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## **Absent homosexuality: The mediated discourses of masculinity on the design and construction of the Sydney Opera House**

By Greg Young<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the controversy surrounding the construction of the Sydney Opera House at mid-century, and the role of “absent” homosexuality in shaping the new ideals of the country as a modern nation. Australian popular culture--in this instance, the Opera House--is an example of “feminine” culture being incorporated into what had hitherto been a masculinist Australian civic identity. The public discourse surrounding the opera house reveals clear anxieties regarding gender and sexuality in Australia in the 1950s, and the inherently unstable narratives of gender and sexuality under Australian patriarchy from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Henning Bech’s notion of “absent homosexuality” is the core theoretical perspective utilized in this analysis of mass-mediated political and public discourses surrounding the design and construction of the Sydney Opera House. This paper suggests that the process of including the culturally-constructed feminine realm of “the arts” into its otherwise masculinist civic identity was closely connected to the nation’s desire to project itself as a modern metropolitan society.

*Keywords:* Sydney Opera House, absent homosexuality, mateship

### **Introduction**

This paper is an examination of a discourse of masculinity in 1950s Australia and the extent to which homosexuality, whether stated or unstated, informed it. The construction and design of the Sydney Opera House is a core focus of my analysis; I read that edifice as a spatial manifestation of what Henning Bech (1997) identified as “absent homosexuality.” This paper suggests that the acceptance of Jørn Utzon’s design as the winning choice for the Sydney Opera House occurred at a time when Australian society’s reading of itself within the modern industrial world was shifting. Central to this shift was the belated inclusion of an aspect of what white Australian society had come to culturally consider as gendered “feminine” into its civic identity and its representation as a modern society. In a different setting, such as in Germany or in Italy, where the interest and involvement of men in opera has historically been associated with masculinity, such an argument may not need to be made. However, this is not so in Australia, where the literature suggests that historically any involvement of men in the arts--and indeed in any intellectual pursuit--has rendered men as both incomplete heterosexual men, and most

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often as homosexual and therefore worthy of exclusion from the privileges afforded to “men” within those proscribed social definitions. Indeed, there is the suggestion here that a form of explicitly heterosexual hegemonic masculinity evolved in Australia where masculinity has historically been conferred by the presence of men and the absence of women (Dixson 81; Hughes 320; Ward 100). In such a context, a man surrounded by women or associated with anything determined as feminine has potentially been seen as “queer.” Overcompensation arguably led to a rigid aesthetic of masculinity in the former convict society in which, as recently as the 1850s, men significantly outnumbered women by as much as twenty to one in some districts. This overcompensation was evident from the nineteenth century onwards through the popularization of the Bush Legend in the popular press and the celebration of its homosocial, but clearly homophobic, institution of “mateship,” which itself evolved out of the need for men to depend on one another in the absence of women.<sup>2</sup> The paper suggests that any understanding of how absent homosexuality pervaded the mediated discourses of masculinity on the design and construction of the Sydney Opera House requires an understanding of the key ideologies of masculinity and identity--and the origins of those ideologies--that informed Australian civic identity in the 1950s. The development of a patriarchal society in Australia that evolved out of convictism and the need for men to depend upon each other in the absence of women (Dixson 81; Ward 100) is a central component of this discourse of masculinity. The paper builds upon Ward’s notion that the arts carried a gendered feminine association for men involved in them in the nineteenth century by suggesting that this remained part of an evolving aesthetic of masculinity in Australia thereafter. In doing so the paper argues that this aesthetic has produced a discourse of masculinity in Australia that has carried with it an underlying need to deflect any readings of implied sodomy, or later, homosexual, readings of men’s proximity to the arts from convictism onwards.

Normative Australian masculinity as an ideal was first popularly mediated through the overarching aesthetic of the nineteenth century “Bush Legend” and the institution of “mateship,” which in combination have historically produced a rigid aesthetic of masculinity. The late nineteenth century was a pivotal moment in the emergence of popular texts on what defined and constituted Australian masculinity (Young 174). It was in that period, some twenty years after the European classification in the late 1860s of “the homosexual” as a type of individual, that Australians began in earnest to identify an “Australian type.” The popularized Australian was the Bushman: a rugged male, with an abundance of physical and practical attributes fostered in a fashion similar to the idealized American pioneer, but in a harsher, mostly arid, continent (Ward 180, 184). The key image was of men who depended upon each other: mates--women were largely absent from that image. This image, popularized as it was during the years of the trial of Oscar Wilde, was informed by perhaps the first mass-mediated vilification of homosexuals and homosexuality in English and Australian society. Although there is a strong undercurrent of implied homosexuality in the figure of the Bushman, this is rarely ever foregrounded. This implied homosexuality was perhaps most evident in the analysis of the core attributes of the Bush Legend contained in Russel Ward’s seminal work, The

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<sup>2</sup> Davison, *et al.*, define the Bush as, “the word used since the beginning of European settlement to describe the rough, uncleared country in the Australian interior and, later, the ways of life and folk traditions of those who lived there” (98).

