



I am, you are, we are ... mediocre

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Great buildings don't just happen, writes Elizabeth Farrelly, and Australia seems to go out of its way to prevent them.

A recent study in the *Harvard Design Magazine* describes the Sydney Opera House as a "tragedy in world architecture" compared, for example, with the "triumph" of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim at Bilbao. Not only did Sydney cop a 1400 per cent cost blow-out and a building unsuited to opera, we also contrived, through government and cultural incompetence, to "destroy the career of its architect, Joern Utzon and [so] ... rob the world of the oeuvre of an undisputed master". The *London Review of Books* takes similar delight in describing the part played by the characteristic venality, corruption and philistinism of "King George's gulag" in turning Utzon's fabled interiors into "a mess of tacky ideas reminiscent of a bingo hall in, say, Middlesbrough". All this is reasonably familiar in spirit, of course, being only a slight advance on our own standard view of the Opera House fiasco as an exercise in advanced knee-jerk poppy-cutting.

But what we're all missing is this: poppy-cutting is way too negative an approach. People need to understand that our devotion, in Sydney, to fully fledged cultural mediocrity is far more heartfelt, more positive and more altruistic than that. It's deep - and, for that matter, broad.

Deeper still, of course, is the ironic contrast between the mediocrity of our institutional culture and the outright exuberance of the place to which we apply it. And sure, we have our energetic cultural moments. On the whole, though, they're the passing, ephemeral bits, like beach culture, Mardi Gras or fringe cabaret. It's almost as though the enduring rocks of culture - the institutions, the places, the professions - intimidate us as much as the continent itself, so we confine our play to their edges. And the mediocrity persists. You can see it in our universities, rapidly morphing from temples of higher learning into profit centres. You can see it in our suburbs, selflessly determined to prioritise today's air-con over tomorrow's breathing. You can see it in the way we struggle to cocoon our lives so that risk and (God forbid) death barely rate cognisance. And you can see it in our arts, fearlessly fostering political correctness in all its dreary forms. Let's not undersell ourselves here. Mediocrity is what we do best. It's how we know we're Australian.

And now, at East Darling Harbour, is our chance to show the world we can still do it; still take a site to rival any in the world, and turn it into a shining exemplar of the bog-ordinary. In less than a month from now you'll be able to judge for yourself, when the entries from the 140-odd registrants will be exhibited. So far, about 30 per cent are from overseas. Will they achieve the levels of mediocrity we expect?

The *Harvard Design Magazine* piece was written by Danish academic Professor Bent Flyvbjerg (no, really). He's a bit of a Utzon-head himself, needless to say; lives in Utzon's childhood home town of Aalborg, beside the Utzon Centre and a stone's throw from several of the few Utzon buildings that exist. His question was this: why did the Opera House leave Utzon so diminished - reclusive, bitter, chronically under-employed - while Bilbao simply puffed Gehry from star into megastar?

Flyvbjerg's answer is complex, though perhaps not quite as complex as the reality. It includes politics, of course, money and the mediocrity thing. Also, premier J.J.Cahill's knowing underestimation of the cost at \$7 million (it would escalate to \$102 million) in order to get the project up in the first place; his

determination to start on site, well before it was prudent, to render the deed irreversible; the 1960 Opera House Act that required him to beg parliamentary approval for every 10 per cent increase, despite the lottery funding; the imminent election; Cahill's successor Robert Askin's philistine determination to play politician, not patron; public works minister Davis Hughes's primitive antipathy to Utzon from the outset.

We know that the cost overruns continued, and worsened, after Utzon's dismissal. But we - or at least I - did not know that, for example, as Utzon's younger son Kim alleges, "a full revolving stage and ... rigging loft ... from Germany were removed [after Utzon left]. They also dynamited part of the structure ..."

Of course there are other factors as well, including the vast technical and technological advances - the visualisation, prototyping and digital modelling tools - that made Bilbao possible for Gehry but were inconceivable in 1964. Not to mention the architect's personal capacity to weather the sturm und drang of politics.

A crucial factor, though, is what Gehry calls "the organisation of the artist". Gehry doesn't get out of bed unless a power structure designed to "prevent political and business interest from interfering with design" prevails. He doesn't allow the client to start on site until he's sure the building is deliverable within budget. (The client, remember, is the one paying the bills.) In other words, he's a total control freak, and that, it seems, is the key to delivering the goods.

Of course that's what an architect would say. There isn't an architect on the planet who wouldn't do it that way, given his druthers, so what's special about Gehry that he can - other than global fame?

Could institution-to-artist trust of this kind ever happen here? We might like to think so. But the signs are bad. Think Macquarie, think Burley Griffin, think Utzon. All geniuses. All summoned for their immensity of talent, all sent packing for daring to outstrip our precious mediocrity. Trust of the power kind between an institution and an artist may need a special kind of artist, yes, but also a special kind of institution.

Bob Carr clearly doesn't think we're ready to abandon our mediocrity habit just yet. Early talk on the East Darling Harbour redevelopment was all of an icon on the site's northern tip to answer the Opera House, but Carr's competition brief concentrates on the big issues: getting 330,000 square metres of office, hotel and residential space onto the site in a large floorplate format up to 14 storeys that covers no more than a third of the site. The rest of it, in what reads as a recipe for more of King Street Wharf's low-rent office-park look, will be roads and grass. All wheelchair-accessible, water-sensitive, ecologically innovative - oh, and self-funding. All to be selected by a 10-person committee of a jury, comprising three departmental heads, three developers, three architects and a scientist, that makes the Opera House's four-architect affair lean and mean by comparison. The working harbour remains, if you call the odd cruise liner and Tasmanian ferry "working". Everything else is sanitised out of existence.

What of the icon? Well, that has been shelved, for a century or so. And in view of the parallels - coming election, reigning monetarism, philistine opposition and a business and political culture that, in Gehry's words, tends to "treat the creative people like women" - maybe it's just as well.

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