‘...the Modern project might never have lost its experiential richness, its sense of fun and its public...’

John Sergeant on Jørn Utzon

Utzon
By Richard Weston
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Reviewed by John Sergeant

It has taken a long time to be able to assess Jørn Utzon’s importance. Until the end of the twentieth century, the architect described by Sigfried Giedion as the most important of the ‘third generation’ hardly appeared in its literature. By contrast we had no such problem with Le Corbusier: there were the Oeuvres Complètes. It was easy to consult any building, indeed sketch, and along the way to be thoroughly coerced into his theoretical position. His massive and megalomaniac contribution to the last century could be studied first through L’Esprit Nouveau, the avant-garde magazine which promulgated him – ‘17.23, 2me février, 1926, Grande Pensée de L-C...’ and so forth – and later through the archives and sketchbooks.

Sydney Opera House: vast and elemental: like a dam
it was only in its second edition, in 1985, that Utzon was included. Frampton then gave him more generous and thorough treatment in one chapter of his Studies in Tectonic Culture (1996). In 1999 Philip Drew’s The Masterpiece, Jørn Utzon: A Secret Life offered a biography and a history of the Sydney Opera House building contract which excoriated the government of New South Wales by revealing both duplicity and non-payment of fees and made it possible to understand why the architect’s career declined as it did. In her Jørn Utzon: The Sydney Opera House (1998), Françoise Fromonot offered a similar appraisal to Frampton of the Danish work and Kuwait National Assembly as background to her focus on the Sydney Opera House, Utzon’s Stadtkrone, where she uncovered new insights into its realization. Unable to discern his adherence to any tendency, and finding his faith in logical systems to be swimming against the Post-Modern tide, she emphatically championed his idiosyncratic and humane imaginative powers. Now, with Utzon’s full co-operation, we have Richard Weston’s catalogue raisonné.

First it must be said that Weston’s book is physically magnificent. It is beautifully designed, printed and illustrated, of large format (430x300mm) and, at 4.5 kilos, suits the library or desk rather better than the lap. There are all the drawings, plans, sections and details needed to understand volumes, spatial sequences and material intentions, as well as Utzon’s inimitable sketches. The photographs expand the text and substantiate the greatness of this totally site-specific work. One thinks especially of Isfahan – the contrast between mud-coloured city and glittering tiled domes, the Fredensborg housing captured in its full pastoral panorama, the platforms of Monte Alban, or the gleaming headland of Bennelong Point, so clear in the sunlit air that its utterly human qualities shine out. The huge, pink, precast paving slabs of Sydney are quite flat for a child to skip on (and were laid years before upside-down roofs or gap-drained terraces). The tiled bench and breakfast table in the first Mallorcan house suggest activity in its absence, for all the world like the open marble-book lectern in the scuola cantorum of San Clemente in Rome. To a remarkable extent these photographs transmit the very tactile, sensuous quality of Utzon’s palette, which was always appropriate and transcended its time. And that time, the late 1950s, was mean and pinched; it is difficult, now, to place Utzon in the contemporary context of New Brutalism and precast concrete point-blocks. Utzon could have dragged Modernism out of its hair-shirt, dour, postwar phase, but his career in terms of big buildings was snuffed out. More of this later, but there is something of a testament about this fully illustrated Complete Works because, sadly, so much of it remained unbuilt. After 40 years of silence, Utzon himself probably feels that this is his last chance to help in presenting himself to posterity.

Utzon has the exponent he needs. The eye of a working architect keeps the book mercifully free of the constructionally ignorant theorizing that now characterizes much current architectural writing. Weston offers lucid commentary on all the work. His accounts of the hugely influential housing projects, Kuwait’s National Assembly Building and Bagsvaerd Church at Copenhagen are especially valuable. Utzon never abandoned the early Modern conviction that conceptual and constructional clarity would yield both economy and poetry and in every project he demonstrates that machine techniques can achieve radically different visual forms.

