

## Utzon's Beautiful Ideas: An Antidote to "The Australian Ugliness"?

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There is no doubting that with the realisation of the Sydney Opera House, Jørn Utzon created what is both popularly and critically acclaimed to be one of the most beautiful works of architecture not only of its own era and location, but that transcends time and place to achieve universal appreciation. What is the beautiful though? What was Utzon's understanding of the beautiful and where did the beautiful come from in his work, not only at the monumental scale of the Sydney Opera House, but also within his approach to domestic architecture to which he was equally dedicated and adept; and how could his work, particularly his housing provide beautiful models for now and the future.

As Richard Leplastrier talking of his time with Utzon recounts, "Quite often in the office he would say something like "ah, that is such a beautiful idea" (Botin, Carter and Tyrrell p.141) and how he was inspired to think in that way since. He remembers sitting with Utzon looking across to the communities on the other side of Pittwater and Utzon saying "you know, if you were interested in, in say maybe making a big bridge that crossed over with great ease and beauty, you would want to be an engineer, but if you want to make a terrace over there, where parents can sit quietly, with a cup of tea and watch their children playing on the sand in perfect safety in the sunshine, then you want to be an architect." As Leplastrier comments *His humanity was his work's foundation*" (Botin, Carter, Tyrrell p.140),

Leplastrier states that what he learnt from Utzon was that "as architects if we don't have underlying what we are doing, a beautiful idea about life...if there is not a beautiful idea that underpins it as a foundation then it is only building and not architecture." (Botin, Carter and Tyrrell p.141) In Utzon's work and the beautiful ideas that underlie them, one can always see a search for the ideal, a dream of perfection, but it is always connected to and centred upon real human experience. In keeping with the philosophical understanding expressed by the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer, who in his essay *The Relevance of the Beautiful* suggests that *that the essence of the beautiful does not lie in some realm simply opposed to reality. On the contrary, we learn that however unexpected our encounter with beauty may be, it gives us an assurance that the truth does not lie far off and inaccessible to us, but can be encountered in the disorder of reality with all its imperfections, evils, errors, extremes and fateful conclusion. The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real.* (Gadamer, p.15)

As Gadamer notes, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762), the German philosopher from whom we have the origins of our contemporary understanding of a sense of beauty, defined aesthetics as the art of thinking beautifully (Gadamer p.17). It was Hegel who went further than Baumgarten in the philosophical consideration of the significance of the shared experience of the beautiful, and as Gadamer expresses it determined that "the kind of truth that we encounter in the experience of the beautiful does unambiguously make a claim to more than merely subjective validity" (Gadamer, p.18)

Juhani Pallasmaa goes further and cites the Russian Nobel prize winning poet Joseph Brodsky's belief that "the purpose of evolution is beauty" as underpinning his own understanding and writings on architecture. Pallasmaa also explains why the discussion of beauty, of aesthetics and ethics within architectural discourse is problematic, stating that "One part of architecture wants to advance along with scientific thought and technological development, while the other desires to focus on the eternal enigma of human existence....The discipline of architecture is "impure" in the sense that it fuses utility and poetics, function and image, rationality and metaphysics, technology and art, economy and symbolisation. (Reisner p.78)

Certainly Utzon's works, most particularly the Sydney Opera House can be said to span and fuse, these so often irreconcilable aims and considerations. In writing more specifically about Utzon, in a personal tribute published to celebrate Utzon's 90<sup>th</sup> year, Pallasmaa writes, "All profound work arises from a dialogue between actuality and dream. Imagination fuses observation and fantasy, memory and desire, past and the future. Your images traverse space and time, unite traditions of distant cultures, and merge natural phenomena with geometry, history and Utopia. You have shown how to turn motion into form, matter into luminance, and gravity into flight" (Juhani Pallasmaa, *A tribute to Jørn Utzon*, 2008)

That Utzon's work can be described by such powerful, poetic sentiment and the Sydney Opera House become the symbol not only of a city, but also the entire nation, is I would suggest due to Utzon's highly original and innovative synthesis of many beautiful ideas, that derived from very diverse and not only Western cultural influences. According to the architectural historian Kenneth Frampton, Utzon's work is, "Comparable in subtle ways to the protean achievements of Le Corbusier, Utzon's architecture emerges today as paradigmatic at many levels not least of which is the manner in which from the beginning of his career, he

would totally repudiate the assumed superiority of Eurocentric culture” Utzon’s architecture demonstrates a profound poetic understanding of world culture combined with the benefits of universal modern building technology; which is why the Sydney Opera House served so eloquently to define a break with colonialisation, and the emergence of a modern, self-confident and dynamic multi-cultural society.

