The Jorn Utzon Architectural Paradigm and the Emerging World Design Experience

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Introduction

The contemporary architectural main stream can be potentially improved to define a paradigmatic methodology of innovative and elaborated architecture, at the intersection of transcultural influences. Jorn Utzon’s architectural designs and especially the Opera of Sydney have always intrigued designers for their dynamic structures, and transcultural aspects. The architectural sculpture seems to be compelling to the international society around Sydney, using its international morphological style recalling the shells and the sea culture. Our world is full of rich icons and images that people identify themselves with. In our globalized world; it is indeed very inspiring to be studying how Utzon connects his architecture with nature using his Nordic sense of the surroundings, and connecting his vision with world architecture through understanding the diversity of our world sphere. Utzon emphasized on the synthesis of form, material, and also social function, thus his fascination and openness to world architecture emphasized and progressed his architectural design process. In a broader context, the research would focus on the roots of understanding the built, political, cultural, social, and technological environments to investigate and understand the impact of cultures on shaping architecture and our world, as well. Technology is a key factor of change, and an active component at the intersection of world civilizations and cultures that would potentially drive the creation of a deep and enrooted contemporary built environment. Today we are at the intersection of world global experiences and realms that would either passively shape our worlds, or would allow us to take the lead, as designers, and shape a well defined and progressive built environment for future cities and future generations.

Architectural influences in Utzon architectural work: a modern and acute strategy in a global world

The concept of transcultural architecture

The notion of transculturization is a very potential way to drive architectural practices forward and to rethink the future of a contemporary and balanced architectural model. Transculturization in architecture opens up a new area that challenges conventional approaches of architecture that are contemporary and disconnected, or traditional and stagnant, as imposed by colonial factors and political stigmas. Architectural transculturization reflects a constant search for an ideal coherence between combined architectural elements, social contexts, and cultural influences. Instead of eliminating such potential tools, it is very crucial to think about how useful interpretation is in defining new architectural realities.

The concept of transculturization offers the needed tools that cities around the world would aspire to have and to incorporate into their global design expectations. This progressive notion offers new avenues for continuous formal exploration, where architects are at the heart of the event, and where they are requested to balance between cultures. Global capitalism is spreading in a fast way; where architects are called to act, reassess the complexities of design, and to reinvest global symbols into the dynamism of their work. A sense of place and belonging is to be established, and at the same time, a progressive architecture would be created to respond to the dynamics of our cultures.

The contemporary work of Jorn Utzon reveals a strong dedication to search for new prototypes that define how dynamic and hybrid architecture can be. Utzon revealed a sense of liberation in his work reflecting his world travels that totally shaped his vision of what the transcultural dimension is about. Jorn Utzon design principles integrated world design symbols, and revealed the extent to which architecture can be evolutionary.

Adding to architecture: Jorn Utzon additive approach

Utzon’s architecture is as evolutionary as nature is. His works including the Opera of Sydney, and his design for a sports complex in Jeddah recall the fact that architecture is as dynamic as nature is. The use of patterns (white tiles in the Opera of Sydney) reminds us how evolutionary and progressive architecture can be. Freedom of architecture is what characterizes this approach and what distinguishes it from other architectural main stream of today.

Mogens Prip-Buus, one of Utzon’s closest colleagues, reports that the term was coined in 1965 in Utzon’s Sydney office when, after a discussion of the social structures in Britain and Denmark, Utzon suddenly
jumps up and wrote "Additive Architecture" on the wall. He saw it as part of an additive world where both natural and cultural forms contributed to additive systems and hierarchies. He realized that his own architecture reflected the same principle, just as the transitions in primitive societies between family, village and the surrounding world have visible links revealing differences, relations and distances.