Australian Legend, as a figure characterized by a form of “manly independence” whose obverse side was leveling, egalitarian collectivism, and whose sum was comprised in the concept of mateship (180). An interesting observation by Ward is that a Bushman would necessarily sublimate the spiritual hunger that arose in the absence of white women, specifically single, white women with whom an itinerant Bushmen could marry. Thus, according to Ward, a sublimated homosexual relationship with a mate, or a number of mates, was not uncommon for itinerant working men in the bush (100). The salience of the mate relationships, Ward hypothesized, meant that Bushmen, the key masculine icons of nineteenth century Australian mythology and popular culture, “naturally denied this soft side of their nature by protesting, perhaps too much, their masculinity” (100).<sup>3</sup>

Up until the late 1980s, the possibility for same-sex involvement between Bushmen has generally been subsumed in the literature on Australian identity and on gendered masculine identity, by a preferred focus upon mateship, understood in Australian culture as close male friendship without sexual involvement (Ward 100). By foregrounding the absence of sexual involvement among mates, the homophobic masculinist discourse of mateship-- essentially designed to protect friends from incurring “the penalties meted out to homosexuals in our culture” (Buchbinder 38)--is then, ironically, reinscribed. Equally important is the possibility identified by Robert Hughes in The Fatal Shore that the prevalence of sodomy as a practice among men in convict Australia produced another layer of meaning for normative Australian masculinity (320). Hughes’s text stands alone in one sense in that it seeks not to repudiate the homosexual implications of mateship borne out of a society in which for the first 70 years men significantly outnumbered women. Regarding the controversy surrounding the construction of the Opera House, the Bush Legend/Australian Legend, as outlined by Ward, propagated an aesthetically stoic masculinity. In this ideology of masculinity, it was the physical rather than the intellectual that was pivotal in the acceptance and inclusion of men and their communication and relative power in relation to one another.

“Absent homosexuality” is a theoretical perspective on male sexuality that Henning Bech identified as central to the defining of male sexuality and identity in modern society. When Men Meet, the thesis that Bech developed around this new theoretical perspective, was published in his native Denmark some ten years before its translation into English in 1997. Bech suggests that absent homosexuality is “the exposition of homosexuality’s most common mode of being in modern societies: the dialectics between presence and absence, knowing and ignoring, desire and denial” (39). More specifically, that homosexuality as evident in modern societies is characterized “by being something everyone wants and doesn’t want, something everybody knows about and knows nothing of” (39).<sup>4</sup> Bech

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<sup>3</sup> These observations lend themselves to an analysis of Australian masculinity based on absent homosexuality and queer theory. The Bush Legend and its associated ideal of the Bushman as outlined in Ward, may have been devised, for example, to satisfy the morality of the prevailing British-financed monopoly capitalist state and private corporations that came to dominate public life in nineteenth-century Australia (McQueen).

<sup>4</sup> These are the five main points that Bech outlines in relation to absent homosexuality as dialectic of being and nothingness:

1. In the form of the unmotivated, the inappropriate, the rupture in relation to conventions, norms, contexts, etiquette governing what is allegedly the issue: nothing

identifies the dialectic of absent homosexuality as a “contributing factor with regard to the normative and factual decline of mono-sexual domains, as well as to the actual--and fundamentally ambiguous--heterosexualization of all relations in modern societies” (77). It is interesting to note, given the prominence of sport in nineteenth century masculine ideals in Australia and its survival well into the contemporary context, the role that Bech accords sport within this context. In his thesis, sport “appears as the last bastion of pure masculinity, its ironic revenge against an onrushing civilization, and the only place where it can safely celebrate itself in its crude naturalness” (Bech 77). Since the late nineteenth century, ability in sport was celebrated as a desirable normative Australian masculine attribute. Athletic ability, which has remained an important cultural marker of normative Australian masculinity, along with the bush legend, anti-intellectualism, and a disdain for the arts (as a supposedly feminine pursuit), formed the cultural binary opposite to the construction of the Sydney Opera House in 1950s and 1960s Australia.<sup>5</sup>

### **1950s Australia: Men on a mission to project a modern Australia**

Two years after the Royal Tour of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 1954, a clear desire for a broader inclusion of the feminine into Australian civic identity emerged when the New South Wales government announced an international competition to design an Opera House at Bennelong Point in Sydney Harbor. The significance of this decision for the analysis at hand is evident in the controversy that surrounded that decision from conception to completion and the threat it represented to the normative ideals that were already being challenged in the aesthetics of hegemonic Australian masculinity in the post-war period.

