



Joern Utzon, Danish Architect of Sydney Opera House, Dead at 90

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By Christian Wienberg

Nov. 29 (Bloomberg) -- **Joern Utzon**, the Danish architect who designed the **Sydney Opera House**, only to abandon the project before its completion and never return to Australia, died today. He was 90.

Utzon suffered heart failure at 12:30 a.m. in Copenhagen, Adrian Carter, director of the Aalborg, Denmark-based Utzon Center, said in a telephone interview. The architect's biggest project, the modernist expressionistic opera house located on Sydney Harbor, has become the city's landmark with its iconic 14 triangular vaulted shells resembling **white sails**.

The house has "arguably become the most famous building in the world," the jury of the **Pritzker Prize** said when Utzon was awarded the most prestigious honor a living architect can receive in 2003. "Utzon has always been ahead of his time. He rightly joins the handful of modernists who have shaped the past century with buildings of timeless enduring quality."

The building, which opened to the public in 1973, has hosted performances by opera tenor **Luciano Pavarotti**, jazz singer **Ella Fitzgerald** and speeches by former South African President **Nelson Mandela** and Pope **John Paul II**.

The house, which Utzon spent more than 10 years designing, is among the United Nations' 878 **World Heritage** cultural and natural sites. The UN called it a "great architectural work of the 20th century" that has had an "enduring influence" on architecture, when the harborside edifice was added to the heritage list in June 2007.

Only Two Projects

The 1.82-hectare (4.5-acre) building includes five halls with some 5,500 combined seats for opera, ballet, theater and concerts. The structure is located on a platform podium for which Utzon found inspiration in the Mayan building culture of present-day Mexico. The roof's jagged profile was part of the **logo** for the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

The Sydney Opera House is also one of just two major projects Utzon completed, after his reputation as an architect suffered following an early departure from Australia.

Utzon was born on April 9, 1918, in Copenhagen. The son of a naval engineer, he overcame dyslexia to graduate from high school and received his degree from the Royal Danish Academy of the Arts at the age of 24. He hadn't built anything outside Denmark when 14 years later he submitted his opera house design after reading of the competition in a Swedish architecture magazine.

"The drawings are simple to the point of being diagrammatic," the judges said in the 1957 declaration of Utzon's winning sketches, according to the Sydney Opera House Web site.

"Nevertheless we have returned again and again to the study of these drawings. We are convinced that they present a concept of an Opera House which is capable of being one of the great buildings of the world."

'So Happy'

Utzon, who stood 2 meters tall (6 feet, 7 inches), was "handsome and charming," a "superb presenter and adept at convincing his clients of his ideas," according to **Peter Murray's** 2003 book "The Saga of Sydney Opera House."

Utzon moved to Australia with his family four years after construction started in 1959. "We loved the building," he said in a 2002 [interview](#) with the U.K.'s Guardian newspaper. "We were so happy in Australia. This was a beautiful period."

Construction proved more expensive and time-consuming than planned, as the prefabricated concrete shells failed to match up properly. Total costs, financed through a lottery, exceeded A\$100 million (\$65 million), overrunning the budget by 15 times.

Relations between Utzon and Australian government officials soured. Davis Hughes, New South Wales minister for public works in 1965, denied Utzon permission in 1966 to construct plywood prototypes for the opera house's interior design.

Damaged Reputation

"I don't think he was the man for the second part of the job," Hughes said in a 2002 television interview with the [Australian Broadcasting Corp.](#) "You could say that he produced the shells. He was a sculptor. He was not an architect."

Utzon resigned in anger, leaving Australia and never to return. When [Queen Elizabeth II](#) opened the building after 14 years of construction, Utzon, with his reputation damaged, had taken a position teaching at the University of Hawaii.

"The overrun and the controversy it created kept Utzon from building more masterpieces," Bent Flyvbjerg, a Danish professor of architecture said in a 2005 [article](#) in Harvard Design Magazine. "Instead of having a whole oeuvre to enjoy, we have just one main building."

Utzon's only other large international project was the 1982 National Assembly of Kuwait, where he drew on his love for Islamic architecture. The building was set on fire by Iraqi troops in 1991 as they retreated during the first Gulf War. Restoration of the building changed some of Utzon's original designs.

Mallorca Retreat

The Sydney Opera House Trust hired Utzon in 1999 to form a set of principles for any future architectural changes, and he was hired again in 2001 to reconstruct the interior, which had been completed by other architects after he left. He worked from his home in Mallorca, Spain, studying video recordings of the opera house and corresponding with Australian entrepreneurs via telephone and fax, refusing to return to see his work.

"No, I will not see it now," the Guardian cited him as saying in a 2005 [interview](#). "Every day I wake up and think of the Opera House. It gives me such pleasure that the building means so much to the people of Sydney and Australia."

Utzon is survived by his wife Lis and three children who all became architects: sons Jan and Kim and daughter Lin.

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