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Sydney's Opera House – Not a World Heritage Item?



Open letter to the Hon. John W. Howard, Prime Minister

Dear Mr. Prime Minister

Sydney's presentation to Joern Utzon of a special key to the city is a welcome gesture, but it is still very sad and disappointing that you, Mr. Howard, refuse to nominate the Sydney Opera House – which many view as one of the best urban design objects of this century – for inclusion in UNESCO's world heritage list. Unfortunately there is not much time left as the deadline for nominations is at the end of June.

The reasons for your negative decision were not given in the article I read in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 23 June 1998, but it does mention Joern Utzon's appeal to the politicians in Canberra to finally recognise the significance of this work of architecture for Australia. What a sad situation. And how tragic that it is necessary to fight for recognition of a building which even the editors of *Time* magazine included in their selection of the five premier works of architecture of this century, about which they wrote: «[they] put down foundations in the psyche of their location; they may grow old but will never become dated» (*Time*, 23/1998). For them the Opera House is a «union of unique structure and breathtaking lo-

cation». It is indeed a splendid work of urban architectural art with very fascinating and harmonious sculptural qualities, uniquely designed and suited to Australia's most spectacularly beautiful urban façade and urban landscape.

Joern Utzon's reference to the Opera House as an «Australian» work of architecture could imply that he feels that it is insufficiently recognised in Australia because it was designed by a foreigner. But in our century there are few areas left in design that have clear national or ethnic roots. Urban architecture is not one of them. Even Sydney's elegant new key to the city includes German and Danish elements and was designed by a foreigner living in Australia who was neither German nor Danish. Four of the seven works shown in the *Time* essay on architecture were designed by foreigners. In the last decades architectural practise has become increasingly internationalised. Le Corbusier, *Time's* architect of the century, is a good example: he was a self-exiled Swiss who lived in Paris and built in many countries. Sydney's authorities were also working in this tradition when they decided to hold an international competition to make sure that they would get a sufficient number of interesting designs for their new opera house. It was a small miracle, and thanks to a courageous jury, that Utzon was awarded the first prize among some

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June 1998

300 entries. And it was a small wonder that the project actually got built and came out as it did despite his being fired, supposedly for unstructured and expensive planning.

From the many explanations and stories I heard during my stays in Sydney, including from people who worked for Joern Utzon until he left, I came to the conclusion that the main reason for the dismissal was Utzon's passion for finding the best possible solutions for his design, and his perception of how his work should be built and with what materials. All great architects function like this. And no one involved seems to have been very good at cost estimates or financial planning. I can only hope that Sydney's authorities will be extremely attentive to what is done in the vicinity of the Opera House, and in the Circular Quay and waterfront area.

I admire the public uproar and shock at the recently finished and highly objectionable apartment block on this most sensitive site at East Circular Quay. Although it would be expensive, it should indeed be demolished as many suggest. The authorities cannot go on without finally developing a long overdue and carefully worked out concept for the entire area, and a longer range strategy for implementing it. And it is not just the Opera House building that should be put

on the world heritage list, the site is an integral element, particularly in this case, and it does not stop just behind the building. Almost any important work of architecture can be ruined by misconceived developments in its vicinity. Australia's most spectacularly fascinating and beautiful urban silhouette deserves the utmost care under any circumstances. To ignore this in the case of the Opera House would be a blow to urban aesthetics and could ruin the area for generations to come.

While Utzon's reconciliation with Sydney is fortunately well under way, your refusal to nominate the Opera House for UNESCO's world heritage list is unjustified and difficult to understand considering the history of its design and planning process, developments since then and its immense symbolic value for Sydney and Australia. This decision should be reversed, the sooner the better. I should think that most culturally aware people world-wide, not just architects, would support this nomination. I do most enthusiastically support the nomination, urge you to change your mind, and congratulate and thank you if you do.

Yours sincerely,

Fritz Stuber,

Architect and Urbanist

Urbaniste en France

Dix ans après la décentralisation des années quatre-vingts, les urbanistes français ont pris conscience de l'évolution de leur profession et de l'émergence de nouveaux métiers. Aujourd'hui, après six ans de réflexion et de remise en cause des structures existantes, ces professionnels encore mal reconnus, en provenance d'horizons très variés, s'organisent et créent le «Conseil français des urbanistes». S'appuyant sur les expériences des autres pays d'Europe, les urbanistes français s'orientent résolument vers l'avenir.

L'histoire d'une profession

Le *contexte français* est celui d'un Etat européen ancien et centralisé. Certaines professions, tels que les avocats, les médecins, les architectes, les géomètres, s'y sont organisées sous la forme d'Ordres à connotation corporatiste. Il y a alors obligation d'être membre de l'Ordre pour pouvoir exercer sa profession.

Par contre, *la profession d'urbaniste* n'est pas organisée de cette façon et n'est *pas* non plus *clairement reconnue* en France.

■ En 1911, la *Société française des urbanistes* (S.F.U.) voit le jour. Celle-ci regroupe essentiellement des architectes et des ingénieurs de formation qui ont une activité dans le domaine de l'urbanisme.

■ Le conflit de 1939 à 1945 laisse en France, comme dans d'autres pays européens, une situation qui nécessite un intense effort de *reconstruction*. Cette reconstruction offre une place prépondérante aux *architectes* parmi les urbanistes. La construction des grands ensembles qui s'en est suivie (construction initialement faite pour les ruraux qui arrivent en ville et pour les rapatriés d'Afrique du Nord) confirme cette prépondérance jusqu'au début des *années septante*.

■ *L'émergence de nouveaux métiers* de l'urbanisme se concrétise lors de la création de villes nouvelles (Melun-Sénart, Cergy-Pontoise, Marne la Vallée, ... autour de Paris; L'Isle d'Abeau, entre Lyon et Grenoble), puis avec le développement d'un urbanisme plus complexe, composé de lotissements et d'opérations groupées de type «zones d'aménagement concertées». Il s'agit alors d'intégrer à ces opérations lourdes, la démarche foncière, la planification urbaine et le

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