The original concept of creating an opera house in Sydney began in the 1950s. From conception to completion, Australia’s most recognized symbol was fraught with controversy surrounding its design, construction, purpose, and function. Men of authority were central players as advocates and resisters to the concept of the Opera House such that

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where something should be; something where nothing should be; something where there should be something else; too much; too little – e.g. internal shame, arousal, confusion; furthermore it exists;

2. By being neutral – non-erotic, non-sexual, non-passionate, yet leaning against, placing itself near something non-neutral;

3. By coming out and yet letting itself be negated;

4. Via a word, a theme, a prop loaded with some special significance referring to the universe of homosexual existence;

5. By virtue of the indication of absence. (39)

<sup>5</sup> From the outset, Bech acknowledges that the concept of absent homosexuality as an analytical tool is problematic because “on principle it cannot be verified, since absent homosexuality is precisely characterized by being present only insofar as its presence can be denied. On the other hand, the analysis, on principle, cannot be falsified. It is inescapably, self-consciously and stubbornly uncertain” (Bech 83). Likewise, this also holds true for the analysis contained in this paper. Bech sees absent homosexuality as a major organizing power in modern societies on par with capital and bureaucracy. Accordingly, “absent homosexuality is potentially omnipresent and tendentially ever expanding and ever intensifying, materially embedded in social spaces and bodies, relations and institutions. It is the typical form of sexuality among non-homosexual men in modern societies. Unequivocal sexual acts (physical-orgasmic) also occur amongst men who are not separated out as homosexual, yet these acts, too, are drawn into the logic of absent homosexuality” (Bech 82).

an analysis of their responses to it from conception to completion provides useful windows into the way they variously embraced or rejected the alternative to the rigid ideal of hegemonic masculinity that it represented.

There is evidence in the conception and construction of the Sydney Opera House of shifting and competing meanings of masculinity in Australian civic identity that were occurring in Australia in the late 1950s and 1960s. That process began in 1947 when British born Eugene Goossens, conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, “announced that he wished to found an Australian opera and ballet company housed in its own auditoria.” At that time, no such facility for staging opera existed in Sydney. Bennelong Point, on the recommendation of Dr. Karl Langer, a planner for the Cumberland County Council of Sydney, was Goossens’s favored site for that facility. Eight years later, John Cahill, the Labor premier of New South Wales, finally warmed to Goossens’s vision, which had by then developed into the concept of an Opera House (Drew “The Masterpiece” 121-4; Mikami 51).

Goossens saw in his vision of an opera house a means by which Sydney could “attract the international spotlight of culture.” In that sense, Goossens’s argument weighed heavily on the issue of the arts as an important contributor to the culture of the city. Goossens succeeded in making the Opera House the centerpiece of Cahill’s vision for Sydney by emphasizing its role in the quality of life of Sydney, and notably by Goossens’s “vehement belief that access to music should be the democratic right of every individual, irrespective of class or condition.” Cahill was attracted to Goossens’s reasoning for an Opera House because he saw it as a continuation of his commitment to “improving the lot of ordinary working people” (Drew “The Masterpiece” 124-5).

Cahill’s decision to take up Goossens’s vision of the Sydney Opera House and the strategy and processes he implemented to ensure it became a reality, suggests that he understood that the dominance of the bush legend’s preference for the practical over the intellectual could threaten the Opera House. To that end it is interesting to note that Cahill “had no desire to establish himself as a great patron of the arts” (Vincent Smith 50) and that his public image was that of man whose own taste in entertainment “tended more towards watching horse racing than an evening at a symphony concert” (50). In a sense, Cahill’s public image was in accordance with the expectations of the hegemonic masculinity identified by Graham Willett. More specifically, it represented a clear awareness of the need to address what Bech (1997) would later identify as the need to recognize the role of absent homosexuality within a discourse of heterosexuality informed by its absence/presence. Whether this was fact or evidence of a man who cultivated his public image to reflect what his electorate, male and female, expected of him in hegemonic terms is unclear. Conversely, the enthusiasm that Cahill had for the Opera House and the interest that it generated in New South Wales can also be seen as evidence of a politician who was in touch with a society which itself sought a more visible commitment to the arts as part of its desire to present itself as a modern, civilized society. Cahill’s pragmatism, his awareness of the need to stress practicality, so admired in the aesthetics of Australian hegemonic masculinity, is evident in his statement in 1954 that: “the opportunities for erecting monumental buildings in Sydney are rare, and I agree that while we must be practical, the Opera House must be something that the people of Sydney and the State can be proud of” (50).<sup>6</sup>

Jørn Utzon's winning modernist design turned on its head the dictum that had hitherto guided architecture, that form follows function. The Opera House shells, its form, preceded its function; as such, everything in its design depended upon the shells. Although the Danish architect would not have been aware of it, there was much in his unorthodox design for the Opera House that was both intrinsic to the mythology of the Australian as an anti-authoritarian figure and the image of Australia, through its unique flora and fauna, as a place that challenged expectations about the evolution of life. Importantly though, there is evidence to suggest that, for the most part, the Opera House carried with it a feminine gendered identity within Australian society that reflected the aesthetics and ideology of masculinity outlined above; one that would require a strategic approach to overcome the limitations that a masculinist culture may have imposed upon it.

