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A backstage biography of the Sydney Opera House

ABSTRACT

The story of the construction of the Sydney Opera House is well told through numerous scholarly outputs ranging from monographs about specific building elements to critiques of the architectural form and function. This article explores how the stories of those who inhabit the various spaces within the Sydney Opera House have become supplementary and are often overlooked in the narrative of what is Australia's most famous building. In particular, this article seeks to highlight some of the stories of this unique performing arts complex utilising the lens of those who ensure the building functions – administrators, technicians and tradespeople – in this way offering a biography of a building that does not adopt the traditional point of view of the architect, the performer and the politician. The biography thus explores the backstage stories of the Sydney Opera House rather than those stories that made front-page news.

KEYWORDS

Backstage
Biography
Sydney Opera
House
Theatre

INTRODUCTION

The Sydney Opera House needs little introduction. Created by Jørn Utzon (1918-2008), it is one of the world's most recognisable buildings, a structure that has become an icon for the city of Sydney and, indeed, the Australian nation. Opened in 1973, the Sydney Opera House now hosts over eight million people a year, demonstrating continued interest in the performing arts complex on Bennelong Point, yet this level of public attention and perhaps curiosity has not been readily translated into similar volumes of academic outputs. In fact, the range of scholarly inquiry has generated a narrow corpus of materials predominantly focused on the structure, function or its location, while other elements such as the design processes, materials used and the effect of the building on the experiences of the administrators, technicians and tradespeople – remaining an under investigated aspect of the Sydney Opera House story.

The built environment is constructed in such a way as to impact and shape our lives in many subtle ways in addition to providing the basic functional requirement of shelter. Structures define cities through both presence (by creating a place of reference) and absence (though public parks, gardens and open spaces). They line city streets regulating access to sunlight and chart clear navigational pathways. As objects, buildings can either inspire or repulse us and, in this way, engage in a dialogue with their audience. In this respect the Sydney Opera House is no different, yet such dialogue remains an under investigated aspect of this striking structure on Bennelong Point.

BIOGRAPHIES TOLD

The biography of the Sydney Opera House is not a simple story with a linear narrative that begins with Jørn Utzon and ends with his son Jan. Similarly, the building's construction did not follow established processes – beginning with solid foundations and finishing with interior decoration. It has been said that: ‘The Sydney Opera House presents a [...] riddle. It remains indifferent to your questions and prying fingers with the result that we keep returning to it, in the hope that we will accidentally stumble on its core and it will all mysteriously fall into place’ (Drew 1999: xiv). After six decades of investigation by academics and the public alike, the riddle that is presented by the Sydney Opera House maintains a cloak of indifference to inquiry, with Anne Watson noting an ‘extraordinary tangle of complex issues’ (2014: iii) that lurk around every corner of investigation into the Sydney Opera House. Perhaps it is due to this complexity – and the desire not to cause offence or open old wounds that run very deep due to the off stage drama during construction – that unlocking the narrative of the Sydney Opera House remains an elusive research output and so is often beyond the reach of contemporary investigators.

Existing investigations tend to maintain a narrow focus, cautiously working around the complex issues of the Sydney Opera House. The genesis of the building began with Eugene Goossens (1893-1962)¹ and John Joseph Cahill (1891-1959)². Goossens wrote his own biography (1951) and Ava Hubble (1988) discusses his input in *The Strange Case of Eugene Goossens and Other Tales from the Opera House*. Cahill's role in launching the Sydney Opera House – from conception to construction – is examined in his biography *They Called Him Old*

¹ Goossens was conductor of what is now known as the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the director of the NSW State Conservatorium of Music.

² Cahill was the leader of the NSW Labour party and NSW premier from 1952-1959.

Smoothie (Golding, 2009).

As the primary architect, Jørn Utzon, has only one biography. Written by architectural historian and critic Philip Drew, on the inside flap of the dust jacket the author warns the reader that the text ‘is a dual biography: of the making of this masterpiece, and of its elusive architect’ (1999). This suggests maker and his work are inseparable, a notion further demonstrated by the tension that exists between the immensely private Utzon (without an official biographer and with so little published work on his life) and his body of work. The depth of investigations into his various projects as set out in the authoritative five volume logbook series³ edited by architect and academic Richard Weston (1953-), stands in stark contrast.

