

Following Utzon's Footsteps in Hawai'i: From the Shores of Oahu to the Bagsværd Church in Denmark

Marja Sarvimäki

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, School of Architecture

Introduction

Once Jørn Utzon had left Sydney under the well-known and distressing circumstances, he experienced additional disappointments in the late 1960s, such as rejection of the Zürich Schauspielhaus project after years of design, in addition to his father's death in 1970. Delightful, in turn, must have been designing his own house Cas Lis in Mallorca, Spain, the Kuwait National Assembly Complex in Kuwait City, and the Bagsværd Church in Denmark. That is also when he started teaching at the School of Architecture in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa from 1971 till 1975 in a few separate shifts; before that Utzon had visited Hawai'i several times in the 1960s while commuting between Denmark and Sydney.¹ The School being the same where the author has worked since January 2003, this paper focuses on the simultaneous design development of the Bagsværd Church and its interrelationship with the environment in which Utzon lived in Hawai'i those days.

Because this less-known period of Utzon's career coincides with the Bagsværd Church design, the investigation includes interviews of Utzon's colleagues and students in Hawai'i, which sheds light into his emotional state during this important design - and healing - process. As expressed by Leighton Liu, one of Utzon's colleagues at the UHM School of Architecture, "he came to Hawai'i partly to 'hide out' and heal the wounds he suffered in Australia, as he was a kindly gentleman who had no stomach for politics (or fame, for that matter)."²

Bagsværd Church is unarguably among Utzon's masterpieces, but the design also gained recognition from Kenneth Frampton's analyses in the 1980s, which re-established Tzonis and Lefaivre's concept critical regionalism. In many of his writings on the topic, Frampton uses Bagsværd Church as an example of critical regionalism in Scandinavia (i.e., the Nordic Countries), in addition to Alvar Aalto's Säynätsalo Town Hall.³ When

analysing the famous ceiling of the church, Frampton primarily makes references to Oriental influences which will be discussed below. Yet, it has been an 'oral lore' at the UHM School of Architecture that a beach on the windward side on the island of Oahu was the true source of inspiration for Utzon. This fact had not been published at the time Frampton made his critical regionalist analyses, but it is included in some sources published later, most notably in the Utzon biographies by Philip Drew (1999) and Richard Weston (2002), further confirmed by Torsten Bløndal's conversations with Utzon in October 2004.⁴ By analysing the most recent information, this paper offers an alternate reading of the Bagsværd Church design from the perspective of those who knew Utzon in Hawai'i.

Pagoda vs. Pavilion

Utzon's work, perhaps even more than that of any other great master of modern architecture, has been associated with transcultural influences from different geographic regions, world cultures, vernacular traditions and historic periods.⁵ Among others, Frampton emphasizes this issue by stating that critical regionalism "as a cultural strategy is as much a bearer of *world culture* as it is a vehicle of *universal civilization*."⁶ In this context, Frampton refers to Utzon's extensive travels of which the early ones are described in his seminal essay "Platforms and Plateaus."⁷

With the above essay, Frampton analyses the Bagsværd Church ceiling and claims that "the only precedent for such form, in a sacred context, is Eastern rather than Western - namely the Chinese pagoda roof" and that the "intent of this expression is, of course, to secularize the sacred form."⁸ Frampton further expands this interpretation in his 'third point' by 'pointing out' that "paradoxically, this desacralization at Bagsværd subtly reconstitutes a renewed basis for the spiritual, one founded, I would argue, in a regional reaffirmation - grounds, at least, for some form of collective spirituality."⁹

On the other hand, Utzon wrote the aforementioned essay in 1962, six years before he started to design the Bagsværd Church. Also, Utzon's often-published sketch of a Chinese building that, at first, appeared in "Platforms and Plateaus" (fig. 1) does not bear much resemblance to a pagoda, since it is not portraying a multi-storey structure with a minimum of three layers. As a matter of fact, Utzon does not describe the sketch as a pagoda and doesn't even use the word pagoda anywhere in the essay. Instead, the drawing seems to depict a Chinese one-storey building with double eaves. Because this kind of eminent halls with the *diantang* structure were always elevated on podiums, the most important ones on three-layered foundations (*zumizuo*), the sketch naturally makes sense in the context of platforms and plateaus.