### **The Opera House: a modernist feminine construction**

For a modernist building, there is something remarkably feminine about the Sydney Opera House, especially the vaginal aspect of the spines of its shells. The Australian UK based reporter and writer Clive James recollection of the roof shells in the original sketches for the Opera House as possessing "a sexily complex curve rather like a Mucha negligee" (Britain 98) is worth noting in this regard.<sup>7</sup> So too is the analysis of this by Ian Britain as evidence of James' yearning for the feminine.<sup>8</sup> The design of Utzon's Sydney Opera House was the antithesis of previous Australian architectural adaptations of experimental modernism, which Hamann (35) suggests, from Federation onwards, tended to strip itself

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<sup>6</sup> One of the participants, a Mrs. Gale from the Worker's Educational Association at Cahill's 1954 conference on the proposed Sydney Opera House, anticipated the role of the bush in the politicization of the Sydney Opera House by pointing out that rural New South Wales had a history of hostile responses towards Sydney's increased ability to attract expenditure on the railways (Drew "The Masterpiece" 128). Indeed, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, a monument with a clear utilitarian function, drew the ire of the bush for similar reasons when it opened in March 1932 at the height of the Great Depression (Spearritt and Shiel). Hostility toward the Opera House peaked in 1965 when, in the face of a drought in the bush, the Askin-led Liberal-Country Party Coalition won office by two seats in the New South Wales State elections. The Opera House and its expenditure was central to their campaign (Drew "The Masterpiece").

<sup>7</sup> The prefabrication techniques pioneered by Utzon are worth noting for the contrast with the rivets-and-bolts processes that characterize the Sydney Harbor Bridge, built three decades earlier. Utzon calculated the geometry of the shells from the circumference of the same circle; then the mass-produced arrow heads of tiles, were glued into place in a comparatively delicate process (Duek-Cohen; Drew "Sydney Opera" and "The Masterpiece"; Fromonot).

<sup>8</sup> As an object that was essentially relegated by the patriarchal order as feminine, the Sydney Opera House was symbolically dependent upon the gendered male domains of engineering and science for its physical realization. The masculine motive in the realization, design, and construction, of the Opera House is symbolized in Utzon's prefabricated tile arrow heads where their shape and placement on the Opera House shells by an army of workmen are somewhat symbolic of spermatozoa seeking to impregnate and bring life to his, their, creation. Max Dupain's photography (in Fromonot) illustrates well the realization of this extraordinary process. In those photographs, Dupain's use of light highlights the spermatozoa metaphor of the tiles in which, pointing as they do from the circumference of the shells down to their respective centers, they appear to be moving towards a ball of light near the center. The Sydney Opera House can be seen as symbolic of a patriarchal perspective of female dependency upon males in the creation of life. It can also be seen as evidence of the birth, albeit at times an uneasy one, of a new era in Australia where the masculinist culture implicitly sought to the renegotiate civic identity, to redress the exclusion of the feminine that had dominated for so long.

of ornament. The removal of the ornamental in itself suggests conformity with a normative masculine aesthetic that similarly derided aesthetic excess, favoring the practical and functional and its unambiguous representation as such. Ornamental and aesthetic excess were both assigned to the realm of the feminine. Yet somehow through its curves and its oceanic setting the Opera House, despite its lack of the ornamental, remains a decidedly feminine entity.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the gendered feminine aspect to the role and function of the Sydney Opera House lies in Geoffrey Dutton's observation in 1986, that because the Sydney Opera House was a shrine to art (as distinct from a shrine to war, such as Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance) it was vulnerable from the outset. Robyn Boyd's reading of Utzon's resignation is that it was evidence of a country that "is ready to give the artist a fair go so long as he doesn't go too far. He should be a bit practical" (Dutton 214). This perspective was born out of Boyd's understanding of the centrality of the practical and functional to the institutions that had guided the dominant aesthetic of Australian masculinity from the 1890s onward.

However, Robyn Boyd's argument does not account for how the beauty of Utzon's Opera House, its monumental possibilities, and its civic purpose, nationally and internationally, were apparent from the moment his winning design was presented to the people of New South Wales. Part of the beauty that is the Opera House is that for all of the forces resistant to the Opera House at all stages of the project, clearly it also suggests that there was something in that aesthetic enabled it to happen. Whether this was due to a moment of doubt or to a definite progression in the evolution of the aesthetic aspects of the ideology or normative Australian masculinity, there were clearly enabling factors at work in that aesthetic. At that point in time the proposed Sydney Opera House was perhaps the most ambitious inclusion of the gendered feminine into Australian civic, national and international identity ever. In his 1995 text, *Sydney Opera House: Jørn Utzon*, Robert Drew suggests that it was the context of Australia in the 1950s that enabled the Opera House to be built, that the Sydney Opera House was emblematic of the "post-war longing for change--a naive reaching out for culture without quite understanding what was involved. Only in Australia could anything so daring as Jørn Utzon's Opera House be attempted" (4).