So what inspired his prize-winning design for Sydney? Clouds over a great base. The clouds to be vaults at one with the sails of the harbour, and the base an acropolis on which Australia could meet or manifest herself. Along the way towards construction, the roofs had to metamorphose from shells (too big) into ribbed vaults; Arups could scent out a compound weight-to-strength conflict but 50 engineers could not see that a rolling segmental geometry could generate both the desired forms and a standardized set of parts.
Utzon did that, working with physical models. Moreover the disarmingly simple base swallowed up all servicing – including a giant bottom-upwards stage mechanism, with ease provided escape from fire, withheld, then handed, the visitor the view over that magnificent harbour, and achieved the single most thrilling monumental staircase in all of architecture. Weston is good on all this, especially on the way in which Utzon hung onto his conviction that the vaults be light, if not physically then visually. The white-tiled cladding achieves this with infinite subtlety. Each ‘sail’ is outlined with porcelain brightness; but the vaults do not dazzle because their chief area is composed of matt tiles. Instead they respond to every change of light. It is extraordinary that at roughly the same time that Lichtenstein was exploring black on black, Utzon should be making this indelible gift of white on white. Weston has unearthed the recollection of a former colleague that Utzon ‘noticed the difference between freshly-fallen snow and the glistening, textured surface of earlier, frozen snow exposed by the wind’ while on a skiing holiday.

It is barely conceivable that a hick politician should have seen it as his mission to plot Utzon’s replacement by placemen, in the name of economy, when the project went on to grotesque overspend once purged of its architect. The tragedy was that David Hughes, for that was his name, used the test mock-ups of plywood-linings for the acoustic interior as his means to unseat Utzon. They had been designed with as much patient flair as the vault exterior, and were to be the colours of barramundi or other Australian fish, red and gold, blue and silver. Instead the brief was changed, and an architectural abortion performed; world-class stage machinery was sold for scrap. The result was that the profession ignored the incomplete masterpiece and, excepting the Kuwait National Assembly, Utzon never got another major public building. If recent press reports that Sydney will execute the original design are true, this may finally right a great wrong, but it can never give back a lost reputation nor lost commissions.

There is abundant evidence that he is a major architect. Norman Foster’s recent American display-hangar for the Imperial War Museum at Duxford shows his close attention to Utzon’s use of sliced spherical triangles to generate not just a complex curved form, but economical precast elements. Renzo Piano clearly builds on the additive-architecture phase of his career by utilizing repetitive sectional elements. Even the rendition of these, and a method of analyzing varying conditions of site-topography by drawing frequent ‘salami-slices’, seems to have given Enric Miralles a method of interrogating the site and deriving his vocabulary. Closer still, for he was personally involved in the Opera House, and 30 years later, Rafael Moneo built on that memory for his own Kursaal intervention at San Sebastián. Further back, Leslie Martin and Colin St John Wilson’s Oxford Libraries and Harvey Court at Cambridge continued Utzon’s exploration of the site-platform as parti. Both Richard MacCormac and Edward Cullinan were affected by Utzon’s identification with the users of his buildings, clearly demonstrated by his drawings of their life-stages in his housing projects. The joint housing project with PAGON (1947) prefigured Ralph Erskine’s perimeter-contour-wrapping as used at the Byker Wall in Newcastle. Only the first two instances above are mentioned by Weston. What has long been a secret among good architects is now attracting the attention of historians. A measured appraisal of Utzon’s work and of its importance in its time is long overdue.