In recent years there has been an increasing number of publications looking at the work of Peter Hall (1935-1995), Lionel Todd (c. 1931-1998)⁴ and David Littlemore (1911-1999): the three men who would take on the task of finishing “Utzon’s House” after his controversial departure from the project in 1966. Anne Watson’s thesis *Peter Hall and the Sydney Opera House: The “Lost” Years, 1966 to 1970* (2014) significantly expanded upon Webber’s *Peter Hall Architect: The Phantom of the Opera House* (2012). The Sydney Opera House gets the briefest of mentions in *Out of the wind*, Leif Kristensen’s (1935-2015)⁵ autobiography (2014), however as with Utzon, separating the biography of the architect from their works remains difficult.

The Sydney Opera House is more than architectural design, and various biographies of consultants and contractors with a close association with the building have been written. In 2006, Peter Jones authored a biography of Ove Arup, head of the engineering practice (still bearing his name) and which continues their engagement with the Sydney Opera House to this day. Sydney based electrical and communications consultants Julius Poole and Gibson commissioned a short history to commemorate eighty years of their practice which included a section for their work on the Sydney Opera House (Anderson and Cochrane 1989).

From these biographies, a trend emerges – one of engagement with the subject’s portfolio of creations, rather than with the designer or user of the facility. Further, this notion can be expanded through the observation that with the focus on the creative output, there is

³ In order of publication the works are a collaboration with Utzon by another respected architect: Utzon and Prip-Buus (2004); Utzon and Pardy (2004); Utzon and Weston (2005); Utzon and Nissen (2008); and Utzon and Prip-Buus (2009) which can be found in the bibliography.

⁴ Todd’s date varies among authors as either 1930 or 1931. The most recent publication with this data is Watson (2014) and therefore Todd’s birth year cited in this publication has been used herein.

⁵ Kristensen was a Danish architect who intended to work with Utzon on the Sydney Opera House. Upon arrival in Australia there was no position for him. Almost 20 years later he was engaged to work on a number of projects in the Sydney Opera House, the notable being the refurbishment of the Studio.

little investigation of how a contribution to the built environment has enriched (or otherwise) the lives of the users. In the case of the Sydney Opera House, Cahill had a clear vision to provide a world class facility for the people of New South Wales and, its contribution to the city, and arguably the nation, as an icon of our modernity universally acknowledged, the narratives of those who facilitate daily performances and tourism activities remain somewhat under investigated. Similarly, the narrative of the structure itself remains untold, relegated behind the numerous other stories that enshroud the Sydney Opera House.

STORY OF A BUILDING

This article posits the notion that a biography of building is in some instances as important as the biographies and life writing projects that are dedicated to its creators and occupants. Extending this notion, when the influence and popularity of the Sydney Opera House is considered, it becomes an important site of investigation into the lived experiences of those who pass through stage door, and the effect that the building has had on their lives. It could be argued that a structure does not become alive until it is inhabited – that the confluence of human design and creation with human occupation is what gives a building its life. From the outset, Utzon intended that his striking building would influence the daily life of the city noting that ‘the Sydney Opera House will serve as a home for the cultural activities of the city and will inspire artists and technicians to present to the public the highest quality performance for many years to come’ (1965: 2).

Initially, the notion of the building’s influence of daily life in the city did carry over into publications. With the opening of the Sydney Opera House in October 1973, there was a subtle shift from an examination of facilities, construction methodologies and activities (Westcott 1968 and Zeigler 1973 for example) to the lives of those that now filled its various administration spaces, backstage areas and plant rooms (such as: Miller 1973, Smith 1974 and Ziegler 1974). This shift was not permanent however, with just one other publication (Hubble’s *The Strange Case of Eugene Goossens and Other Tales from the Opera House* 1988) focusing on the backstage experiences at the Sydney Opera House. The influence of the architecture, and possibly the scandals enveloping the architect, proving to be too strong or perhaps more accurately, too marketable (examples of this type of work include: Sykes 1993, Messent 1997, Murray 2004 and Dellora 2013).

