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THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

NEW SOUTH WALES CHAPTER

ARCHITECTURE AWARDS, SYDNEY TOWN HALL, 26 AUGUST 1992

CREATIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

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CREATIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG

Gough Whitlam, when asked to contribute to the book *The City in Conflict*,<sup>1</sup> suggested with characteristic modesty, that his chief qualification to do so arose from the fact that, as Prime Minister, he had spent a great deal of time inspecting Greek temples. Indeed, you will remember that he was summoned back to the devastation of Darwin from Olympia. And he returned immediately to the temples. That was nearly twenty years ago. He warned his readers who were architects to avoid the ignominy into which the legal and medical professions had fallen.

I cannot claim Mr Whitlam's temple qualifications to venture my opinions on architecture. The recent experience of the Prince of Wales in offering a layman's view on the subject produced such razor-tongued calumny that it shows that architects feel deeply. When stirred, they can react sharply.<sup>2</sup> But in architecture, as in any profession, it is ultimately necessary to answer to civilized lay opinion. Stretching the definition a little, I imagine that is why I am here tonight.

I have to say that I love Sydney. Here I was born and grew up. Here I have lived all my life. Turn back the years. Walk up the ramp to the ferry for the harbour. Can you hear that jangling bell? The fiddler's tune and the accordion? Can you feel the excitement of the rocking waves near the Heads? See the vision of a colonial city grown from bushland in such a short time?

Before the modern skyscrapers, before the Opera House, the Bridge dominated all. True, the AWA Tower was a minor icon of those days. Lazy, spacious, confident days. How self-assured were the builders of Empire. Can we compare our creations in this century with the solid buildings of stone which the imperial founders wrought? Their confidence was not peculiarly Australian. But it was that too. Henry Lawson described the mood a hundred years ago:

*"A new generation has arisen under Australian skies,  
Boys with the light of genius deep in their dreamy eyes -  
Not as of artists or poets with the vain imaginings,  
But born to be thinkers and doers, and makers of  
wonderful things."*

The confidence rested in the foundation of an international Empire upon which the sun never set. Of this imperium, we were an important outpost. Public architecture reflected the self-assurance which British people felt in their civilizing destiny. Private architecture reflected the attitude which an island people had brought to the other side of the world. The ideal was, and still is, the cottage in the garden. Add to that ideal the private motor car, graft onto the colonial cities the towers of a New World and a serious challenge is presented to architecture which has not yet been fully resolved in the Great South Land.

Back on the harbour, forty years later, I had an occasion recently to take a ferry into the dark of night from Kirribilli Wharf to Circular Quay. It was cold. In the chilly wind, the lights of

the city buildings formed a mighty backdrop to my city. Braving the elements, I walked out to the bow of the vessel. Resolutely it turned the dark corner where Kirribilli House and Admiralty House lay vacant of their distinguished, but always temporary, residents. Around the bay I knew, the new adventure of Darling Harbour beckoned. Suddenly, Joern Utzon's mighty, confident cathedral hit my eyes. And as if this were not enough, the wondrous enormity of John Bradfield and Sir Ralph Freeman's great bridge. Left to right and right to left my eyes went; taking in the magnificence of these wonderful achievements of human-kind. Confidence. Technology. Art. Empathy with nature. There was nothing on the harbour at that moment except my little boat and me. I was alone to drink up this scene - savouring it like precious champagne. I felt giddy with it. Those with lazy lives should treat themselves to this thrill. They should choose a night when the stars are out, when the moon adds a yellow tint to Utzon's sails and when the cleaners are busy at work, vacuuming and dusting in the great buildings behind.

I suppose there are greater cities, more splendid towers, bigger and braver. Certainly, there are cities with wider avenues which trees line. With more parks where citizens can recreate themselves. But there will be few which display, in such a small space of this earth's precious surface, such important achievements of 20th century architecture which are instantly recognised wherever in the world you go.

The Bridge, solid yet graceful, will, in a few days, be joined by its serious modern companion: a tunnel. Their relationship is not, I am sad to say, one of marriage. You cannot pair off an aging, familiar yet still energetic dowager with an efficient underground punk. But there they are, locked together in a *de facto* union of the times. Many a PhD thesis will be written on the demographic

difference of those who speed off under the water compared to those who stick to the Bridge. To light and to air and to a glimpse of the beauties of nature with reveries of Lang and De Groot and perhaps of a youthful visit to the Pylon Lookout, when that was the tallest vantage point for the city next door.

But it is Utzon's mighty creation, framed by the Bridge, which causes the heart to leap. The sails seem to reach out - to be telling us something. To be telling Australians to be daring and bold. To extend themselves in this new but old land of contrasts. To venture into the unknown. To strive for excellence. To dare to do something different. How remarkable that we, an all too often complacent society, should have embraced Utzon's fantasy.