Weston has achieved a hugely valuable compilation of the work and provides a knowing commentary on each project. It is a fine piece of scholarship and the benchmark by which Utzon’s true importance can now be judged. But Weston can at times suspend critical judgement. Some recent work has lacked Utzon’s normal subtlety of scale and lightness of touch. For example the Faustian Showroom buildings on the
waterfront at Copenhagen (1998), executed with his son Kim, have a lumbering, inelegant quality. More importantly, he omits any discussion of the disparity between the exterior form of Sydney Opera House and its intended internal spaces. In a general way the disposition of the two halls, their stages, and the independent restaurant are expressed. However the auditoria volumes reduce in height toward the rear in order to reduce the reverberation time – at just the point where the vaults above flare outward. The magnificent structural ribbing is also covered up, of course (and the interiors of both halls changed fundamentally throughout the project). To any reader versed in Pugin there will be an objection to this: one of the most powerful arguments of True Principles was its rejection of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, London, for its structural dishonesty as it has three forms – an exterior for the city-view, an invisible, structural, inner cone and an interior with a false perspective. Utzon had a ready response to this problem which, as usual, he expressed visually by displaying a walnut together with its opened shell – the one smooth and the other wrinkled. It is implied that, because Nature employs this strategy, the principle is indisputable; but surely debate is needed. The walnut employs a fibrous inner packing to protect the nut until it has fallen and taken seed; is this, then, an acceptable analogy for fortuitously discovering a space for technical servicing? It is part of Utzon's normal syncretic procedure of drawing on a very personal list of closely observed precedents throughout the world: nature in all her forms, boats, Islamic tiled domes, the ancient Chinese building manual Ying Tsao Fu Shi, and the raised platforms of the Mayas are the most obvious; Fromont has even suggested that the form of the Sydney vaults may have come from a subconscious memory of a watercolour for an imaginary project by Scharoun. If Utzon's theoretical position remains unclear, the other area in which Weston's study could be strengthened is its treatment of his use of materials. Utzon is fond of Aalto's comment that 'my poetry is in my specifications'. A book of this comprehensiveness, written during the architect's life, could surely have better clarified the means by which Utzon achieved his major material moves. True, at Fredensborg, Weston catches the cherokee-red paint that the architect borrowed from Wright and the blue ceramic half-round parapet cappings which recall Aalto – a special material for contact with the hands. His most thorough treatment is of the tiled cladding of the Sydney vaults where it is possible to follow the dogged realization of visual and detailing intentions. But at the wonderful Bagvaerd Church, Utzon managed to achieve the lightness of the concrete vaults – the 'clouds' – that had eluded him in Australia and it would be of interest to more readers than just architects to know how exactly concrete of less than 100mm thickness was induced to set uniformly in moulds which curved through 360 degrees. At a more prosaic level, what were the instructions to carpenters to achieve the superb timber detail? One assumes the milky finish to be white oil or soap or lye, all Danish specialities, but an appendix of a representative specification could have answered such questions. And, as Weston himself notes, the issue is of importance because of Utzon's love of building. It is also important because, by contrast, today's students have their imaginations stimulated by critics' elaborately historical or phenomenological analyses of material. Tadao Ando's concrete is a good example: how often has it been studied in this way without any mention of his 50-page specifications or any account of his patient development of mould-materiial, joints and finish? And so to Weston's conclusion. In just four pages he accounts for Utzon's weak place in history to date: he did not lecture, hardly wrote, discouraged publication and left no aphorisms. He does this more in biographical terms than in terms of the architectural tendencies of the last century. To be sure his general position as regards working with the nature of materials is set out as being in the tradition of Wright, but we are told that 'despite their longevity ‘organic’ ideas have been in retreat before successive waves of Post-Modern theory'. Hope is held out that new awareness of the fractal nature of natural structure and research into the behaviour of matter such as clouds and wave-theory – Portughesi's 'new paradigm' in science - will bring the organic project in from the periphery. But this is all too gentle. Utzon wrote his one great article, 'Platforms: Thoughts of a Danish Architect' (Zodiac 10, 1960) at a puritan time when every project could be justified only in terms of the brief, or possibly systems: architects could not even discuss form. Yet his advocacy of the temple bases of the Mayas is based on the brilliant observation that their builders had been imprisoned literally and conceptually by the jungle and that it was only by ascending the steps to the abode of their gods that they were liberated by their changed viewpoint above the trees. It would be 20 years before architectural criticism employed this kind of observation in the person of Heidegger. Indeed Norberg-Schulz cited the latter in discussing Utzon. Again, having initially introduced Frampton's concept of Critical Regionalism the theme is dropped. The organic tradition has always encompassed the need for poetry (Wright's 'wayside flower'), has always been rooted in place and aware of context, climate, and client. It loves material and technique and because of all this always results in a different end product. It is a way of working and proceeds from the specific. The term was used by William Morris, Ruskin, Wright, Aalto and Scharoun. It could, for example, be argued that Herzog and de Meuron are quite probably working in this spirit at the Laban Dance Studio in London or the new Forum in Barcelona. Had Utzon been able to finish Sydney, build his central Zurich project and the other major commissions that would have followed, the Modern project might never have lost its experiential richness, its sense of fun and its public; ‘critical regionalism’ would be an unnecessary category and Post-Modernism would never have had an audience for its superficiality. Even as things are, Weston has shown enough to embed Utzon in a tradition of working and excite the imagination for the future. John Sergeant is an architect and the author of Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses: The Case for Organic Architecture (Whitney Library of Design, 1984).
Tom Ellis: Dead Hotel
Percy Miller Gallery, London
Exhibition took place 5 September–10 October 2003

