The Sydney Opera House: The Sails Known Around The World

The Sydney Opera house has been described as an architectural masterpiece of the 20th century and is often referred to as the 8th Wonder of the World. It is not only the most recognizable attribute in Sydney, and possibly all of Australia, but it is also the youngest cultural site to be included on the World Heritage List. The Opera House did not start off this successfully, however, and many people criticized the work and architecture of the Danish architect Jørn Utzon.

The project was estimated to be completed 10 years before it actually was and it cost $95 million more than its original estimated cost. Also, because of its original and ambitious design for a theatre, many people were skeptical about its actual functionality and was referred to as “a magnificent doodle”. Some people, including Frank Lloyd Wright, even considered the design a monstrosity that resembled the “Loch Ness Monster”, a “hideous parachute” and a “plane crash”. Utzon claimed that his final design for the structure was not yet complete but the Australian government insisted that construction start right away. As a result, there were issues during the construction period and a large amount of money was wasted as the design needed to be fixed or altered during, or even after, construction. Eventually the government began to deny Utzon more money to work on the project and pressured him to resign. When this occurred Utzon took his sketch designs with him, leaving the new architects with nothing to go off of other than the half built building they were presented with. This further increased the total price of the project, costing the Australian government $102 million when it was finally completed in 1973. However, thanks to a lottery system that was created at the beginning of the project to help fund its construction, the Opera House had paid for itself by 1975. The Sydney Opera House has become an internationally renowned building which has won Utzon many architectural awards, including the Pritzker Prize for Architecture. Sadly, since he was forced to resign from the project in 1966, he has never returned to Australia or seen his finished masterpiece in person.

From the outside the most noticeable and recognizable image is the peculiar shape of the roof. Utzon was originally inspired by orange slices when designing its shape in the way he did but it ended up resembling boat sails, which happened to work perfectly with its background. The Sydney Opera House is situated on a peninsula in the Sydney Harbour which is often occupied by many ships and boats, allowing the Opera House to fit into its environment without seeming forced to belong. In addition, on the side of the Opera House that is bordered by land are the Royal Botanical Gardens. This not only prevents the Opera House from getting lost in a sea of buildings and allows it to stand out, but it also prevents it from directly outshining and diminishing the architectural beauty that can be found throughout the city (Image 9). As stated by Utzon, “The character which is most prominent about the Opera House is it’s being free in the centre of the Sydney Harbour, free from all sides, visible from all sides.”

The Opera House may have been pleasing sculpturally, but there were many concerns about the functionality of the building acoustically. These concerns were addressed in a 2002 renovation and it is now considered to have “the best acoustics of any building of its type in the world”. Though the acoustic problem had been resolved, it introduced a renewed criticism about

costs. An Australian newspaper even stated that, “Sydney could have a new opera theatre for not much more than the cost of fixing the old one.” On the other hand, a historic preservationist such as Jessie Fisher would argue that rehabilitating an old building keeps more money in the community than building a new structure, and it is better for the environment. The design of the Sydney Opera House had environmental concerns in mind when it was constructed, including a cooling system that uses the seawater it is surrounded by. In addition, as of 2018 it became a carbon neutral building. Had a different building been constructed instead of renovating this one it not only would have negatively impacted the environment during its construction, but it could have been years into the future that the new building gained this status, if it ever did. Also, because the Sydney Opera House has become such a pinnacle object of Australian culture, no other opera theatre could be built to match its immaculate reputation.

Another concern of the design of the building was that the two main stages were set side by side, which took away a large portion of the backstage and side areas that performers generally have. Instead, Utzon had designed space below the stage on a lower level for the performers. Though this was unconventional, Utzon designed it this way so that “on top of the platform spectators receive the completed work of art and beneath the platform every preparation for it takes place.” Viewers are unable to see “backstage” regardless of if it is actually behind or rather underneath the stage, so the designer took full use of the creative license he had been given. In the end, the Opera House itself was a work of art and was treated as such. Another contributing factor to why Utzon designed the two stages side by side was because of accessibility. Utzon stated that there are “two halls, placed side by side, to avoid the necessity of passing one hall to get to the other”. This way people are able to spread out to get to their desired location without disrupting others, and it is less of a fire hazard.

The Sydney Opera House is also easily accessible to the public, with free admission to the inside and it being open 363 days a year; closing only on Christmas and Easter. The Opera House overlooks the transport hub of Sydney’s ferries, trains and busses, and there is an underground parking lot for cars, making it a welcoming institution to every class of person. Also, both entrances to the building face the city which further opens it up and welcomes the public to enter.

