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Jorn Utzon dies at 90; Danish architect of Sydney Opera House

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Architecture Critic

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Jorn Utzon, the Danish architect whose eye-catching, nautically inspired design for the Sydney Opera House overcame a series of controversies surrounding its budget and acoustics to become one of the most recognizable landmarks of the 20th century, helping to usher in the current era of buildings beloved for their daring and photogenic forms, has died. He was 90.

Utzon died of a heart attack early Saturday morning while asleep at his home in Copenhagen, his son Kim Utzon told the Associated Press.

Few architects have been as closely associated with a single building as Utzon was with the 1973 opera house, which emerges -- part sailboat, part sea creature -- from a site on the edge of Sydney Harbor. In 1957, when he was just 38, he was named the surprise winner of an international competition for the project. His design for a cluster of five auditoriums tucked beneath a roof of billowing white concrete shells impressed a jury that included architect Eero Saarinen. It ultimately prevailed over 232 other entries.

In the end, though, Utzon's opera house commission proved to be the very definition of a mixed blessing, giving the architect years of heartache to go with broad newfound fame. In 1959, Joe Cahill, who as premier of New South Wales had been an early and influential champion of Utzon's design, died suddenly, and in the years that followed, controversy swirled around the proposed building. Utzon was criticized so heavily for cost overruns -- racking up a bill of more than \$100 million, in Australian dollars, for a project budgeted at \$7 million -- and construction delays that he resigned from the job and left Australia in disgust in 1966, seven years before the opera house was completed. Government-appointed architects finished the interior, making drastic changes to the layout of the theaters. Utzon never saw the final product in person and never returned to Australia.

Though he went on to design a handful of acclaimed public buildings in Northern Europe, along with the 1982 Kuwait National Assembly, Utzon's career output was relatively small, particularly given the boost his win in the opera house competition provided his fledgling practice.

For certain observers, the opera house was a cautionary tale about the risks of pursuing inventive architectural shape-making at the expense of function and budget. Davis Hughes, who served as director of public works for New South Wales during the height of the opera house controversy in the mid-1960s and was among the fiercest opponents of the design, told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. in 2002: "You could say that he produced the shells. He was a sculptor. He was not an architect."

Utzon's supporters countered that the opera house budget was never realistic -- and in fact may have been strategically underestimated in an attempt to make it more likely to gain political approval -- and that the parts of the building that were most troubled were precisely those whose design had been taken away from the architect and handed to lesser talents. For them, Utzon was a visionary caught up in, and ultimately deeply wounded by, partisan squabbling that was only tangentially connected to architecture.

"The shells in Sydney Harbor have placed Australia on the global map like nothing else," Bent Flyvbjerg, a Danish planner and architecture professor, wrote in the Harvard Design Magazine in 2005. "But given the costs involved -- the destruction of the career and oeuvre of an undisputed master of 20th century architecture -- Sydney provides a lesson in what not to do."

Certainly there was no disputing that the opera house's distinctive exterior profile, which was entirely the product of Utzon's imagination and the expertise of the structural engineer Ove Arup, gained international attention as soon as the building opened in 1973. A design exquisitely suited for an age of mass media, it remains among the most photographed buildings ever constructed and was a ubiquitous screen presence during television coverage of the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney. A government website promoting tourism in Sydney accurately calls the opera house "as representative of Australia as the pyramids are of Egypt and the Colosseum of Rome."

With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that as the leading symbol for modern Australia the building was a bargain at nearly any price.

Jorn Utzon was born in Copenhagen on April 19, 1918. In his youth he watched his father, a naval engineer, sketch yacht designs. After graduating from the Royal Academy of Arts in Copenhagen in 1942, Utzon went to work for the Swedish architects Poul Hedquist and Gunnar Asplund and, after World War II, found a job with Finnish master Alvar Aalto.

Utzon traveled to Morocco in 1948 on a scholarship and later visited Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West in Arizona.

Returning to Europe, he founded his own firm in Copenhagen in 1950. By 1952 he had completed a spare, somewhat forbidding brick house for his family north of the capital. It is marked by many of the design elements that would remain constants in his work, particularly an interest in combining the ornament-free forms of Modernist architecture with powerful, elemental references to African, Maya, Southwestern and other ancient vernacular designs.

Utzon and his wife, Lis, later spent much of their time on Mallorca, off the coast of Spain. The pair of houses Utzon designed there, according to London's Architectural Review, "have acquired almost mythic status among architects."

Like Aalto, Saarinen and Wright, Utzon helped push his profession away from dogmatic disputes about how much to acknowledge architectural history and precedent and toward an era of freer experimentation with the forms made possible by new engineering. His career provided a bridge between doctrinaire Modernists, for whom any curve, twist or functionless flourish was a betrayal of first principles, and expressionistic contemporary architects such as Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava and Zaha Hadid.

In 2003 Utzon was named the winner of the Pritzker Prize, architecture's top honor. Though the Pritzker is given for a body of work and not an individual building, the award was widely seen as belated recognition for the innovative Sydney design.

As Gehry, who served on the Pritzker jury that year, noted, "Utzon made a building well ahead of its time, far ahead of available technology, and he persevered through extraordinarily

malicious publicity and negative criticism to build a building that changed the image of an entire country."

For Utzon, a more meaningful recognition came when officials in Sydney asked him to design updates to the interior of the opera house. He did so from Europe, working remotely and relying on photographs of the building and video recordings of performances on its stages. The opera house's Utzon Room, overlooking Sydney Harbor, was officially dedicated in October 2004.

"The fact that I'm mentioned in such a marvelous way, it gives me the greatest pleasure and satisfaction," Utzon, who rarely agreed to interviews or made public appearances in connection with his work, wrote in a statement at the time. "I don't think you can give me more joy as the architect. It supersedes any medal of any kind that I could get and have got."

Utzon is survived by his wife; sons Jan and Kim; daughter Lin; and several grandchildren. His sons are trained architects.

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