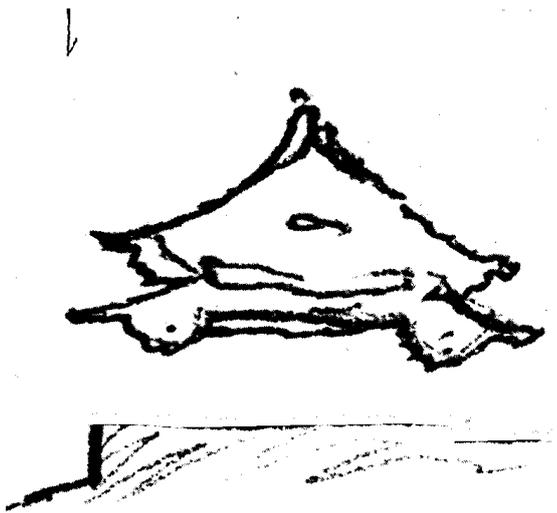


Fig. 1. Utzon's sketch of a Chinese building that some scholars have interpreted as a "pagoda," though it appears more as an eminent hall with double eaves that were always elevated on a high podium. Source; Utzon, Jörn. "Platforms and Plateaus: Ideas of a Danish Architect" in *Zodiac*, Vol. 10, 1962, p 116.

An alternate interpretation of the sketch above should take into account the fact that Utzon was much too well versed in Chinese architecture to call it a pagoda. Owing to his instructors at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, especially to professors Kay Fisker and Eileen Rasmussen who knew Chinese architecture very well, Utzon had not only seen the Song dynasty building manual *Yingzao Fashi* (most sources on Utzon use the older transliterations *Ying Tsao Fa Shi* or *Ying-tsao fa-shih*) in his study years, but later he also owned a copy of it. Among the hundreds of drawings

included in this manual that itself is a treasury of the principles of Chinese architecture, most relevant to this paper are the section drawings of eminent double-eave halls (fig. 2).

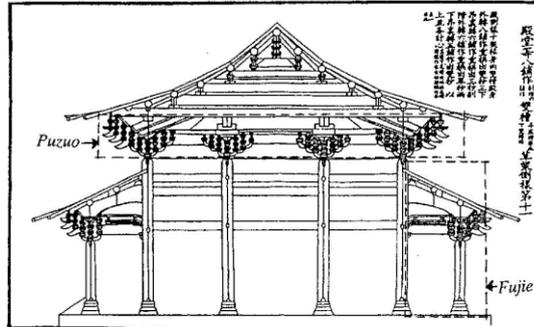


Fig. 2. A section drawing of a Chinese eminent hall with *diantang* structural system in which the lean-to on both sides creates double eaves; not shown in this section is the multi-lever podium on which this kind of halls always rest. Source: Guo, Qinghua. "Yingzao Fashi: Twelfth-Century Chinese Building Manual" in *Architectural History*, Vol. 41, 1998, p 9.

There are countless of this type of structures in China, including both temples and palatial buildings, and Utzon undoubtedly observed many of them during his trip to China. To compare Utzon's sketch with a Chinese building, Weston features a photograph of a latter, and the caption describes it as a "Chinese temple abstracted to the interplay between a heavy, but apparently floating roof and stone platform."¹⁰ However, the building in the photograph is not a temple but a corner pavilion of the Meridian Gate (*Wu men*) leading to the Forbidden City in Beijing. Nevertheless, this only underlines the fact that the sketch can illustrate either a temple or a palace hall/pavilion, though not a pagoda. Indeed, with regard to Utzon's precedents, those can be either sacred or profane buildings regardless of the type and/or function of his design. Parallel to Frampton's view of desacralization, Michael Asgaard Andersen states that the "references in Utzon's projects and writings to both geographically and temporally distant cultures made them transcend their immediate context."¹¹

As for other sources of inspiration for the Bagsværd Church, and that for its ceiling in particular, yet another much-published sketch by Utzon has been used in interpreting the design (fig. 3). The sketch displays a beach on the windward shore of the island of Oahu where the Utzon family lived in a rented house in Mokulua Drive, next to

the Lanikai Beach, and later nearby in Kaimalino Street, closer to the Kailua Beach.¹² The sketch illustrates the clouds brought to the Hawaiian islands by the regular trade winds from the northeast and the effect of the sunlight falling through the clouds down to the sand. According to Utzon, "It's a natural space that gives a profound spiritual peace [...] So the natural space that gripped me has been turned into the body of the church, though there are also a number of other rooms, and together they form a complex that can be compared to a monastery."¹³