Reviewed by Pamela Self

‘Which way up?’ and ‘What size?’ are recurring questions when viewing the artworks of Tom Ellis. Devices of reflection and re-scaling are extracted from an architectural context and employed with quirky irreverence in this exhibition of models, drawings and ready-mades. Even before his collaboration with architects for this latest show, Tom Ellis’ work has shown a fascination with imagined places and structures. Earlier pieces construct, in cheap, clumsy materials, the inaccessible landscapes viewed from a plane window or the envisaged destination of a journey. His explorations of the perceptual effects of scale are sometimes jokey, sometimes profound, but always refreshing and unpretentious.

It does take some time to engage with the current exhibition. The centre of the room is dominated by Chimera, a bland sculptural composition of two plastic chairs which fail to create the incongruous beauty promised by its name. Here the artist’s representation of ‘upturning and inverting’ is at its most literal. The small print on the chairs’ labels offers the only hint of Ellis’ eye for detail and irony, advising that they are ‘suitable for sitting only’ – an instruction that the artist takes much rooted in the physical.

The assemblages encourage us to question appearances, and in this can be compared to the models of Thomas Demand, which have a similar disorientating effect. However in their formal qualities they could not be more distinct. Where Demand’s precise cardboard structures are photographed to create a hyper-real illusion, Ellis’ work is urgently crafted and strongly three-dimensional. His models appear spontaneous and instinctive, rendering them all the more engaging. In other aspects Ellis’ constructions recall Dan Graham’s Alterminations of a Suburban House, an early model which experimented with the idea of reflected space. Like Graham’s large architectural pieces, the focus is phenomenological. Whether Ellis’ works will grow to the size of Graham’s Pavilions remains to be seen, but at their current small scale, they convey great charm and a playful imagination. Despite its throwaway appearance, this exhibition is a subtle, sophisticated provocation.

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Through a microscope to reveal a hidden, technically complex miniature world.

One interpretation of St Catharine’s Chapel is as a gentle critique of the architectural profession. The ‘design’ for the chapel begins with a simple model and then gets lost in a fantasy of details, as if a perfectionist zeal has taken over the architects and weakened their grasp on reality. With affectionate humour, the architectural process is thus characterized as an unhealthy union of child’s play and obsessive delusion.

Some of Ellis’ individual pieces are more mysterious and atmospheric. His crude medium-density fibreboard (MDF) structures are, like half-constructed design models, far more compelling than finished objects because they are open to many readings. The methods of making are immediately clear but their content is enigmatic. In Dead Hotel, the reflection of a building has been made physical but the actual building is absent from the model. At first appearing to be an underground structure, the inverted snow-covered hotel gradually reveals itself, and a more sinister result of reflection is suggested: the disappearance of the original object. This brings to mind a Baudrillardian ‘loss of the real’, but instead of theoretical posturing, Ellis’ exhibition is very much rooted in the physical.

Left and below
‘St Catharine’s Chapel’, 2002, a scale model made from a plastic kit and wood. A gentle critique of architects’ simple models… and fantasies of details: ‘St Catharine’s Chapel – detail 2’, a constructional drawing by Adam Richards Architects

Right
‘Dead Hotel’, 2002, polystyrene, wood and MDF