### **Gender as discourse**

The discourse on the Opera House points to the notion of gender as discourse. According to David Buchbinder, to speak of gender as discourse is to "signal that gender is implicated in power relationships that go beyond the fundamental distinctions of male/female or masculine/feminine and take in social as well as historical formations of the concept" (8). The example of the Opera House demonstrates above works on the assumption that gender as discourse is closely allied to a discourse of sexuality; one which, for example, "then, develops both out of and within the historical experience of a culture" (8). Furthermore, if we apply Foucault's notion that trajectories across space and time reveal variations in the meanings appropriated to particular discourses, then this is also reflected in the ways in which power is distributed along and through the discourses that intersect with or converge upon that of sexuality (8). In the case of the Opera House this is expressed as men navigating the potentially queer meaning of advocating an Opera House in a masculinist culture that sees any advocacy of it as a project by men in power as

potentially sexually suspect. Jaque Lacan's approach to sexuality is of interest here, where "sexuality cannot be reduced to instinctual behaviour, instead it takes on a dialectical relationship with the absent, the forbidden, and finally, the impossible" (Edgar and Sedgwick 357). Lacan's perspective brings the discussion back in a sense to Bech and absent homosexuality, where we can clearly present absence as a forbidden and impossible homosexuality as, for example, recognized/disclosed or undisclosed.

Bech makes it clear that absent homosexuality has clear spatial ramifications too. Consider his example on men watching soccer below:

We are accustomed to viewing the specific contents of a situation as the most important (be it sex, boxing or soccer), while its forms, structures and spatial dimensions are secondary. If we...direct our attention towards the latter features --and certainly the reiteration and popularity of this space make it reasonable and interesting to do so--the 'contents' fade into the background; the crucial part then, becomes this space with its forms and structures, plus that which sustains and structures it: an interest in between men in what men can do with one another. This interest is over determining if you will; in relation to it the issue of homosexuality, or not, in a sense recedes into the background. (Bech 47-48)

That interest he suggests men have with what other men can do with one another informs an ideology of masculinity where, for example, a man's interest in aesthetics "is intrinsically idiosyncratic and subject to many social and moral restrictions as well" (48). This in turn is also manifest spatially where the ideology of masculinity informed by absent homosexuality is one that is informed by knowing which spaces men can traverse and do so in the knowledge of "masculinity as a decision, masculinity as nature, and masculinity as appropriation" (49). A central assumption that informs this ideology is the notion that "everyone knows that those running from spaces without homosexuality to spaces with it are the most difficult to pass through" (49).

The paper now goes on to examine the extent to which the key Australian figures, outlined below, associated with the opposition to the construction and at times design of the Opera House, were, in a sense, part of a heightened masculinist gendered discourse of sexuality; how each in their own way were attempting to cross over into or keep away from spaces that were culturally difficult to pass through. This at times produced rigid expressions of masculinity, ones not immediately understood by non-natives. For example, Utzon, by way of his vision, had to negotiate and defend that vision with men who variously brought themselves into or sought to move beyond the cultural expectations of normative masculinity outlined above. This variously contained the possibility of threatening the stable order of the rigid framework those men had established themselves within and to render them as sexually suspect by way of this. This was an extraordinary scenario borne out of narratives from within and without of Australia which resulted in trajectories that both informed and produced the possibilities for newness that the Opera House symbolized as well as the concurrent anxieties about the execution of those possibilities. To that end, the Opera House also functioned as a transformative tactical resource (Pile and Thrift 32). It did so in terms of the opportunity it represented to transform both the meanings appropriated to Australia since European settlement by way

of its lower social ranking in the Empire first off and by way of its convict origins and the discourses of gender and (homo)sexuality, said or unsaid, that that emerged out of that context and informed its key masculinist institution of mateship.

As such, the Opera House contained the “possibility of converting one spatial signifier into another...to call up transformative tactical resources” (Pile and Thrift 32). The Opera House was symbolic also, of what Michel De Certeau identifies as an opportunity for new places and meanings to produce “liberated spaces that can be occupied” (105). One where “rich indetermination gives them...the function of articulating a second poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning. They insinuate other routes into the functionalist and historical order of movement” (105).

Both in 1995 and 1999 Robert Drew identifies Cahill’s expediency in first demolishing the tram depots at Bennelong Point and then laying the foundations of the Opera House as a strategic response. It was strategic in the sense that it would ensure that the Opera House, a building that by name and function existed outside of the rigid framework of the normative ideal of Australian masculinity, would be built.<sup>9</sup> He also suggests that Cahill did so with the view that obstacles to its construction on the basis of its costs and its perception as an elite institution potentially existed from within as well as from outside of his government. According to Drew, Cahill’s best strategy against such obstacles was his proposal, submitted ten days after the announcement of Utzon’s winning design, that there be a State lottery to finance the Sydney Opera House (Drew “The Masterpiece” 150). This brilliant solution temporarily removed the outcry regarding the use of public money to fund a building that, according to Smith in 1977, many Australians saw as elitist.