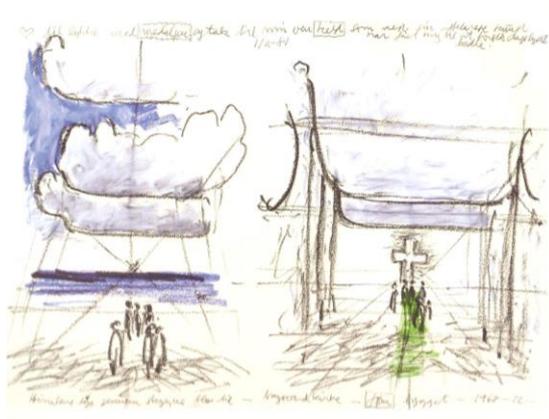


Fig. 3. A pair of Utzon's sketches illustrating the interrelationship between the clouds above the Lanikai Beach on the Hawaiian island of Oahu and the ceiling vaults of the Bagsværd Church. Source: Weston, Richard. *Utzon: Inspiration, Vision, Architecture*. Edition Bløndal: Hellerup, Denmark, 2002, p 280.

As mentioned above, the Hawaiian connection is rather recent information and, for example, Christian Norberg-Schulz in his 1981 analysis on the Bagsværd Church regards the ceiling as "the curved vault which recalls the clouds of the Danish sky."¹⁴ Regarding the transcultural influences in Utzon's work, the geographic location of course is irrelevant, although especially the Lanikai Beach most certainly does evoke a feeling of spiritual peace as described by Utzon.

In the Hawaiian context, it also is significant to take into account the strong East Asian influence in Hawai'i. As East Asian architecture in general and Japanese architecture in particular, in turn, was such an important source of inspiration for many modernists, including Aalto to whom Utzon often refers, one can analyze the layout of the Bagsværd Church from that perspective as well. In the Nordic Countries, the Japanese precedent was the Zui Ki Tei Teahouse in Stockholm, in addition to the

many books published on Japanese architecture in the 20th century, but unlike Aalto and many other Scandinavian modernists,¹⁵ Utzon also had personal experience of buildings in both Japan and China. Especially the floor plan of Bagsværd Church with atrium gardens (fig 4), reflecting the Chinese courtyard house (*siheyuan*) typology, is a concept Utzon applied to many other projects as well, such as the Kingo and Fredensborg houses just to mention two.

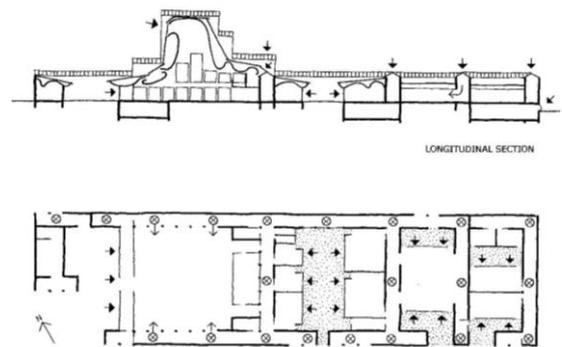


Fig. 4. Section and floor plan of the Bagsværd Church. Source: *Jørn Utzon Logbook Vol. II, Bagsværd Church*. Edition Bløndal: Hellerup, Denmark, 2005, p 166.

Teaching in Hawai'i

It is actually rather surprising that Utzon taught only in one architecture program during his long life (not including guest lectures and other visits) - and in Hawai'i of all the places. While interviewing Utzon's former colleagues and students in Honolulu in January-February 2014, approximately 40 years later, it became apparent that everyone had only fond memories of him.

