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On: 27 December 2014, At: 14:14

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Architectural Theory Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ratr20>

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Published online: 28 Jul 2009.

To cite this article: Philip Drew (1998) JØRN UTZON TURNS EIGHTY, Architectural Theory Review, 3:2, 126-129, DOI: [10.1080/13264829809478350](https://doi.org/10.1080/13264829809478350)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13264829809478350>

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1000 WORDS

JØRN UTZON TURNS EIGHTY *

PHILIP DREW

On his workroom wall, Jørn Utzon's father Aage Utzon kept a display of photographs of the Utzon ancestors extending back as far as 1578, beginning with Ude Pedersen. Below them hung his French curves and drawing instruments, and rolls of drawings of the famous double-ended yachts he had designed. Off to one side were two early Kemp & Lauritzen U 4860 pendant lamp fittings designed by Jørn, above the door head was a polished half-model of a yacht and below it, pinned to the door was a large perspective view of the north front of the Sydney Opera House surrounded by the sparkling waters of the harbour.

The entire Utzon story was there: the succession of merchants, several pastors, a regimental quartermaster, dyers, town councillors. Aage Utzon, a naval engineer who managed the Aalborg and later the Helsingør shipyards, was proud of them and especially his architect son Jørn. The Utzons were solidly middle class, they were important people, socially assured and accustomed to running things. Driven out of the Kolding in central Jutland by the First Schleswigan War in 1849, they came to rest at Hellebaek, north of Copenhagen, in what is one of the most beautiful regions of Denmark.

Jørn Utzon turned eighty this week on 9 April. Shortly after this he will receive the prestigious Sonning Prize of DK Kr 5000,000 in Copenhagen recognising his contribution to the advancement of European civilisation. Over the years, Utzon has received 17 major prizes, including the RIBA Gold Medal, the Alvar Aalto Medal in 1982, Wolf Prize, which he shared with Frank Gehry and Denys Lasdun, but the Sonning Prize is the most important and valuable to date.

* Philip Drew delivered this tribute to Jørn Utzon at the University of Technology, Sydney, on the occasion of Utzon's birthday.

At the very moment that the NSW Minister for Public Works, Davis Hughes was contriving to remove Utzon as architect for the Sydney Opera House early in 1966, the German Architectural Association, in an unprecedented move, awarded him its Honour Plaque.

Jørn Utzon is one of the outstanding architects of our time, not so much for the quantity of his architecture which is limited in comparison to many other architects, but because of its unique quality of expression and its undeniable ability to define place.

He has dominated the second generation of Danish Modernists who succeeded Kay Fisker, Vilhelm Lauritzen, Arne Jacobsen, more by what he designed than by what he built. He never did the Louisiana Museum of Contemporary Art because he was already committed to the opera house in Sydney so Knud Jensen gave it to another talented contemporary, Jorgen Bo.

Utzon already occupies an important place as a highly original architect in the twentieth century. This is not based solely on Sydney; his work on the new theatre in Zurich which was stopped after 6 years was even more impressive in its maturity; and the National Assembly Building in Kuwait City which was badly damaged during the Iraqi invasion, together testify to his capacity to develop and complete large projects that were emblematic works with the ability to encapsulate the spirit of their place and in turn become powerful local symbols.

It is Utzon's smaller works that impress most, buildings such his house on the cliffs near Santanyi on Mallorca, and the inspiring Bagsvaerd church northwest of Copenhagen.

Utzon is significant for several reasons. He never turned his back on industrialisation as a force in architecture, instead he sought to humanise it, to give it a human imprint by discovering the simplicity and variability and richness of vernacular folk building.

Throughout his architecture he returned to a limited number of metaphors: the Danish beech forest, the cresting wave in the surf, and weightless clouds, sunlight glancing off an alpine peak at sunset in a rosy alpine glow. Utzon wanted to take people back to nature and remind us of its rigorous determinism where logic and poetry somehow mysteriously coincide. That in spite of our seeming sophistication, nature is more inventive, more prolific, more subtle, more diverse.

Utzon believed emphatically that architecture should not be based on style, but should emerge quite naturally from the way we conduct our lives. It should be organic. Style was an a priori imposition that falsified reality. Foremost he was a sculptor, who treated architecture as a branch of sculpture which exerts an

irresistible appeal on our imagination.

Is Utzon one of the ten greatest architects of the century—who knows? Certainly, the Sydney Opera House, even in its present mangled state that the Davis Hughes team left it, remains one of the great twentieth century architectural shrines with a universal appeal. It alone is a testimonial that added immensely to his reputation, but it also gets in the way. It is not typical of Utzon who was at his best working on small things directing the tradesmen, making changes, working more like a medieval designer. This is where he excels.

Utzon is a survivor in a life coloured by tragedy. His two brothers died before him, he himself narrowly missed death in an airplane crash at Idlewild Airport in March 1962 with Sir Jack Zunz. Both the Sydney Opera House and the New Zurich Theatre were bedeviled by the premature removal or deaths of important clients.

For a quarter of a century now Utzon has lived in retirement on the south coast of Mallorca some distance away on the opposite side to Australia's notorious Christopher Skase. Utzon is a loner, a recluse who seems not to need to have people close to him. Like Greta Garbo the Swedish film actress, Utzon is a social outsider and a non-joiner, he deliberately chose to live close to nature.

I first discovered the Utzon reality in the 1970 when, with my wife and her sister, I was looking for his forest house near Hellebaek in north Zealand in Denmark. Riding rented bicycles, we cycled through the dim forest light along a winding forest trail beneath stately beech trees, then, without warning, we came upon a clearing bathed in bright sunlight, in the middle of which sat Utzon's wonderfully calm house.

It was like being a child again caught up in a fairy tale about an enchanted forest and finding the wizard's castle. Utzon's life is also a bit like a fairy tale, it too wandered in and out of the fantastic, it had its miraculous moments, its moments of dark despair.

I think Australia can be grateful for the three years Jørn Utzon spent here from March 1963 to April 1966, for his great gift of the Sydney Opera House, whose value is beyond measurement. It still remains a mystery how he could come up with such an effective symbol for a city gathered around the harbour as he did, how he could perceive that we are truly a veranda people living close by the sea on the edge of the continent, not an inland nation as some have argued. The Opera House is our chief symbol to Australia's maritime culture and our sea-side coastal existence.

Utzon demonstrated that architecture can be great if we pursue perfection, and it can be the possession of ordinary people.

For Utzon, architecture is about living better, the sun finding its way across a stone floor in the afternoon, looking out at the sea, being happy because we are alive and alive to the joy of living. He has given Australia a great gift, we should thank him for that and wish him long life and good health on his eightieth birthday on Mallorca.

A Tribute to Jørn Utzon on his 80th Birthday

Nature Spirit

I come from the clouds,
I spring from the salty sea,
tossed by the curling waves,
I lounge beneath the cool beech forest.

I am spirit—

I am the wind's sigh,
the sea's murmur,
the sap rising,
the worm burrowing,
clouds swirling and drifting,
I am everywhere, in everything.

Breathe deeply,
inhale me,
suck me in,
With your fingers,
weave me;
carve and shape me,
mould me,
express me,
whisper my name,
but do not deny me.