### **Cahill’s death: Hegemonic discourses prevail**

After Cahill’s death, on 22 October 1959 Drew suggests that the Opera House rapidly became a political football. The bi-partisan support initially pledged to the Opera House disappeared (Drew “The Masterpiece” 180). Thereafter Utzon and the Opera House became pawns in the Opposition’s play for government as it repeatedly raised questions about its costs and timelines that the Labor government, post-Cahill, found difficult to answer. When in government, Askin and Hughes’s strategy evolved into personal attacks against Utzon’s credibility and ability to complete the Opera House. They premised these attacks on what they saw as Utzon’s absence of practicality and his preoccupation with aesthetics in the face of rising costs. They persisted so until finally in 1966 Utzon resigned from the project (Baume; Duek-Cohen; Drew “Sydney Opera” and “The Masterpiece”).

The Opera House Trust in 1973 vindicated Hughes’ perspective on the costs incurred under Utzon which it claimed had by 1965 reached \$50,000,000--well above the 1956 estimate of \$9,000,000 (Sydney Opera House Trust 1973). However, the 1965 figure

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<sup>9</sup> Cahill’s decision to demolish the tram depot housed at Bennelong Point before the State Elections of 1959, and so to commence with the construction of the foundations and base of the Opera House before adequate geological studies of the site had been undertaken by the engineers, was part of his strategy to ensure that the Sydney Opera House would in fact be built (Drew “Sydney Opera” and “The Masterpiece”). According to Drew, by doing so Cahill preempted the resistance that would mount against its construction by parliamentarians both from within and without the Labor party, whose constituents, both country and metropolitan, were likely to object to it on the grounds of resources best spent elsewhere.

of \$50,000,000 was really an estimate in that year of what the final cost of the building would be when completed.<sup>10</sup>

Elias Duek-Cohen is the only commentator on the Opera House Affair to have attempted to analyze in a cultural context the terms that Premier Robert Askin, the Liberal successor to Heffron, Cahill's successor, and Davis Hughes, Minister for Public Works (formerly the leader of the New South Wales Country Party), used in their campaign to oust Utzon. Duek-Cohen identified both men as distinguishing themselves as down to earth practical men who could get things done efficiently and cheaply as opposed to Utzon who was not. In 1965, Askin described Utzon as "an aesthetic" who was "up in the air a bit about some of the practical things like cost and when its likely to be finished." In that same year Hughes referred to Utzon in the New South Wales State Parliament as "brilliant in the designing field," but organizationally wanting: "With the organization which existed with the complete control in the hands of the architect...we would never see the Opera House finished." He then went on to say: "any government has to consider just how far it can go in producing an artistic gem, irrespective of the social needs of the people" (Duek-Cohen 8). Askin and Hughes applied the words brilliant, aesthetic, and the term artistic gem pejoratively to Utzon. On their use of the word, "brilliant," Duek-Cohen said: "In Australia, to be 'brilliant' is sometimes taken to mean to be untrustworthy in practical matters" (36). Unfortunately, Duek-Cohen's analysis of the use of those words was all too brief. In accordance with the discourse of the ideology of normative masculinity outlined above, Duek Cohen devotes the rest of his argument in favor of reinstating Utzon by foregrounding his practical rather than aesthetic, intellectual or creative attributes. Brief as that component of his analysis was, it does imply that publicly at least Askin and Hughes adhered to an aesthetic of masculinity that was in accordance with the overarching, idealized aesthetic of normative Australian masculinity outlined above. Within the discourse of that masculinity the pejorative use of those terms by Askin and Hughes reflected a disdain or inherent suspicion of the role of the artist and the arts in Australian society. Ironically, that sentiment was echoed in the Opera House Trust's account of Utzon's departure in their 1973 publication, *Sydney Builds An Opera House*, in which they express clear support for the governments position by dismissively referring to the controversy over his resignation as having come largely from "cultural sections of the community" (Sydney Opera House Trust 34). According to the Trust, the government was faced with a building in which "much of the work was still in experimental stages" (34) and that faced with this Hughes declared "that the time for experimenting had passed and that conventional methods of construction must be adopted" (34). The Trust's pejorative

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<sup>10</sup> The reality of costs under Utzon was that in the nine years that he "worked on the Opera House \$15,072,855 was spent" (Drew "Sydney Opera" 394) on its construction and design. When he left, stages one and two of the three stage project, the platform and the shells were near completion, and according to Drew's estimates a further \$3,095,800 was spent before stage two was completed (394). The real blowout in costs occurred during the design and construction of stage three, the interiors and glass walls, which the government, dissatisfied with Utzon's obsession that these meet his vision of aesthetic and technical excellence, effectively sacked him over. Under Hughes, a panel of architects headed by Peter Hall (Drew "Sydney Opera" and "The Masterpiece"; Fromonot) completed stage three which cost a further \$83.64 million (Drew "The Masterpiece"). Thus Utzon's share of the "grand total of \$98,709,085...was just 15.5 percent" (Drew "The Masterpiece" 394). Duek-Cohen, Drew, and Fromonot have come out in favor of Utzon on this account.

use of the terms, “experimental” and “experimenting” in relation to Utzon and his work in progress was an extension of the vernacular that Askin and Hughes used in their assessment of Utzon.

