

UTZON AND MONEO: A CRITICAL CONVERSATION

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ABSTRACT

Jorn Utzon's Opera House has secured a canonical status within Post WWII modernism, its Australian reception dominated by a familiar but in many ways limited mythology surrounding architectural authorship and invention. This paper will offer a framework for more closely examining its potential for architectural influence and relevance in contemporary architectural production, locally and cross-culturally. The argument will be developed via a close double reading, suggesting a critical dialogue between the Opera House (1959-1973) and Rafael Moneo's Kurshaal in San Sebastian, Spain, completed in 1999.

Moneo worked for Utzon during the development of the Sydney project, and was responsible for the now famous line drawing printed on the 'Yellow Book' cover showing constructed vaulted shapes within a spherical geometry. Numerous strategic similarities between the mid and late twentieth century buildings are evident when one compares the site plan in Spain to Bennelong Point. Both buildings situate expressive major and minor performance halls oriented toward the water. The geometrically distinct volumes are in both cases linked by a podium faced in fragmented stone. Multiple echoes between the foreign projects are conversely distinguished however whereby important shifts of emphasis, in material, function, appearance, geometry and decisions about detail, show the later work conceived dialectically to its Sydney cousin.

This comparative study or focused reading of a detailed architectural 'conversation' between the two iconic buildings looks to offer an expanded critique of Utzon's elusive project, aligned with an example of its capacity to inform precise invention, in current architectural, material and urban terms.