

Summary of July Address

Guest Speaker – Ralph Bott.

Subject “*The Sydney Opera House*”.

Introduced by Jim Bryant, Ralph’s presentation proved to be an appropriate sequence to the address in 2004 by Architect Adrian Pilton, particularly in regard to recent alterations, improvements and maintenance – and it was pleasing to note the extent of works in the planning stage in 2004 that have already been attended to.

Both of these presentations covered the history of this iconic building. Post WW11 a stronger sense of national identity emerged. At that time theatrical productions were normally staged in the inadequate Town Hall. In the late 1940s Director of the Conservatorium of Music Eugene Goossens envisaged a venue suitable for large productions being located on Bennelong Point. His strong lobbying resulted in Premier Joe Cahill in 1954 calling for designs for a dedicated Opera House. Utzon’s design was accepted in 1955, and he arrived in 1957 to assist supervise the project. The former tram depot on the site was demolished in 1958 and construction commenced 1959. The unique design, particularly the original parabolic shape of the shells, caused insoluble engineering problems. Utzon’s eventual solution changed the shape to ribs of a sphere of similar radius. This change also allowed the tiles covering the shells to be prefabricated in sheets on the ground instead of being stuck on individually in mid-air.

As most Sydney-siders are aware, the time and cost overruns created significant angst in the community, not least in the political arena. In 1965 the project was put under governance of the Minister for Public Works Davis Hughes. Issues between Utzon and Hughes resulted in Utzon’s resignation in 1966.

Major changes post Utzon included extending podium cladding down to the water, and changing paving, glass wall construction design and use of the halls. The major hall, originally to be a multi-purpose opera/concert hall became solely a concert hall. The minor hall, originally for stage productions had now to cope with opera. Two more theatres were added which completely changed the interior layout. Already fitted stage machinery was pulled out. Utzon’s interior designs, including acoustics and seating, were scrapped (his acoustic design subsequently found to be perfect).

The 1957 cost estimate \$7m and the estimated completion date 1963 eventuated as \$102m and 1973 respectively, with the building formally opened by the Queen on October 20th that year. Utzon was invited to the opening but declined advising he felt his presence could overshadow what had been done. The building cost was paid off in 1975, funding having been principally provided by a lottery.

Subsequently there has been progressive improvement and maintenance over the years. The pipe organ in the Concert Hall was completed in 1979, with the 2 level walkway added on the Western side for the Bi-Centenary in 1988.

The complex contains about 1,000 rooms, including 5 theatres, 5 rehearsal studios, 2 main halls, 4 restaurants, 6 bars and some souvenir shops. Ralph acknowledges the bars located along the access route are noisy, but are good money earners.

In the late 1990’s Utzon was approached to be involved in design proposals for improvements. Initially reluctant, he agreed and although distance precluded his travel to Australia, his contribution was further supported by his son’s involvement on site. A short treatise - the Utzon Design Summary - was prepared. It is not a detailed design but a philosophy, including his vision for the future.

Sadly Utzon passed away on November 29, 2008, but Ralph was able to update us on the current state of the various elements planned in 2004.

A major improvement has been the new windows and colonnade shading the Western foyers. Also lifts and escalators have been installed (“not perfect for all”) and the Reception Hall now has a Utzon interior and \$5m tapestry woven in 2004. When the Queen opened Stage 1 of this improvement project in 2006, Utzon’s son was on the podium. Planning includes for deliveries to proceed along the cliff face to an underground loading dock, upgrading the interiors and improving the Opera Theatre orchestra pit opening.

Although public buses no longer come on to the site (for security and other reasons), there is a shuttle service from Alfred Street.

In conveying appreciation to Ralph on our behalf for his most interesting and illuminating presentation, David Davis may have very succinctly summed up the fundamental problem of the complex – the iconic shell is too small to house the required content.