Since the Sydney Opera House Trust’s re-engagement with Utzon in 1999, the narrative of the building has been highly refined to that of its architect, architecture and the refurbishment

project of the day. There is no denying that these activities are biographical in nature – they are the stories of the building – yet they continue the focus on its construction – the materials used, their arrangement on site, the colours and so forth – thus omitting the human element. The effect that these changes have on the lived experiences of the administrators, technicians and tradespeople who have a closer ongoing relationship with the building when compared with actors and directors (who may spend as little as a few weeks a year in residence) or visitation of tourists and patrons which can be measured in hours and minutes.

BIOGRAPHIES TO BE TOLD

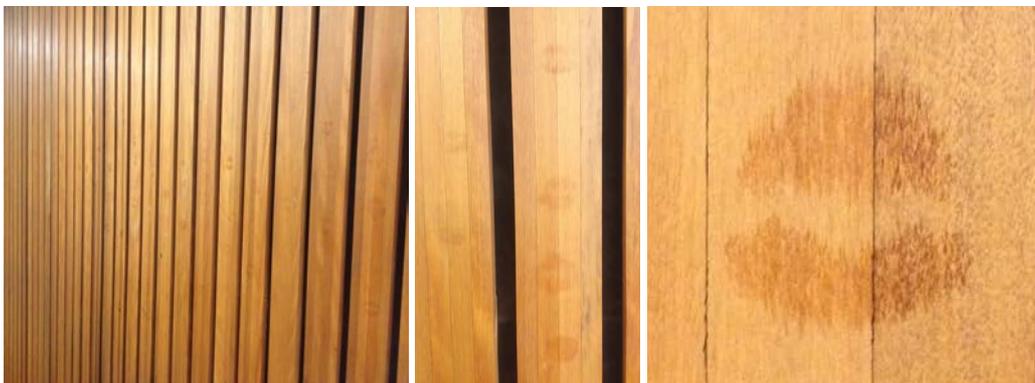
This article also considers four different sites within the Sydney Opera House. Places in which the physical structure of wood and concrete has a story to tell about the lived experiences of the occupants of the building and their lives. Using the structure as a page and the impressions on this structure as words, a contemporary biographical reading can be made of the users of these inhabited spaces, whether the occupation was briefly attending a performance or as part of the team of craftspeople creating the permanent structure. Examination of these sites is based upon the impact of the person's life on the Sydney Opera House, rather their status in the community or how frequently they made an impression on the structure, to demonstrate another way of understanding the building and its occupants.



Figures 1 and 2: Imprint in concrete (Photographs author's own)

One of the most curious biographies waiting to be told is the single left foot imprint (shoe, or possibly boot), on a single step in a flight of stairs that climbs multiple floors. Barely discernible after 40 or so years of wear, masked by a thick coating of sealant applied to the concrete the single foot print reveals little about the identity or life of its maker. This trace of life may be the result of a prank, or perhaps thoughtlessness from the tradesperson responsible

for finishing this part of the building – yet this still invites investigative questions. Was the prank to test if the work was being supervised? Is it an attempt to secure a little extra overtime to redo the work? If the foot print was intentionally left, a range of different questions may uncover the history of the footprint, such as: Did this person have a history of leaving an impression, a trace of their identity at every site they went to? Is there a lineage of safety footwear fashion that can be followed? There could also be a parallel narrative – is the footprint from a famous actor, designer or technician who was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time and has no idea that they have their left footprint immortalised on a stair tread in the Sydney Opera House?



