher Wren's, were turnkey jobs where the architect left an invoice at the end and was presented with an award. These master works were always a work in progress. In fact, Utzon's was relatively speedy.

In the age of autocracy it was possible to garner the civic authority to conceive and complete grand buildings of this kind. In our age of democracy, this is nigh on impossible, with governments coming and going, while the financial demands of the

task soar. Most governments these days would wilt under a Sydney Opera House project. A building like this today would represent ten cross-city tunnels all rolled together, with works ministers back-pedalling for all they were worth.

That said, I would like to amplify a couple of things that, over the years, have occupied my mind about Utzon's concept at its core.

There is little doubt that the inspiration for the masterpiece came from nature.

The more horizontal organic shells of Utzon's original entry touching his podium lightly at their load-bearing apexes no doubt have their roots in nature. Light and seemingly hovering, the shells could almost be thought to flutter.

The problem was, they could not be built.

Because of their organic shape, the stresses within each shell were unpredictable and could not be measured.

It was, I believe, Arup's application to the task which pushed Utzon to rethink the practicability of his conception, so as to provide it with shell elements that could be built, owing to the fact that they would behave predictably: in other words, subject to an applicable order or set of governing principles.

This, no doubt, is where his vertical, heaven-sent shells came from.

It is to his everlasting credit that Utzon saw the sphere as providing him with a building geometry that was at once predictable, while capable of calibration for industrial reproduction.

Utzon's passage from his artistic conception to his spherical solution is as impressive and as real as architectural history's age-old journey from the primeval hut to the stylish, mathematical purity of the Parthenon.

Utzon's Opera House does not belong to any historical age, but is 'timeless, earthy and utopian', all at once.

I have no personal connection with the building save for four things.

I was at the opening and, of course, it was better to be there than not be there.

In another instance, I sat on the design committee of the new Parliament House in Canberra for seven years and from the Saarinen example in Utzon's selection, I did what I could to encourage IM Pei to join the judging panel. And, as it turned out, he played a similar role in turning up Aldo Giurgola's and Richard Thorp's winning design.

In yet another instance, one of Utzon's young collaborators, Peter Myers, approached me as Prime Minister about the withering state of Utzon's drawings and the body of work associated with Arup's engineering. I gave the government of New South Wales a grant of $6 million to preserve them.

Finally, I scurried across the quayside from a green double-decker bus in George Street to the building that was then only at podium stage, to hear the great basso voice of Paul Robeson standing in his herringbone coat with cap on head and hand at ear. He sang the great black spiritual songs that had made him famous and which seemed to come not from the bottom of his chest but from the earth underneath him.

And maybe if I can add one more.

I saw the USSR State Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Evgeny Svetlanov, with their battered and decaying instruments, lift Tchaikovsky's Manfred Symphony to a musical experience so profound as to make me ask the question: why could the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, with the greatest residence in the world, not sound like that? Seven years later, as Prime Minister, I took the opportunity to free the SSO from the stultifying bosom of the ABC and it has never looked back.

It is fitting and right that 50 years after the New South Wales Labor government launched the competition in 1956 for the new opera house, we should celebrate that event. An exercise in vision and community-building which, in this country, only comes from Labor governments.

But, what a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the genius who won the competition.

Utzon's building has no parallel in human history. Not only did it represent an endorsement of us as a people, a people whose community had come of age, in a much more parochial sense, it reconnected Sydney to its own harbour.

This book, *Building a Masterpiece*, edited by Anne Watson, is being published by the Powerhouse Museum to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of that great undertaking.

I understand it was to be the frontispiece of an exhibition surrounding the project, which, sadly, never came about.

Nevertheless, there are gems contained here. Eugene Goossens's own vision of an opera house he campaigned for. Details of the unprecedented design and construction challenges including stories about the work site, its multiculturalism and industrial activism.

It talks also about the reconciliation between Utzon and the community of New South Wales, which, I must say, is an issue that has been way overdone. No one else at that time would have had the political patience or the funding to have built Utzon's design. Now, of course, many would, but not then.

Utzon made his appointment with history when he dropped his entry into the competition box. He should never forget this. But, neither should we.