

# Sydney Opera House architect wins major international award

**Paul Bartizan**  
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On April 7, Jørn Utzon, the architect who designed the Sydney Opera House, was awarded the 2003 Pritzker Architecture Prize. Utzon's son Jan, also an architect, accepted the honour and a \$US100,000 cheque on behalf of his 85-year-old father at a ceremony at the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Madrid on May 20.

Thomas J. Pritzker, who is president of the Hyatt Foundation and a member of the family that owns the Hyatt Hotel chain established the prize in 1979 because there is no Nobel Prize for architecture. The award is in recognition of living architects for a whole body of their work, rather than a single building, and winners read like a virtual "who's who" of world-renowned architects. Prizewinners over the past five years include Renzo Piano, Norman Foster, Rem Koolhaas, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron and Glenn Murcutt.

Frank Gehry, who won the prize in 1989 and was one of this year's jurors, said the choice of Utzon was important. Referring to the Sydney Opera House, Gehry said the groundbreaking Danish architect had constructed something "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. It is the first time in our lifetime that an epic piece of architecture gained such universal presence."

Born in 1918 in Copenhagen, the son of a naval architect, Utzon studied architecture in the Danish capital. During World War II he was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance and after the war traveled extensively, making contact with some of the greatest architects of the modern era, including Alvar Aalto, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright. He also learnt from French sculptor Henri Laurens and worked with architects Gunnar Asplund and Paul Hendquist in Stockholm.

Utzon won the Sydney Opera House international design competition in 1957 from a field of 234 entries. The project was amply funded through government-run lotteries and Utzon was given the creative freedom to implement his revolutionary designs for the main podium structure and striking white shells of the opera house.

In 1965, however, a conservative Liberal-Country Party coalition came to power in New South Wales and Public Works Minister Davis Hughes moved to control Utzon's complex and largely experimental work. As a result, Utzon was forced out in 1966 and the interiors re-designed by Peter Hall, a government-appointed replacement. The result: a sharp contradiction between the magnificent exteriors and Hall's mundane interior work.

Utzon's interior design was characterised by bold colours and fantastic shapes. In contrast to the white simplicity of the outside shells, bright gold and red was planned for the interiors. The ceilings in the main theatres were to be a staggered flow of curved self-supporting plywood beams, all built to the same radius. Like the outside shell, there was a coherent and easily fabricated rationale underpinning its dynamic, exciting effect. His design not only addressed the basic functional aspects of the building but also represented a poetic response to the Sydney harbour itself.

As Utzon explained: "In the work with the curved shapes in the opera house, I have developed a great desire to go further with free architectural shapes, but at the same time to control the free shape with a geometry that makes it possible to construct the building from mass produced components. I am quite aware of the danger in the curved shapes in contrast to the relative safety of quadrilateral shapes. But the world of the curved form can give something that cannot ever be achieved by means of rectangular architecture. The hulls of ships, caves and sculpture demonstrate this."

Utzon's recognition has been a long and belated process. In 1992, the Australian architects' professional body, which was complicit in his sacking in 1966, awarded him a commemorative medal and an apology. Two years later, in 1994, research by architecture student Philip Nobis resulted in an exhibition that showed how the Opera House interiors would have looked had Utzon been allowed to complete the project. This clearly demonstrated that the unexciting interiors, inferior acoustics and other problems would not exist had the architect's plans been implemented. There were demands for Utzon to be hired to upgrade the interiors.

In 1999 Utzon, although unable to travel, agreed to collaborate with Sydney architect Richard Johnson on this necessary work with his son Jan acting as a liaison.

Australian architect Bill Wheatland worked on the Sydney Opera House from 1963 until Utzon was driven off the job in 1966. After the Opera House, Wheatland worked in Sydney for a few years before becoming chief architect for the regional Albury-Wodonga Development Corporation.

Wheatland now lives in active retirement in northeast Victoria and spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about Utzon's Pritzker Prize and what it was like working with the audacious and innovative Danish architect.

**Paul Bartizan:** What's your opinion of Utzon receiving the 2003 Pritzker prize?

**Bill Wheatland:** I'm delighted but it was not before time. It's a wonderful thing for him and all that he stands for. Credit should also go to now-retired professor of town planning and architecture at the University of New South Wales, Elias Duek-Cohen, who has been a wonderful agent for Utzon. He wrote one of the first books on the Sydney Opera House and advocated Utzon to the NSW state government for many years.

**PB:** What do you think of the Sydney Opera House?

**BW:** As a piece of building design I think it's inspirational, probably the most thought-out proposal that's ever been built, certainly in Australia and probably in the world up to that point. Most of the competition entries were conventional square buildings—very few had any softening of their lines. While some may not have liked what they saw originally in Utzon's design, the more you studied it the more you realised that the person who designed it had really thought about it.