The stories of its selection are often told. Of how Aaro Saarinen, the famous American architect of Finnish lineage, arrived a day late for the judging. Of how he rescued Utzon's sketches from the pile of rejects. Of how he pressed their merit and finally persuaded the hesitant local judges to embrace their cause. Barry Jones has collected the story of all the wonderful Australian inventions which we have rejected and which have then been developed elsewhere. This was not an Australian invention. It came from the mind of a Dane from the cold North. And it took an American Finn to urge it upon us. But at least *this* time we had the imagination to embrace the bold idea. If the tale of Saarinen's insistence is apocryphal, it matters not. All those who can contradict its truth are now dead. Certainly, the competing plans were very worthy. They can be seen. Wholly conventional are they. Our architects, our public servants and our politicians took courage in their hands. We, the Australians, are the beneficiaries of this millennial gift. True we were often plagued with doubt and drove Utzon to despair. But we finally put it up. And we funded it in

that most Australian of ways - by a lottery. Never in the history of Australian culture has so much been given by so many with so little.

But what of the buildings between Utzon's creation and the Bridge? Those of you who saw *Four Corners* on Monday night will have been treated to views of the concrete and glass architecture which shot up during the ten boom years. You will also have heard of the gross over-supply of office space, the lack of planning and the sad errors into which unrestrained property investment took our city and our country. When the magic of evening lifts and the sparkling lights on the windy harbour are replaced by the actuality of the morning after, the achievements of Sydney's architecture in recent years leaves much to be desired. The art-deco of a bygone era in another place has all too often stunted the local architectural imagination. The selfish determination to push more and more buildings into less and less space controlled others.

Water-filled building sites and motionless cranes bear witness to the frenzy of building that marred our city in the last decade. As one of your number has said:

*"Much was lost - little was given back."*

The lack of planning and the absence of an overall design, together with the dominance of the motor car, stole from the public of Sydney the streets and sunny places. This was New York in miniature but without the grand avenues to allow light and warmth to intrude into the chasms and wind tunnels below. Much of the development has succumbed to banality, neutrality and enveloping greyness. Here are all the symbols of late 20th century selfishness. Here is the very definition of the fundamental problem of the architectural profession.

Most lawyers are attracted to their profession, originally, by

a desire to right wrongs, to control State power and to protect, as the Bible enjoins, the widows and the children of the poor. Most doctors enter their profession with an idealistic determination to relieve pain and save lives. Most architects look with wonderment at the great buildings of the past and of the present. They see those buildings in relation to their environment. Theirs is a profession of art and creativity. But then the dawn lifts and all of these professions become debased. The cold necessities of the morning intrude again. For the lawyer, the guilty criminal who invokes every technical defence. For the doctor, the Medibank computer and the hurried parade of half-remembered patients. For the architect, the client with urgent demands, insistent plans and plenty of competitors who will deliver the goods if art stands in the way of commerce.

Architecture in hard times is not easy for the demands it puts upon its practitioners. The profession is ever vulnerable to economic downturn and to crass indifference to style. These have been difficult years for the architects of Australia. It has been a hard time. Staff have been dismissed, putting out of work creative spirits who now work in taxis or as couriers or who take their business offshore or abandon professional development for the quick return in soulless work.<sup>3</sup>

The need in such times is to adapt the architect's creativity to the challenge of what is achievable. But it is also to educate the ignorant and the insensitive in the community and to advance architecture as a discipline which maximises imagination but does so in a socially responsible way. Throughout history, from ancient times, architects have had to respond to the urgent demands of their clients - nearly all of whom will, by definition, lack the art and grace of the architect's imagination and training.

As we approach a new millennium, the architecture of this

country should take its inspiration from the nature of the Australian environment, from the needs of Australian society and from the requirements of a planet slowly coming to terms with the obligations of sustainable development. The watchwords of the time for architecture are creativity and social responsibility in the use of the environment.<sup>4</sup>

In our continental land, whose people overwhelmingly and increasingly live in cities, this is a tremendous challenge. We can draw from the great European cultures which have inspired most of our architecture to date. We can doubtless derive lessons from our unique natural environment in which the Aboriginal people lived in harmony before our forebears came. We can snatch inspiration from the countries of Asia and the Pacific with which, inescapably, in the millennium ahead, our society will become more closely connected.

And when, in hard times, our courage falters and our inspiration wanes, we can steal away, alone, on a dark night. Board that ferry. Listen in the ear of the past to the merry fiddle and the tin of jingling coins. Go out onto the bow. Look down the harbour where Phillip and his silent ships crept on the brink of their remarkable achievement.<sup>5</sup> Then look up to the stars and the moon - eternal things. Underneath them, the work of human kind. Not universally beautiful it is true. But still beautiful enough.

The eyes will then fall on the Bridge and Utzon's dream. Were we brave enough to go ahead with this? Yes we were. Was it our idea? No, but we embraced it and now it is ours too. Is it unique? Yes. And it points the way, like the sails pointing forward and upward. It points the way for architecture. Into a new era. It points the way for Australia.



## FOOTNOTES

1. C Johnson (ed) *The City in Conflict*, Law Book Co, Sydney, 1985, 62.
2. HRH The Prince of Wales, *A Vision of Britain*, BBC, London, 6 November 1988. For a response see Richard Rogers, *Pulling Down the Prince*.
3. See *Architecture Bulletin*, November 1991, 14f.
4. See *Architecture Bulletin*, October 1991, 17.
5. J M Freeland, *Architecture in Australia - A History*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1968, 1.