According to Leighton Liu, "he was a true gentleman and I remember him as a kind human being rather than just as an architect." Leighton was hired at the UHM School of Architecture right after his graduation from the Art Department and "found out that I am sharing an office room with a world-famous architect. We talked about everything and anything, as he was very interested in people and cultures." One of the things Utzon did not talk much about was the Sydney Opera House, though he did give one public talk on the design. "He pretty much had to," said Leighton. In summer 1974, when Leighton visited Denmark, Utzon also took him to the construction site of the Bagsværd Church where the vaults had just been cast and Utzon mentioned the inspiration coming from a beach in Hawai'i.¹⁶

Another colleague, Architect John Hara, recalls that "Utzon was passionate about other cultures. In many ways I consider his work a continuation of Aalto's." Although a "local boy" from Hawai'i, John himself has lived in various places across the world, including architecture studies at the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania under Louis Kahn and many years in Europe, added with travels to Japan and Australia, among others. "Arriving in Pennsylvania from Hawai'i was a cultural shock at first, but fortunately I got good friends there, including Louis Kahn's daughter. My European experience was largely generated by the instructors at Penn. In addition to working in Zürich, I was in correspondence with Aalto and met him in Paris, when I *almost* got hired by him." Besides being a studio instructor at the UHM School of Architecture back in Hawai'i, John knew Utzon through Danish architect Peer Abben with whom both Utzon and John worked on several projects.¹⁷ Abben had been Utzon's classmate at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen and, after working on projects in Africa until the Mau-Mau rising made living in Kenya unbearable, he moved to Honolulu on Utzon's recommendation,¹⁸ but that is another story...

Utzon's former students in Hawai'i, where he taught graduate level design studios and also a class in climatology, were of course extremely lucky to have an instructor of such caliber. "Utzon emphasized natural forms and repetition," (i.e., his idea of additive architecture) remembers Architect Dwight Mitsunaga who had Utzon as an instructor in his last design studio in spring 1973. "Of course we knew something about Utzon, but he didn't come across like a famous man, as he was very casual and relaxed. However, when he spoke one had to pay attention, as his accent was unfamiliar to us, although his English was very good. Having always believed the Sydney Opera House to be inspired by sails, I was surprised one day when he expressed that his design was inspired by the sectioning of an orange." At that time, the UHM School of Architecture included landscape architecture, urban and regional design, interior design, building technology and environmental design, besides architecture, and functioned in temporary wooden buildings with louver windows and without airconditioning. According to Dwight "they were pretty comfortable buildings with natural ventilation."¹⁹ Those could also have functioned examples of climatically appropriate and/or climate-specific design for Utzon.

Of all the former students, Kelvin Otaguro turned out to be a real treasury of information. Not only did he remember many anecdotes of his famous teacher, but he had also saved magazines, photographs, and drawings from those days. "Utzon didn't talk much about his own projects and gave us free range to do anything we wanted with the studio projects. He helped with many things, but wasn't too critical. I think everyone got an A in our class. I do remember, though, that one day he was explaining skylights and gave me a sketch of a building he was designing. I think I still have it somewhere." Fortunately Kelvin did, indeed, find the drawing (fig. 5) and much more material that sheds light into Utzon's teaching in Hawai'i, such as a sketch of design assignment for a studio project (fig. 6). "He gave us a U-shape building in which we were asked to design interventions freely expanding outside the building perimeters," explains Kelvin and continues "mine was a boat house."²⁰

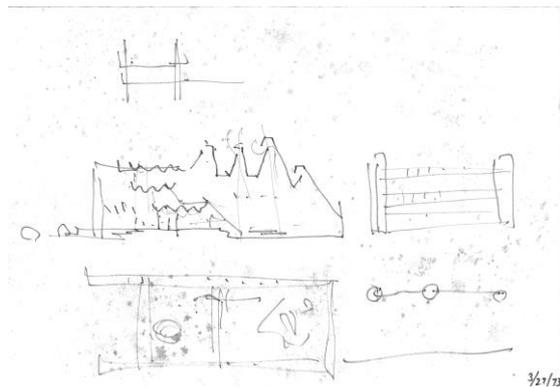


Fig. 5. A sketch Utzon gave to his student Kelvin Otaguro when exemplifying skylights of a design he was working on. (Probably the Melli Bank in Teheran.) Courtesy of Kelvin Otaguro.

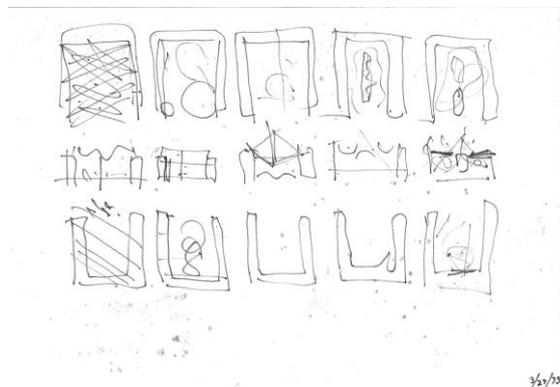


Fig. 6. Utzon's sketch for a design studio assignment. Courtesy of Kelvin Otaguro.

