

Cultural Cover-Up: The Sydney Opera House Turns 50

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Asia-Pacific Research, October 24, 2023

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Culture](#), [History](#)

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Commemorative occasions are often draped in fatty platitudes. Within such platitudes lie excuses and apologies. People are celebrated after the fact, not for their faults but for their virtues. It's just the polite thing to do. At the time of their achievement, they were ridiculed, condemned, and flayed. Buildings are also remembered, not for the blemishes they caused or the arguments they ignited, but the fact that they were (the pun is irresistible) foundational. After the fact, they stand as glorious fragments of culture.

Much of this can be seen in the horrendously treacle-covered slurry about the Sydney Opera House, which was opened on October 20, 1973 by Queen Elizabeth II. After 50 years, it is arguably the most internationally recognisable symbol of Australia, leaving aside its astonishing collection of natural wonders.

The current tributes never deviate from admiration verging on wince worthy worship. The ABC News Breakfast program diligently cobbled together a montage of events, performances and celebrations, with the edifice as star performer. No mention of controversy; not mention of the efforts to kill it off. For those versed in public relations, the following proved mandatory: The House functions as a multi-venue performing arts centre, hosting 1,500 performances each year receiving audiences of 1.2 million people. The site around the building is visited by almost eight times that many people, with 350,000 taking guided tours around it.

The administrative wonks have also made sure to court and flatter artists to add their ingredients to the commemorative cake. Nuance is not the name of the game here. "I adore the Opera House," [says](#) Australian singer and composer Tim Minchin. Minchin can be relied upon to give us the sacerdotal worship befitting a son of the sunburnt land: "playing in and around this beautiful building"; doing so being "one of the great honours of my creative life" and, naturally, feeling "hugely flattered" when asked to write a celebratory

piece for the five decade anniversary. He sees this edifice as a reminder to Australians “that our not-entirely-mythological ‘larrikin’ spirit is the same spirit that allows us to be bold and brave and not care too much what other people think.”

This is sad nonsense. It was brave to initially embark on the construction of a daring design, but there was little bravery in the construction phase of the Opera House, much of it marked by spite and exploitation. And as for the larrikin spirit, Minchin is only right in so far as the decision to commence the project had much to do with a premier who felt that the city needed an Opera House as much as his party needed a change of image. (The Australian Labor Party could be cultured too!) The rest was up to a daring, immutably haughty Dane, and every imaginable obstacle put in his path.

Architecturally, the building is seen as a modernist expressionist masterpiece, one that germinated in the mind of architect Jørn Utzon who worked, not without difficulty, alongside the engineering exploits of Ove Arup. In what can only be seen as a feat of unintended inspiration, the building was the result of Utzon’s winning design in 1957. His controversial, baffling genius led to the creation of a singular roof structure inspired by the peeling of an orange. In terms of construction, the sail, or wing-like structure, is constituted of precast concrete panels which are, in turn, bolstered by precast concrete ribs.

But genius, notably when it comes to architecture, only functions in a narrow range, frail before global assault, rival designers and accountants. It is viewed with abundant suspicion by the political and administrative mind, even more so by the budgetary minded. Utzon proved no exception. New South Wales Premier J.J. Cahill was bold enough to approve the project in 1958, but his death a year later, compounded by acrimony in the project itself, augured ill for the building. The Liberal government of Robert Askin, which came into office after 24 years of Labor rule, proved hostile, and the Minister for Public Works David Hughes had little time for Utzon’s insistence on maintaining complete control over the project.

Costs began mounting. Estimated at 3.5 million pounds in 1959, the budget had blown out to 13.7 million pounds by 1962. The NSW government began meddling in the construction phase, stating its own views on seating in the main hall. Philistine did battle with Renaissance Man. In July 1964, the [observation was made](#) in the publication *Tharunka* that the press, with the support of “political intrigue”, had achieved some success “in destroying the public image of the Opera House.”

Utzon would eventually throw in the towel with a heave of disgust, leaving the project, and country, after falling out with a plywood manufacturer who was retained [to produce prototypes](#) of the beams intended to support the ceilings and glass exterior walls. The decision was also helped, in no small measure, by the tart response to Utzon from Hughes when they met at the latter’s office on February 28, 1966. Seeking to be paid for outstanding fees regarding the stage machinery, Hughes cited a contrarian report from Arup. “You are always threatening to quit,” Hughes said dismissively. But quit, Utzon did.

Rage filled protests followed. In March 1966, a [1,000 strong protest](#), armed with a petition of 3,000 signatures backing Utzon’s reinstatement, took place. A sculptor went on hunger strike. All of it was in vain. The gold laying goose had fled. Hughes, left without the guide for the design (or so he claimed), could only [tell the public](#) that it was “the Government’s intention to complete the Opera House, ensuring that the spirit of the original conception is fulfilled.”

The mangling, readjustments and cuts began, a point made by a despairing critic Laurie Thomas in September 1968. Writing in *The Australian*, Thomas thought the small opera hall was passable, but the concert hall, “a disaster. It has the air of an extraordinarily fussy Town Hall. The ceiling is covered in knobs that can only be described as inverted teats.” Hughes, ever the apologist, put much of this down to Utzon’s own defective approach, a state of affairs [challenged with some severity](#) by the 1994 exhibition *The Unseen Utzon*. Even after almost three decades, the now knighted Davis [would dismiss](#) Utzon’s defenders such as architect Harry Seidler, his wife Penelope, along with Elias Duke-Cohen as partaking in an illusion. “I wanted [Utzon] to produce something. I would have loved him to do it.”

For just a taster of the spray that came during the construction, there is no better source than Keith Dunstan’s 1972 gem [Knockers](#). The compiled comments are a delightful, acid corrective to the worshipful, after the fact responses that would follow the opening of the Opera House. Sir John Barbirolli remarked bitchily that it was, “A piece of Danish pastry.” Sydney architect Walter Bunning savaged the design, claiming it would “be a second-rate building when compared with the Lincoln Center Opera House being built in New York”. Tenor Giuseppe Di Stefano admitted to knowing little about Australia, but knew more than a thing or two about opera. “I think they are crazy to think opera can succeed in Sydney.”

When it comes to greatness in vision and pettiness in decision, the latter often wins out. The appreciation, and the appreciative, can only come later. Peter Hall duly stepped into Utzon’s shoes. Costs soared further by some \$102 million (or A\$1 billion in today’s terms). Only years later would the remarkable, though somewhat more wounded structure, assume the proportions of a fable.

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