Utzon’s architecture however eschews kitsch historicism and the superficiality of ubiquitous universal civilization, but rather emphasizes the authentic use of materials and clarity of construction, and in specific relation to its context. According to Jaime J. Ferrer Forés there are two essential convictions underlying Jørn Utzon’s work, which are a master builder’s focus on building structure and the concern for the evocation and rapport with landscape.

It was also Utzon’s vision, alone among all the competitors that recognised that this unique site at Bennelong Point needed to be understood in terms of its surrounding landscape and that being visible from many surrounding vantage points required a sculptural solution with regards its “fifth facade”. Having not visited Sydney, it was through his skilled reading of topographic maritime charts that Utzon was able to appreciate the particular morphology of the Sydney harbour basin, with its characteristic headlands, which he emulated in the forming of the podium. Thus Utzon’s fascination with the beautiful idea of the platform, with its origins in the ancient architectural idea of the raised platforms that Utzon had experienced at the Mayan and Pre-Columbian ruins at Chichen Itzá, Monte Albán and Uxmal in Mexico, becomes in Sydney a continuation and evocation of the local natural terrain. Developing further Alvar Aalto’s, with whom Utzon worked briefly, notions of building as artificial landscape. This intention can be clearly seen in the original section drawings of the Opera House, which show the podium shaded as a continuous landform running back through the Botanic Gardens

The Sydney Opera House is now known for its striking iconic visual image and outline; that has inspired so many other, often desperate, visually orientated attempts to emulate its success since. However Utzon’s own approach to the design was developed on the basis of the intended human experience of using the building, rather than mere image. His beautiful idea was that the area in front of the podium steps should provide a huge plaza for public gatherings and events, as Richard Weston has suggested possibly the greatest public space created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the grand stairs of the podium not only providing extensive seating for outdoor event, but creating an almost sacral sense of rising above the humdrum everyday world, in the process providing a grand panorama of the harbour prior to entering the dramatic cavernous interior for the actual performance, having been sublimely prepared for a profound experience.

Part of the sacred experience of the building is the timeless, almost archaic experience of the podium incorporating the amphitheatres, enclosed within the

cathedral-like arches of the roof shells. As Richard Leplastrier said, during its construction “you could not really tell if it was coming up or coming down,” it had such a powerful presence like an ancient ruin. Seemingly floating above the podium, the Sydney Opera House’s signature sail-like roof shells were expressed by Utzon in his conceptual sketches as being like clouds hovering above the sea, both as experienced in nature and as evoked in ancient Chinese and Japanese temple roofs floating above a stone base.

The remarkable boat-like forms of the Opera House roofs, quite unlike anything else submitted for the competition, owe their origin to Utzon’s experience of working with his famous yacht designer father Aage Utzon on the design and actual building of sailing boats, learning how to work with complex forms. Just as the ancient Vikings would upturn use upturned boats for shelter and storage, so Utzon poetically took the bows of his father’s boats and turned them into an Opera House in Sydney. Utzon’s resolution of details was equally poetic and beautiful, with the choice of the ceramic tiles, inspired by the Great Mosque in Isfahan, Iran that accentuate the sculptural character of the shells, being developed to emulate the reflective character of freshly fallen snow; an appealing quality in the heat of a Sydney summer and one that gives the building its dynamic, mesmerising and ethereal beauty.

Robin Boyd, who was an outspoken critic of visual pollution and a vulgar decorative tendency he called “Featurism”, saw however in Utzon’s Opera House, a form that apparently seemed not to have a basis in geometry, a common misconception then and still now; “and yet still manifestly controlled by an idea comprehensible to the observer an of architecture of poetic expression, made by an architect as artist striving for perfection. Boyd also quotes Nervi as saying “the indispensable premise for architectonic beauty is correct technique. This is probably due to the fact that the intuition and sensitivity to statics which in a more or less confused form may be found in all people are satisfied by those structure which immediately reveal the play of forces and resistance which define its equilibrium”. (Boyd, p.211) While Nervi very precisely articulates the intuitive appreciation of the tectonic integrity of the Utzon’s Sydney Opera House, that is the basis for its enduring iconic status; Boyd though questioned whether “the layman’s eye, really can sense statics in any detail” (Boyd, p. 211) and also writes that Nervi castigated buildings like the Sydney Opera House for “the most open anti-functionalism in statics and construction” (Boyd, p. 211). A disingenuous and erroneous appraisal, given Utzon’s brilliance and dedication in precisely this regard, but possibly motivated by Utzon’s different approach to resolving the roof shells, to that used by Nervi in his Rome Stadium, which had inspired Utzon while making the competition.