According to Robert Drew, Davis Hughes had an “edifice complex.” The man who audaciously plotted against Utzon with the aim of cornering him into a position where he would resign as architect did so because he wanted to replace Utzon as the man that would be most associated with that building. The following scenario constructed by Drew from an interview with Utzon explains his reasoning on this:

When Utzon met the newly elected Minister for Public Works in 1965, he entered Hughes’s office to find the Minister sitting at his desk surrounded by easels on which had been placed drawings of the Opera House. Utzon was surprised because he imagined, like many other people, that Ministers for Public Works usually concerned themselves with housing, sewerage, dams and harbour improvements. ‘In my naiveté I thought this was to please me,’ said Utzon. Utzon was mistaken, Davis Hughes had decided to take over and become the man most associated with the Opera House. (Drew “The Masterpiece” 319)

The above account by Utzon reflects his awareness of the persistence of the bush to the core identity of mass-mediated Australian masculinity, evident in the discourses surrounding the ongoing public relations exercise between parties, governments, and the public, on the “public” financing of the Sydney Opera House. Much of the recent literature on the Opera House suggests that Hughes’s concern over the rising costs of construction under Utzon was a *furphy*--an unsubstantiated claim dressed up as truth--one that was designed to appease his rural constituents; to demonstrate to them that dams, not the Opera House, were his priority (Baume; Duek-Cohen; Drew “Sydney Opera” and “The Masterpiece”; Fromonot). Delegates in Hughes’s rural New South Wales electorate of Armidale were quite vociferous, acerbic even, in their hostility towards the Opera House and Utzon. The inclusion in Drew’s 1999 text of the words of one of those delegates who claimed that “the talk among the café society by long hairs and others about the spirit of the opera and mystique ‘and all this rubbish’ made him rather sick” was an example of this (“The Masterpiece” 355). Davis Hughes relied upon such sentiments as a smoke screen behind which he could live out his own desire to be more directly associated with its completion and its realization as an architectural wonder of the world. It is strange that in moving the focus of the analysis of Hughes’s motive for ousting Utzon to Hughes’s desire to be the man most associated with it, Drew fails to see this possibility in Hughes. Instead he talks of Hughes as a man that was “not in the least bit interested in architecture or aesthetics” (319), a conclusion that he makes on the basis of Hughes’s lack of preparedness to allow Utzon the finance and necessary authority to carry out his vision as he saw it. Duek-Cohen and Francois Fromonot draw similar conclusions on the same basis. The image of Davis Hughes surrounded by pictures of the Opera House, presumably placed there by him, is an image as complex and contradictory as the rigid aesthetic that he publicly sought to be identified with.

### Narratives and Spatiality

If, as Graham Willett suggests, masculinist ideology was shared by the left and by the right in 1950s Australian political discourse, then one might assume that this unity would have translated into a clear bipartisan resistance to the Opera House as a project. Instead, what is clear from the political discourses was that parliamentarians understood the implicit fears that the Opera House might conjure, as something that could be viewed as electorally irrelevant, primarily because they existed outside of the rigid masculine aesthetic outlined above. The Opera House generated fierce, at times deeply personal, verbal attacks on the integrity of the respective players' culturally prescribed masculine attributes. This would suggest that the hegemonic masculine culture that informed the public debate of the men who dominated the public sphere of, in this instance, New South Wales state politics in the 1950s, did not necessarily agree on these ascribed meanings of masculinity. Instead, for many, the Opera House from inception to completion was about a renegotiation of narratives of spatiality that sought to project a progressive meaning of modern Australia, one that would produce more inclusive geographies of gender and sexuality.

Considering the spatial ramifications of this ideology of masculinity and its expression as absent homosexuality it would be useful here to apply Michel De Certeau's perspective on the importance of space. Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift suggest that for De Certeau, "space intervenes both in constituting tactics and in forming the other" (33); Michel De Certeau's definition of a tactic is equally useful: "A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (De Certeau xix).

Likewise is Michel De Certeau's suggestion that narrative structures have the status of spatial syntaxes. He states: "Narrated adventures simultaneously producing geographies of actions and drifting into the common places of an order, do not merely constitute a 'supplement' to pedestrian enunciations and rhetoric. They are not satisfied with displacing the latter and transposing them into the field of language. In reality, they organize walks. They make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it" (De Certeau 116).