Figures 3, 4 and 5: Imprints in timber (Photographs author's own)

Another site within the Sydney Opera House where the lived experiences of the occupants have left a visible trace is, at one of the entries to the Concert Hall from the dressing rooms. The wall is adorned with lipstick marks from a number of performers which have accumulated over the years. In contrast to the shoe print, these are deliberate impressions which have resisted numerous cleaning attempts to be removed. They have now been there so long that it is not unknown for other performers to touch one or more of the impressions as they go on stage for “luck”. This transition from lipstick to lore is, in itself, an interesting narrative that resists investigation. Both the leaving of the mark and then incorporating the visual feature into a pre-performance routine are likely to initially be spontaneous acts rather than theatrical tradition. Yet, at some point what originated as an extemporaneous act is now as routine as the transition from street clothes to costume. The transition to the world of the theatre, highlights the tension that exists between the temporal nature of the performances on stage and the permanency of the marks that have so far refused to be erased. This could be extended as temporal nature of the backstage rituals around these marks has yet to be investigated and

documented in words that form a permanent record – that may yet outlive the marks and the ritual associated with them.



Figures 6 and 7: Structural changes (Photographs author's own)

Not all narratives of a building remain fixed. Negotiating the terrain between arriving on Bennelong Point and travelling to take up a seat in a circle of one of the Sydney Opera Houses' main halls involves walking for about a kilometre before climbing the equivalent number of stairs as a four storey building. Originally, bar services were provided in the southern foyers of the main theatres and on the lowest levels of the northern foyers – often a considerable distance again from a patron's seat in the theatre. Sir Roden Cutler (1916-2002) held office from 1966 to 1981 as the 32nd Governor of New South Wales.

Prior to his appointment, Cutler had a distinguished military career followed by various diplomatic postings. It was during one of his military campaigns that an injury was sustained resulting in the amputation of a leg. Sir Cutler's attendance at various performances was long before the modern security environment of private suites and personal protection, he was briefly, simply another citizen at the Sydney Opera House. As Governor, some additional comfort was afforded. To reduce the burden of the numerous stairs, a small modification made in the northern foyer – a private bar. Although this bar has long since ceased that service, the structure remains – discrete and unassuming, transformed into an equipment space – without any indication of its former use as a space for entertaining dignitaries and heads of state: a minor memoir of adaptation.



Figures 8 and 9: The Green Room Bar (Photographs author's own)

The final site under discussion is the bar within the Green Room. This space offers a communal dining and sitting room for the actors and technicians, away from the private spaces of dressings rooms and public spaces of the stages and foyers. Many theatres have a private bar area set aside for actors to invite guests to join them after a show, and in some cases to fortify themselves preshow. Affixed to the front of the Green Room Bar are a collection of small bronze plaques with inscriptions. The various narratives behind the names have been somewhat lost to time. One staff member expressed the belief that only those who had passed while in the service of the Sydney Opera House should qualify to have a plaque with their name on the bar, yet the plaques in existence indicate that an association with the building is sufficient to be recognised in this way. Another staff member observed that it was more likely that those who frequented the bar would be remembered regardless of who they worked for, how long or if they were still employed at the time of their passing (personal communications). The plaques are a physical reminder of the impressions made over time by those who are no longer able to provide their own narrative and, in this way, represent a continuation of the narratives from those no longer with us among the living.

Each of these four sites offers a slightly different reading of the Sydney Opera House, and those who inhabit the various spaces it contains, contained within through the impressions left behind. These lived experiences have both shaped and been shaped by the Sydney Opera House.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored four different sites within the Sydney Opera House; stairs, backstage, a private bar and the Green Room., places in which the physical structure of wood and concrete has a story to tell about the lived experiences of the occupants of the building and their lives.

Using the structure as a page and the impressions on the fabric of the building as words, a brief broad biographical reading can be attempted of the users of the various spaces they have inhabited, even if their time at the Sydney Opera House was only brief. These biographies run parallel to the traditional official narratives of the Sydney Opera House which focus on the architect, architecture or processes of construction and which demonstrates that there are a range of stories to be uncovered in one of Australia's most famous buildings. The narratives of the administrators, technicians and tradespeople can be just as interesting, and just as important, in reaching an understanding of how the built environment impacts and shapes our lives as the stories that make front page news. Through peeling back the layers and revealing understanding all the stories the Sydney Opera House has to tell, it is possible that one day, as suggested by Drew, we will stumble upon its core and the riddle will be solved.

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