As Boyd states in his introduction to his book *The Australian Ugliness* published in 1960, “Under the veneer, practically all the impulses that lead to the culture of Australia are familiar in other prosperous parts of the world. Abstract art, prefabrication, mass-production and perverted Functionalist ethics provide the moulds that shape things in

Australia, as they do wherever English-speaking people build communities. The extroverted flair of the Latin countries and the introverted refinement of Scandinavia are not to be expected” (Boyd, p.3), Boyd perhaps did not appreciate Utzon’s Sydney Opera House in terms of the introverted Scandinavian refinement that he admired, though that is precisely what had characterised Utzon’s earlier domestic architecture.

Utzon travelled to Australia, with a great deal of hope and optimism, as had other modern architects that had emigrated from a Europe still recovering from the effects of the Second World War. For many at the time Australia was an escape from the then relatively recent trauma of war and an opportunity to realise a new life, in a dynamic young and exotic country, where the sun shone brightly and everyone spent time at the beach. The family established themselves at Palm Beach and purchased land at Bayview with the intention of a building a family home for their envisaged permanent stay in Australia. Sadly the remarkable house that Utzon designed and redesigned was repeatedly dismissed by the local authorities, who presumed that the separated pavilions intended to provide a degree of autonomy to the two eldest Utzon children, Jan and Lin, in itself a beautiful idea, was actually intended to be a separate dwelling on a site where it was only permitted to build one. The Bayview House, which would have showcased the potential of the innovative use of locally produced plywood beams, provided the genesis for Can Lis, the house that Utzon later built on the southern coast of Mallorca.

The Australia that Utzon and his family encountered was a combination of their high expectations, but also that which Boyd described in *The Australian Ugliness*; where he humorously, but scathingly criticised the cultural values or lack of them in the built environment; being particularly disparaging about the spreading Australian suburbia and housing, with its inherent ugliness, as he saw it. This lack of beauty in the built environment and broader cultural values, though particularly endemic in Australia, characterised all cultures of English origin, as he wrote “among the English-speaking nations with which Australia likes to compare herself she is very high on the list of conspicuous ugliness. And then, as everyone recognizes, English-speaking nations top the world list. A consistent vandalistic disregard for the community’s appearance runs through them all” (Boyd, p.11).

When writing about Sydney, Boyd describes the then relatively recent suburban growth away from the city. To the west from Liverpool to Parramatta, he describes it as “a fairly typical Australian working class development, repeating the dreary, ill-considered housing growth on the outskirts of every Australian town: the same cold comfort conservatism of villa design with the regular sprinkling of primary-tinted features. The Housing Commission of New South Wales, speculative builders and private owners compete with one another to reduce the bush to a desert of terra cotta roofs relieved only by electric wires and wooden poles.” (Boyd, p.101).

Boyd though reserved his most damning indictment for Sydney’s Northern Beaches, as wrote “The really depressing parts of Sydney, however, are in the North Shore Executive Zone. Here some of the most dramatically beautiful country available to suburban commuters anywhere in the world seems to draw out a delinquent streak in nearly everyone who builds. Out through French’s Forest and along the spine above Pittwater one can find three or four of the most notable modern houses in Australia. They are nationally, and to an extent internationally known by their photographs. But the photographs do not show their neighbours. The few thoughtful buildings of the area are all but lost in a wild scramble of outrageous Featurism clearly planned for the express purpose of extracting a gasp of envy from each passing sports car” (Boyd, p.103)

Undoubtedly Utzon’s own planned house at Bayview would, if had it been built, have joined the select ranks of those notable modern houses to garner international attention and Utzon himself was concerned at the potential visual encroachment of future neighbouring houses that he purchased a large enough plot of land to ensure that his future house would remain surrounded by natural bushland.

In his daily journey from Palm Beach along the Northern Beaches into the site office for the Opera House at Bennelong Point, Utzon would have been conscious of a less than harmonious relationship between placing of houses and the topography of the landscape, between the competing desire for views and privacy; and despite the pressing demands of the Opera House gave this matter his consideration, as he had done so admirably with his courtyard housing projects back in Denmark.