That De Certeau's later writings on narratives as spatial syntaxes emphasized, "...these spatial stories as a vital constituent of the other, specifically through consideration of practices of the Empire and Colonization" (Pile and Thrift 33) is relevant to the analysis in this paper. The narratives of the Bush Legend and the normative masculine values they disseminated are part of this process. So too the origins of white Australia as a penal colony can also be seen to have potentially set in motion footsteps and narratives that were informed by the tactic of the Empire and its imposition upon that space (Hughes 320), its attempt at "converting one spatial signifier into another" (Pile and Thrift 32). In the case of Australia this would be signposted with geographical terms such as "remote," "isolated," and the meanings attached to that space such as Captain Cooke's use of the term, "Terra Nullius" (Davison *et al.* 638) to describe the continent. Each of these has also variously informed Australia as an empty space and all that that may signify culturally.

Thus in the 1950s, the time was right for an attempt at new meanings. Although they could be seen to be part of this process, the 1958 Melbourne Olympics were in no way as transformative as the symbolic value represented by the Opera House. The narratives of Australia's uniqueness, emptiness, and newness (paradoxically narrated alongside of narratives of its ancient geological history (Davison *et al.* 4), set it up in part as a blank

canvas, as a space to be filled with the new. Thus, the Opera House represented an opportunity for a “new” place to yield new meanings through its “acts and footsteps.” Through re-narrativization, that discursive project can also be seen as an attempt to circumvent the somewhat demeaning discourse that had evolved to describe Australia in relation to the processes of colonialism and Empire; such externally produced meanings and directions had informed Australia and were reproduced internally on the subjects and meanings of Australia. For regardless of its achievements as a civil society, the footsteps of the Empire clearly marked narratives of Australia as an “other” in the cultural and social geography of the Empire as expressed from its geographical center, Britain. The institutions that were borne out of that process from within Australia and its masculinist tradition have variously informed a trajectory of modernity that developed in Australia which effectively amplified the requirements of masculinity in modernity, if informed by absent homosexuality. That is to say, Australian hegemonic masculinity has perhaps more often amplified a need to repudiate the possibility of homosexuality, where it could so obviously reside/take place, in the tradition of masculinist narratives whose hegemonic status were served by the absence of women in the mythologies that informed them. Clearly the suggestion here is that the Opera House likewise performed this function both at its design, inception and completion stages. However, in doing so it sought to address the need to insinuate a symbol that universally signified that of a progressive rather than parochial, modern industrial society. The meanings attached to the Opera House by way of its gendered feminine form and its function as a site for performing opera, both of which in classic Australian ideological terms signified two values that were excluded in its mythology, the feminine and the elite, meant it was going to be a problematic project within that culture. Conversely, one could argue that because the Opera House defied the architectural expectations of the day and went against established norms that this, in turn, is precisely why Australia was also the right place for such a vision to have materialized at that time.

### **Conclusion**

The continued controversy surrounding Utzon’s departure, the later alterations to his original design, and the reluctance of successive governments to commit public money to the restoration of the Opera House interiors in accordance with Utzon’s original designs, indicate that an uneasy relationship between hegemonic Australian masculinity and the Sydney Opera House remains (Walker “Wind,” “My Vision,” and “A Father’s”). As such, the Sydney Opera House has come to symbolize both progress and resistance on the part of normative ideals of Australian masculinity to incorporating alternative aesthetics into the culture and institutions that have informed it since the nineteenth century. Utzon’s statement soon after his departure from Australia in 1966 that, “the main thing is that the Opera House will be a great stimulus to Australian culture” (Drew “The Masterpiece” 433) was a prophetic, timely point of optimism from which to conclude his involvement with that masterpiece. Though it still had another seven years to go, the Opera House was already deeply within the psyche of Sydney and the nation. In a sense, its design, construction, and the controversy surrounding each of those phases, fostered a new discourse to emerge on the role and place of the arts in Australian public life, one that revealed many divisions, allegiances, and contradictions among city and rural constituents.

Through this somewhat selective analysis of the controversy surrounding the construction of the Opera House, I have sought to present one marker or point of reference from which to analyze the evolving aesthetic of Australian hegemonic masculinity in that decade and into the 1960s. In doing so, I have hopefully demonstrated that the discourses surrounding the design and construction of the Sydney Opera House revealed uneven developments in relation to masculine sex and gender identity in Australia in the 1950s that in themselves accord with Bech's notion of absent homosexuality. The controversy surrounding that edifice throughout its lengthy construction phase suggests that there was a much greater degree of competing and shifting discourses for gendered masculinity in Australia in the 1950s than has often been assumed. Through this process emerged an icon that came to signify, nationally and globally, a modern cosmopolitan Australia. Importantly, it signaled a key moment where this essentially masculinist culture belatedly began to symbolically include aspects of what it had culturally determined as feminine and therefore had previously excluded from its civic identity as such.

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