You can clearly tell what the building/space is designed for when you are inside because of the plethora of stages and performance venues. Within the Sydney Opera House there are a total of six of these venues, each allowing for a unique style of performance. The two main stages, and the two largest stages, are the Concert Hall (Image 2) and the Joan Sutherland Theatre (Image 3) where most of the operas and concerts occur. Next there is the Drama Theatre (Image 4) and the Playhouse (Image 5) which are smaller in size, but are better settings for plays, conferences, film screenings, etcetera. Lastly, there is the Studio (Image 6) and the Utzon Room (Image 7) which are the smallest of the venues but are the most intimate and have flexible seating arrangements to accommodate the space to each specific event that occurs. Also, occasional concerts are held on the forecourt of the building, outside below the steps (Image 8).

Not only do the actual venues in the building encourage mixed theatrical uses of spaces, but there are other locations in the Opera House that provide additional uses of the building. As well as the 6 performance venues there are multiple restaurants and bars, a gift shop, decorated foyers that visitors can admire, and the general area around the building that can be accessed by walking, providing breathtaking views of the city and the Opera house. It is also bordered by

the Royal Botanic Gardens that visitors can also visit. In addition to different physical locations, the building also offers tours and free light shows that run every day. The light show, called Badu Gili, runs twice every night and it is a show projected on the Bennelong “sail” (seen in Image 1). This spectacular display presents First Nations artists’ work that tell the story of their history. As stated by Pat Ansell Dodds, who had his work represented in one of the light shows, “We’re people that have knowledge about who we are. And what we’re doing here is sharing it with the rest of Australia” . It is a way to incorporate and honor the aboriginals of Australia, and with the thousands of viewers that the Sydney Opera House attracts each year it educates people all over the world about their culture.

A major controversy that is still very prevalent in Australian’s lives surrounding the Sydney Opera House today is the use of the building as a billboard. The Opera House has been on the World Heritage List since 2007 and has to follow strict policies including the restriction that they cannot light the sails with any type of corporate logo. In recent years the Opera House has been lit with things representing the Olympics, Chinese New Year (Image 9), the Badu Gili show, and it was lit up green when the building gained carbon neutrality; but in 2018 it was lit up with the Everest logo, a horse racing event (Image 10). When the head of Everest initially asked the chief executive Louise Herron of the Opera House if he could project his logo, Ms Herron denied his request in fear that it would comprise the building’s integrity and revoke its status on the World Heritage List. Controversially, the government overrode her decision and the images were projected (Image 10). This not only outraged the chief executive Herron, but the Australian citizens as a whole. Utzon had designed the Opera House white to be a stark contrast to the dark harbour and to reflect the sun, enabling it to really stand out against its background. His intentions were not to build a gigantic billboard that endorsed commercial events or products. Since that event, hundreds of thousands of people have signed a petition to prevent such occurrences from happening again, with one petitioner stating, “Sydney’s landmarks are not the playthings of those with money, they are ours and let’s keep it that way”. This relatively young building has already heavily impacted the culture so greatly that tampering with it evokes strong emotions from many devout nationalists. It is a landmark, a work of art, and a part Australian history that should not be mistreated.

Even though the design and functionality of the Sydney Opera House was heavily questioned and criticized, over 100,000 performances have taken place there since 1973 giving it the distinction of being Australia’s most famous performing arts center. It is estimated that the Sydney Opera House has directly, indirectly, and through tourism provided about 8,500 full time jobs. It also brings in about $775 million a year and is estimated to have a cultural value of $4.6 billion. Studies done by Deloitte found that a person attending an opera at the Sydney Opera house values the experience 38% more than if they had experienced the same opera elsewhere. Also, they found that 77% of Australians believed that it had a significant effect on Australia’s culture.

This iconic building has not only reshaped Australia’s culture in such a short time, but it has also largely increased its yearly economic revenue while providing thousands of jobs and attracting millions of tourists to the country. Though it had a challenging start, it has proven to be all that Utzon had intended and more. The magnificence of this structure includes its spherical “sails,” its location on the peninsula in Sydney Harbor, as well as its internal design. It transcends class distinction as well as economic status, inviting all to appreciate what it has to offer. Its architecture and provided amenities truly make it a destination you will not soon forget.