An invitation to write for the 15<sup>th</sup> year anniversary issue of *Australian House and Garden*, provided Utzon with an opportunity to formulate and publicly express his opinion of what would be a more ideal approach to suburban housing development in Australia, based upon the understanding he had developed in his housing projects in Denmark. Under the heading *JOERN UTZON TALKS ABOUT HOUSING*. Joern Utzon, internationally famous architect of the Sydney Opera House, gives us his impressions of Australian domestic architecture and ideas for the future development, echoing less explicitly Boyd’s sentiments regarding Featurism, Utzon wrote, “Looking at the fast growing suburbs of Sydney with a critical eye, the result as a whole is not happy, in spite of a wonderful landscape, nature and climate. Everywhere we see houses built looking into one another, of any style, any color and material and with no attempt at harmony. This tendency for every family to be independent is in itself a very good thing, and is possible if one has very large lots of some acres each then you can play around with any building form without being in disharmony with your neighbour. However, this is only possible far away from the city centre, and as developments are for economic reasons generally concentrated and with relatively small lots, we must not forget the fact that everybody is dependent on his neighbour when it comes to noise, views and privacy. On the slopes of the hills the buildings are very bar, so even though everybody gets a beautiful view, there is the disadvantage



Kingo Houses, Denmark. Photo Adrian Carter

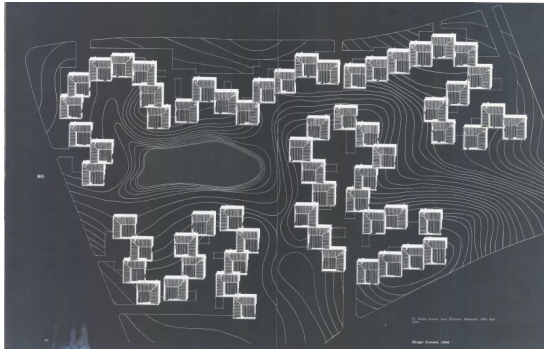
that it is also possible to see at the same time many ill-related houses.” Here Utzon addresses the competing desire for independence, views and privacy for each home, with the social responsibility of maintaining those qualities for all. Utzon’s comments in this regard could be as pertinent today and perhaps more so, given the tendency to expand, rebuild and create new ever larger homes on increasingly smaller sites, with diminishing spaces between. The tendency though towards the creation of McMansions, the new Featurism, is not a particularly Australian or even exclusively Anglo-Saxon phenomena, but is increasingly universal.

Utzon was not a person to be critical or negative, without considering how to concretely improve a situation. As he continues, “As an architect, I cannot make this criticism without trying to be positive. If the land around Sydney had been built on in the same way as around the Mediterranean in France and Italy hundreds of years ago, one would see small harmonious village groups completely blending in with and supporting, the contours of the hillsides. The question is, is it possible within today’s economy to create something as good as the old European villages?” This might appear to be an almost wistful, nostalgic and romantic Eurocentric yearning for the old country, that would tap into what Philip Drew has described as an Australian tendency to visit a beautiful European village and want to bring it back home, which he compares to being “as though you walk into a field of beautiful flowers and you pluck off the flowers, leaving the roots behind. You put it in the ground here and expect to get the thing growing. Real culture springs out of the soil.” (The triumph of ugliness Sydney Morning Herald, March 22, 2008) This was Utzon’s viewpoint precisely and the sources for this understanding did not come from Europe alone, but also from his experiences seeing the villages of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, made of rammed-earth that were as one with and grew out of

the landscape and similarly the Pueblo settlements he saw in Mexico.

The profound inspiration of North Africa, the Middle East and Mexico, combined with Utzon’s fascination with courtyard town houses of China and traditional Danish farmhouses built around courtyards, were the catalyst for Utzon’s enduring enthusiasm for the beautiful idea of the courtyard house; a housing arrangement that provided both a high degree of privacy, that the retiring Utzon valued highly, while at the same time when built together engendering a cohesive, harmonious sense of community. As well as appealing to the pragmatic side of Utzon’s character, by being a rational, effective and efficient use of resources and also site. Which had the considerable benefit that not only could more dwellings be built densely together, which was economically beneficial, but also actually more of the site could be retained in its natural state, as common ground and a shared amenity. Utzon’s explorations of the possibilities of the courtyard house, first gained public recognition, with his first-prize winning submission, entitle “Private Life” for a Swedish low-cost housing exhibition in 1954, together with Ib Møgelvang. This courtyard house proposal, with its possibilities for potential future expansion within its own perimeter walls, was to provide the model for the highly successful Kingo and later Fredensborg courtyard housing developments.