In our global and fast-paced world, buildings should be designed more openly rather than identical boxes. Utzon expressed the same ideas in an essay titled "The Innermost Being of Architecture" stating: "Something of the naturalness found in the growth principle in nature ought to be a fundamental idea in works of architecture." 2

Islamic architecture is evolutive and dynamic thanks to the complex geometry that forms it. The world design experience can be rich integrating such symbols as the arabesque. Spirals are universal symbols that involve the addition of similar shapes, relating to the evolution of nature, life and its cycles. They embody the adding process of creation’s expansion and contraction and they are being widely used in Islamic design and specifically in arabesque motifs. 3 Jorn Utzon additive and evolutive process would be very valuable in making Islamic more dynamic and progressive. In a way, Islamic design is a reflection of infinity, universality, and progression; consequently sustainable. Imagine a cultural venue in Dubai with a very complex structure, as in the Opera of Sydney, and where patterns are inspired from floral patterns and form part of the skin. These elements are not just decorative but they add on to the building structure as they come out of the skin and roof. Freedom is synonym to progression and reinvestment in that sense. A spiritual experience takes place within the poetry of architecture, creating an irresistible sense of harmony between the floral structured roof and the context of Islamic design. Architecture is additive, and evolutive and is at the core of progression conceived by man.

**An architectural vision relating to world sphere**

Utzon’s architecture is revelatory and straightforward, since it reveals a well understood style of architecture. The human touch is also easily identifiable through his work. His architectural works reminds us of natural elements including the shells and sea in the Sydney Opera House, and it strongly connects with the local architecture of where the project is located. The architecture of the place is what we need today for our global cities. Moving beyond the iconic star architecture towards a more enrooted architecture connected with its site, history, and climate is what planners and architects should be urging for nowadays. A sense of place needs to be strongly integrated in our contemporary architectural era. This notion is also illustrated through the work of Japanese Modernist architect, Tadao Ando, whose work reveals a thoughtful research of form, light, and geometry. Tadao’s work is an illustration of timeless and minimalist interventions on landscapes. By correlation, Jorn Utzon’s work is also timeless as the visitor can sense a strong sense of the place and a strong presence within the surrounding nature. In the Architect Magazine, it was mentioned that: "The marine-architect father, the designs for abstractly beautiful hybrid monohull-trimaran, the debatable but irresistible conflation of sails and hulls with the shells of the opera house roof". Jorn Utzon world experience fully engages the sailors, the visitors, and the innovators into a uniquely distinguished world experience, where architecture meets nature in an evolutionary way.

His elegant work reveals a universal grasp that he creates through the cultures he gets in touch with. Through his travels, Utzon was able to create a very unique and clear design that reflects a universal attitude and a personal touch combined through façade, walls, and an overall open and clear architectural expression. Utzon invites the user or spectator to come in, and if you look at his buildings, there is nothing that you do not understand [...] looking at it [The Sydney Opera house] from a distance, it’s sculptural, but at hand, there is nothing that you can’t understand. Everything has been put forward. Utzon’s architecture had a human aspect at its core. He was inspired by architecture without architects. Instead of just looking at what his colleagues made, he searched and found some universal architectural ideas. He was able to grasp a culture that wasn’t his own, and transform it into his own". 4

Fig. 1. SOH competition sketch, East Side, 1957

**How does culture shape our urban environments?**

The social and sociopolitical context is integrally related to architecture, which means that architecture is a revelation of the surrounding culture. Cities are often thought to be imposed by city planners and decision makers in the way we see the millennium cities of today. Dubai is one example where architectural ambitions went far beyond the rational and where dreams went far from reality. According to some researchers Dubai is ‘perhaps the world’s fastest-growing global city and intercontinental hub’ but it is also ‘a non-Arab society planted in the heart of Arabia’ (Hirst, 2011). Normally, culture gives quality and value to the meaning of life and is a strong tool towards progressing societies and civil entities. In a way, culture has a strong connection with local cultures and habitat, which has been somehow overshadowed under our global world design patterns.

Looking back at Jorn Utzon Kuwait National Assembly project, we would certainly see an eastern culture
FOURTH INTERNATIONAL UTZON SYMPOSIUM – SYDNEY AUSTRALIA
WHAT WOULD UTZON DO NOW?

inspiration. Utzon was inspired by the Bazaars of Isphahan, Iran, and the covered structure of those very particular dome-covered Islamic souks. As a result of his travels, Utzon had developed an affinity for Islamic architecture.

Fig. 2. The National Assembly of Kuwait building designed first in 1972 by Jørn Utzon. It was later modified and completed under the leadership of his son Jan in 1984.