In both of the above sketches, one can see Utzon's often recurring themes of courtyard layout and indirect, diffuse lighting from above, which were also applied to the Bagsværd Church design. And as far as Utzon as a teacher is concerned, Kelvin among others emphasized that Utzon was a very inspiring person, though sometimes quiet and less approachable than at other times. "He was funny, too. I remember one day in studio when he was talking about Luis Kahn and started to mimic Kahn's way of explaining things with his hands. He taped a poster that read 'The mind of Louis Kahn' on his shirt and made the same hand movements." Needless to say, Kelvin managed to find both the poster and the photo in his archive (fig. 7).

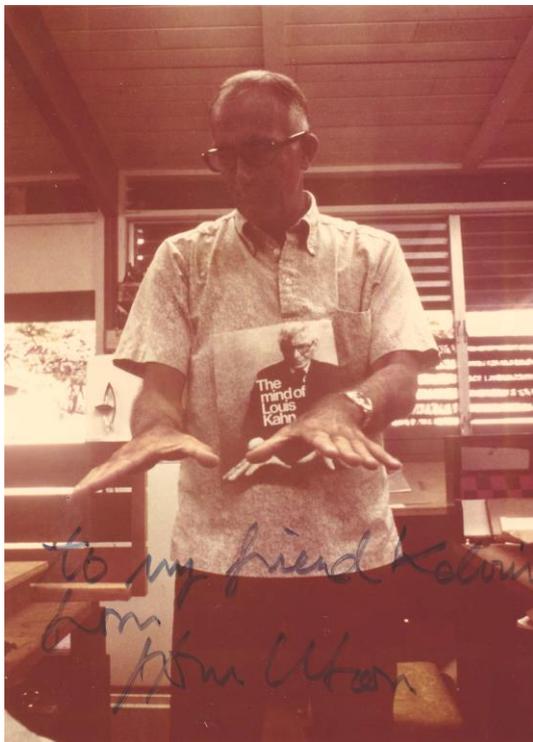


Fig. 7. Utzon fondly making fun of Luis Kahn in a design studio at the UHM School of Architecture in spring 1973. On the background one can see the louver windows of the School building, providing natural illumination and ventilation. That is all one needs in the Hawaiian climate with the 20-30 degree temperatures and usually not particularly humid air, thanks to the almost constantly blowing trade winds. Courtesy of Kelvin Otaguro who was one of the students in Utzon's studio.

Kelvin met Jørn Utzon, and later also Jan, outside of the School as well, because he worked for Peer Abben, at first, as an intern, and after the graduation as a draftsman for more than two decades until Abben closed his firm.²¹ When talking with Kelvin and going through his archives

he donated to the UHM School of Architecture, I realized that this paper is only a beginning of a new research project, for much more can and should be known about Utzon's life in Hawai'i.

Conclusion

Ever since my colleague Leighton Liu mentioned that Jørn Utzon had taught at the School where I had just started working in January 2003, I have been wondering, why did Utzon decide move to live and work in such a remote location as Hawai'i? It might have been because Hawai'i is a very healing environment, as Leighton Liu suggested and which I have personally experienced as well, or "Laying Low" as Philip Drew subtitled this period of Utzon's life in his biography.²² John Hara thinks that "he was optimistic about being invited back to Sydney."²³ Perhaps that was the reason why he was staying in Hawai'i due to its close proximity to Australia.

On the other hand, Utzon obviously knew how to choose wonderful places to live in, judging by his intended house site close to Sydney, his houses in Denmark and Mallorca - and most importantly for this paper, the windward coast on the island of Oahu. Sitting on the warm sand of the Lanikai Beach and listening the sound of breaking waves, it is easy to imagine what a pleasant life the Utzon family must have had in the neighborhood. If that is not a healing environment, then nothing is, and can explain at least partially the successful design of the Bagsværd Church.

¹ Email from Jan Utzon, January 21, 2014.