As Utzon describes in his article, “the basis for a successful community group is that one idea should dominate a large enough portion of land to make it undisturbed by other existing buildings. The landscape could be divided into districts where one should build and plan according to one style, and these divisions should follow natural lines. I have tried to make such communities in Denmark, a finished group of 64 houses built on a site that would only take 48 houses on a normal sub-division. This results in an immediate economy. Each family has a private



Site Plan, Kingo Houses, Utzon Archives,

*courtyard, not looked into by other houses and from this, a view of the common parkland. The expression of the houses to the street and to the park is in harmony with the movement of the landscape, and one has the feeling of living in a community group. In another similar group, a community centre was built containing hobby rooms, a restaurant and a club, and this added to the community feeling”.*

According to Kenneth Frampton Utzon, like Alvar Aalto before him, “strove for a building culture that would be more accessible to the society at large. For him there ought to be no inherent division between modernity and the continuity of architecture as a universal culture” (Louisiana Revy p.18) Frampton goes further to suggest that “The validity of this ‘popular’ approach would never be more

*convincingly demonstrated than in the compact low-rise housing schemes that Utzon built in North Zealand, Denmark between 1956 and 1963, and that Utzon’s Kingo Houses and the Fredensborg Houses, which separated vehicular access from the interstitial green common areas and represented an “alternative pattern of residential land settlement for the universal megapolis of our times.” And according to Frampton no other architect in the West has demonstrated more convincingly the land-conserving, socially cohesive and socially accessible virtues of this model.” (Louisiana revy, p.18)*

Certainly Utzon’s model of suburban courtyard housing developments is a valid today, as when he was proposing them in Australia in 1963; not only as a more sensitive, harmonious and beautiful antidote to the ugliness that Boyd described, but also as a more land efficient and thus more economic means of developing suburbia. While at the same time creating a strengthened sense of community and a built environment that demonstrated a heightened appreciation for the remarkable Australian landscape.

As Karsten Harries concludes in his essay *The Ethical Significance of Environmental Beauty*, “Perhaps appreciation of the beauty of the environment can build a common sense strong enough to replace the type of thinking that seeks to master and to possess the environment – the type of thinking that, if left unchecked, would be destined to mutilate and destroy both it and us.” (Caicco, p.149) It is pity therefore and also surprising, given both the



House in Avalon, Sydney, Australia. Architect, Richard Lepplastrier. Photo, Adrian Carter

economic and environmental benefits of such an approach to housing, that Utzon's beautiful proposal has not been as yet fully developed. Perhaps it is because as Drew suggests *"Despite 200 years of colonisation, we are still to come to grips with the land on which we live"* and possibly because more poignantly, as Brit Andresen has suggested to me, the inability to build with respect and in harmony with the landscape is in part a consequence of the still prevailing ambivalence towards the land from colonial settlement onwards, *"the underlying national guilt- guilt that breeds crass disrespect for such easily stolen goods."* Utzon's courtyard housing would have provided a discreet sense of belonging in the landscape, with one's own sheltered outdoor space in the sun; while allowing more of the natural landscape to remain. Naturally if Utzon would have had the opportunity to have developed housing projects in Australia, then he would have approached the task differently to the manner he did in his native Denmark, where despite the many transcultural references, his Kingo and Fredensborg houses are appropriate to a Danish tectonic tradition and culture. Just as one can see a continuity and development from Aalto in Utzon's work; so can one see a development and evolution of similar ideas appropriate to the Australian landscape and conditions, in the work Glen Murcutt and Richard Leplastrier, who like Utzon have strived and succeeded in creating some of the most beautiful architecture in Australia. Richard Leplastrier's house at Avalon, is a wonderful evocation and translation of beautiful ideas that Utzon himself was fond of, the raised platform the gathering and opening up around an inner, more private courtyard-like sanctum, into which the landscape and nature is brought in. Beauty might seem such an elusive and exclusive quality, but as Juhani Pallasmaa suggests *"Beauty is also the promise of a better world, and that is why beauty is such an important element in human experience. It maintains optimism, and that also creates the authentic ground for an interest in the future"* (Reisner p.87)

**Notes**

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