In the definitive book by Richard Weston titled simply, Utzon, the project is described as follows: “The complex was conceived as an evolving fabric with, initially, ragged edges but of uniform height save for the representative spaces—the covered square, parliamentary chamber, large conference hall and mosque—which would rise as visually dominant group. These four major elements formed the corners of an incomplete but clearly implied rectangle, and the highest surfaces of their distinctive roofs—as specified in a three-dimensional sketch—were to lie in the same plane to create a ‘firm strong grouping’ to ‘hold the rest of the complex (which in its nature is irregular as it grows) together. Dominate it’ as Utzon explained in a note next to the sketch. The mosque was flat-roofed and anchored one corner of this spatial core—it would later be angled slightly toward Mecca—and its autonomy was stressed by making it independent of the office grid. The other roofs were sag curves, reflecting Utzon’s interest in fabric as a metaphor for concrete—we may recall it was shortly before this time that he had explored the Bagsværd Church’s cloud-vaults with fabric models.’

The Sydney opera house and the world experience: how can designers and architects rethink and reintegrate core principles of world architecture?

The Sydney Opera House recently became a UNESCO world heritage site on June 28th, 2007. The work of Danish architect Jørn Utzon is influenced by what we refer to as expressionist architecture. Expressionism in architecture was a movement that grew up in Europe during the first part of the 20th century, in parallel to expressionism in the arts. This movement of architecture tends to be more gothic than classic, relating more to symbolism than to conceptual representation of the time. Through an artistic architectural piece, the architect reveals emotional connections and feelings through forms, shapes, and unique materials places in a way that makes the building more of a sculpture or monolithic design. In this movement, architects are also being influenced by political and social situations that surround them, and drive part of their inner creative side revealing landmarks that commemorate an era of total challenge and questioning.

Fig. 3. Sydney harbour at night, a sculptural landmark shaping the skyline

The idea of the platform would manifest itself in many of Utzon’s designs over the years, including that of the Sydney Opera House, where he described it as follows: “…the idea has been to let the platform cut through like a knife and separate primary and secondary functions completely. On top of the platform the

Architecture is an expression of its time, and also a long lasting expression of what mankind would leave as a trace on earth for future generations. The national opera house is one of the “world” examples of world architecture given the fact that its architectural features and expression is long lasting. The National Opera House erected on the very strategic site of Bennelong Point celebrates both culture and context in the city of Sydney.

The structure of the opera house is very unique as it brings large precast concrete shells together. This performance art centre of the world has established its world character thanks to its connection with its site, and to its global expression. The cultural icon in Jorn’s work strongly connects with the sense of departure and openness that Sydney bay offers as an open gate to the world. The Sydney Opera House shells ribs structure is an expression of its time and of all times, since nature is timeless, and what connects with nature is also timeless. From a distance, the roof structure appears as shells that are, in fact, precast concrete panels supported by precast concrete ribs. The white colour of the outside skin speaks to the outside environment and reveals a strong spiritual connection with nature.

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spectators receive the completed work of art and beneath the platform every preparation for it takes place. Utzon continued, “To express the platform and avoid destroying it is a very important thing, when you start building on top of it. A flat roof does not express the flatness of the platform … in the schemes for the Sydney Opera House … you can see the roofs, curved forms, hanging higher or lower over.

Utzon cultural hybridization and transcultural connections are seen through his work of the opera of Sydney where he got inspired from the Mayan temples during his trip to Mexico. This was a feature that Jorn Utzon wanted to integrate gradually into modern architecture, as a strong expression of modernism. Jorn Utzon combined both the Sydney headlands as well as the Mayan pyramids to create a strong and dynamic architectural sculpture in the Middle of Sydney Harbour. This particular world design experience is very present and culturally significant to building a world design experience that would reshape our habitat. It is certainly fundamental to build and not only to construct, and by constructing we are referring to the massive internationalization and copying of architectural icons and boxes. The world design experience of Jorn Utzon is a revelation of how new hybrid modes of cultural connectivity embrace images and symbols that add on to the architectural value in our planet. Cultural heritage is very present in all aspects of life, therefore the architectural world experience of our global planet needs to gather these cultural values and to celebrate them through the built environment.
Notes


4 The Architect Magazine (AIA, USA), P.27, October 23, 2013 Edition

5 CEO of the Danish museum Lousianna, Poul Erik Tøjner: Text Rune U. Jørgensen


References


CEO of the Danish museum Lousianna, Poul Erik Tøjner: Text Rune U. Jørgensen.