**PB:** How did you come to be working on the Sydney Opera House?

**BW:** I spent five years travelling. My first port of call was Sweden where I worked for two years. I know it's not Denmark [where Utzon was born] but it is very alike in the way the people think and work so I learnt to think like the Scandinavians. Everything they touch, they look at carefully and study it in terms of design.

The next step was England. A colleague from Sydney and I were working in Kensington when the Opera House competition was announced. We looked at the brief but couldn't get it to fit comfortably on the harbourside site. We tore our brains out but it just wouldn't go. Finally, we went up to the White Swan [hotel] in Twickenham and took out all our models and drawings and burnt them on a fire.

We thought there's no way in the world this competition is fair dinkum. Why would you make a brief that you couldn't put on the site? I was too naive in those days to know that briefs were meant to be broken.

I then worked in New York and one day went to the Qantas office and saw the *Sydney Morning Herald* with a picture of Utzon's Opera House design. He'd put them [the concert halls] side by side, angling in towards each other.

I thought that it didn't really accord with the brief and wasn't sure about the shape of the shells but decided that when I returned to Australia I would go and see this guy. A couple of years later, after they'd started on the Opera House, I rang up the site office and got an appointment to meet Utzon. We hit it off quite well and he asked if I would consider working with him. I liked what I saw, including some of the details they were working on and the shells where they had developed the spherical solution. They had moved away from the free form shapes.

I joined Utzon in May 1963 and he asked if I'd be prepared to look at the co-ordination of Stage Three. Stage One was the base podium structure; Stage Two the concrete shells and Stage Three was all the things that go inside the building, including the plywood ceilings and the glass walls.

**PB:** How did Utzon work?

**BW:** He had his team from Denmark, which amounted to three people at that stage, and young architects to act as draftsmen. The way he worked, particularly with the glass walls [the exterior concrete shells are enclosed by glass at their open ends], was he would come up with an idea and give it to a couple of draftsmen to work on. He would then develop another approach and pass it to a couple of others, and have it going through the office like this. He would be working through each possibility until it was either eliminated or he discovered the way it should be done.

Every time he did something he made a model of it. The big models of the halls were made in Berlin to a tenth scale. Now you can buy computer programs that let you analyse the acoustic quality of the space using three-dimensional computer drawings but in those days it had to be done by trial and error. If Utzon had an idea with the plywood ceilings he would draw them up, send them over to Europe and three months later he'd get the test tape recordings back. As the models were built at a tenth scale, it was played back ten times slower and you could hear the results and correct the problems.

Utzon is a master architect who looks after all aspects of design. The day he decided the glass wall support and framing would be better in plywood, he stood on his hands and walked on his hands down the office. He stood at the end and said, "Gentlemen of the Opera House"—that's what he called everybody in the office—"we now have a solution to the glass walls." And he had. Finally the solution was there and it was full speed ahead.

**PB:** What led to Utzon's departure?

**BW:** At that time the minister [New South Wales Public Works Minister Davis Hughes] was saying, "No more mock-ups. You can't build any more until you produce working drawings."

Hughes wouldn't accept our detailed drawings to the manufacturer for the mock-ups and said we had to have working drawings and go out to

tender. Then he told us we were not going to get any more fees until we produced these working drawings. We explained that we couldn't afford to run the office any more—they owed us about \$250,000 at that time in unpaid fees.

One day we opened the office to Davis Hughes and the public works department to show them what we were doing. There were 15 of us in the office at that time. I suggested we take the written notes off the drawings of the glass walls. If they are really interested, I thought, they'll ask us to explain why the drawings were like this. Utzon said it wouldn't work but I said let's try it.

They walked around—the minister, chief architect, second in charge—half a dozen of them and we had the drawings spread all over the place but were all on hand to explain. We put the drawings on the tables upside down, just to see how much they were interested or understood.

They had a look at one drawing, nodded and then moved onto the next one. Nobody asked any questions. Utzon was flabbergasted. "You're right," he said, "They had no idea what they were looking at, nor do they care. We have a problem." I said I've been telling you this for some time. They're not interested in what you're doing and just want you out of this place because they know that we cannot do standard working drawings and send them out to tender.

Utzon didn't really resign. He simply said that unless we were paid the outstanding fees we would have to shut the office. Hughes took this as a resignation and offered to re-engage Utzon, but on unacceptable terms—he would have to work under the Public Works architect.

**PB:** What's your opinion of the current refurbishment process?

**BW:** I think it is a genuine attempt to make up for past errors but they don't have enough money. They have \$140 million. I said to Richard Johnson [the Sydney based architect working with Utzon on the refurbishment], "all you're doing is tinkering at the edges".

**PB:** What lessons do you draw from your experience with the opera house?

**BW:** I still think that the government or whoever funds these projects should look to fair competition amongst architects, much like the Europeans are still doing. Unfortunately we don't see this sort of approach in Australia. Instead of saying there are six big firms and we'll have a limited competition between them, they should hold properly structured open competitions. They keep on throwing the opera house up as a disaster because it was an open competition and it failed. But it didn't fail because of the competition; it failed because of government interference.



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