² Email from Leighton Liu, October 15, 2013. Drew and Weston also interviewed Professor Liu who shared an office with Utzon at the UHM School of Architecture, though Weston incorrectly calls him Laurence Liu. Weston, Richard. *Utzon: Inspiration, Vision, Architecture*. Edition Bløndal: Hellerup, Denmark, 2002. p 421. In addition, it is worth noting that Drew makes another mistake by calling the Dean who hired Utzon as Bruce Heatherington. Drew, Philip. *The Masterpiece. Jørn Utzon. A Secret Life*. Hardie Grant Books: South Yarra, Victoria, Australia, 1999. p 420. The Dean of the UHM School of Architecture at that time was Bruce Etherington.

³ Frampton, Kenneth. "Towards a Critical regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*. Bay Press: Seattle, WI, 1983, pp 16-30. "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism" in *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal*, Vol. 20, pp 147-162. Yale Architectural Journal Inc. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MA, 1983. *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 3rd edition, Thames and Hudson: London, UK, 1992, p 314-327. See also Tzonis, Alexander and Liane Lefaivre. "The Grid and the Pathway" in *Architecture Greece*, No. 15, 1981, p 164-178. Since the 1980s, there has been plenty of criticism against critical regionalism as well, though that discourse is not the focus of this paper and, hence, not discussed here.

⁴ Drew, Philip. *The Masterpiece. Jørn Utzon. A Secret Life*. Hardie Grant Books: South Yarra, Victoria, Australia, 1999. Weston, Richard. *Utzon: Inspiration, Vision, Architecture*. Edition Bløndal: Hellerup, Denmark, 2002. *Jørn Utzon Logbook Vol. II, Bagsværd Church*. Edition Bløndal: Hellerup, Denmark, 2005.

⁵ E.g., Carter, Adrian. "Transcultural Tectonic Connections: The Utzon Paradigm" in *Proceedings of the ARCC/EAAE 2014 International Conference on Architectural Research*. University of Hawaii at Manoa, School of Architecture, p 238-246.

⁶ Frampton, Kenneth. "Towards a Critical regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*. Bay Press: Seattle, WI, 1983. p 21.

⁷ Utzon, Jørn. "Platforms and Plateaus: Ideas of a Danish Architect" in *Zodiac*, Vol. 10, 1962, pp 113-140.

⁸ Frampton, Kenneth. "Towards a Critical regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*. Bay Press: Seattle, WI, 1983. p 23. Probably because of Frampton's interpretation, several authors have later referred to the sketch as a pagoda. See e.g., Fromonot, Françoise. "Jørn Utzon: Un ricordo delle Hawaii" in *Casabella* 649, 1997, pp 24-37, p 28.

⁹ Frampton, Kenneth. "Towards a Critical regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*. Bay Press: Seattle, WI, 1983. p 23.

¹⁰ Weston, Richard. *Utzon: Inspiration, Vision, Architecture*. Edition Bløndal: Hellerup, Denmark, 2002, p 221.

¹¹ Asgaard Andersen, Michael. "Embedded Emancipation: the field of Utzon's platforms" in *Fabrications*, Vol. 15, No. 1, July 2005, pp 27-37.

¹² Email from Jan Utzon, January 21, 2014.

¹³ *Jørn Utzon Logbook Vol. II, Bagsværd Church*. Edition Bløndal: Hellerup, Denmark, 2005, p 116.

¹⁴ Norberg-Schulz, Christian. "Church at Bagsværd" in *Global Architecture*, No. 61, 1981, p 5.

¹⁵ For more on East Asian impact on Aalto and on the early European modernist architecture in general, see e.g., Kim, Hyon-Sob. "Alvar Aalto and Humanizing of Architecture" in *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*, May 2009/ 16, p 9-16. And "Cross-Current Contribution: A Study on East Asian Influence on Modern Architecture in Europe" in *Architectural Research*, Vol 11, No. 2 (December 2009), pp. 9-18.

¹⁶ Interview of Leighton Liu on February 2, 2014.

¹⁷ Interview of John Hara on February 15, 2014.

¹⁸ Email from Jan Utzon, February 18, 2014.

¹⁹ Email from Dwight Mitsunaga, January 27, 2014, and interview with him on February 19, 2014.

²⁰ Interview of Kelvin Otaguro on February 1, 2014.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Drew, Philip. *The Masterpiece. Jørn Utzon. A Secret Life*. Hardie Grant Books: South Yarra, Victoria, Australia, 1999, p 417.

²³ Interview of John Hara on February 15, 2014.