

1973 SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE OPENED

I have much pleasure in declaring the Sydney Opera House open. On 20 October 1973, with these simple words — each word representing nearly \$10 million in cost and 20 months in design and construction time — the Queen officially concluded the most controversial building project in Australian history.

But, for a few brief hours at least, even the Opera House's greatest detractors among the 750 000 Sydneysiders who came to see the opening must have felt that it had all been worthwhile.

Together with 300 million television viewers all over the world who joined them 'live', the people of Sydney were treated to an extravaganza of sight and sound such as few could have dreamed possible.

As the band struck up 'God Save the Queen', nine F-111 fighter aircraft

screamed over the gleaming white shells on Bennelong Point; then four tugs symbolically 'launched' the building as they dragged out to sea pink nylon streamers attached to each of the tips of the Opera House.

Next, hundreds of white pigeons flew skywards to freedom, followed by thirty thousand helium-filled balloons; fire-floats spurted; helicopters flew in formation underneath the Harbour Bridge; a brilliant fireworks display painted the night sky with rainbow colours...

It was, indeed, Sydney's Day of Glory.

It all began in late 1947 when Eugene Goossens, conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, expressed the need for a 'musical centre' to provide for symphonies, chamber music, and opera.

Labor Premier J. J. Cahill took up the idea, albeit seven years later, and appointed a committee to select a site for what was then envisaged as a £100 000 project.

On 13 September 1955, after Bennelong Point had been chosen, an international competition for the design of an Opera House was launched. Sixteen months later the Premier announced that the £5000 first prize had been won by Joern Utzon, a thirty-eight-year-old Danish architect.

His set of sketches, said the judges, were 'simple to the point of being diagrammatic' but represented 'a concept of an opera house that it capable of being one of the great buildings of the world'. It was also one of the most difficult to build.

When work on the first stage of the 'sea shell' building began on 2 March

1959, the projected cost was £3 500 000, with completion scheduled in time for Australia Day 1963.

Instead, as the enormous difficulties inherent in the design gradually became clear, costs spiralled to reach £12 million by 1962; £24 million three years later; \$85 million (£42 500 000) three years after that; and finally \$100 (£50) million.

Long before then, however, the Liberal Party had replaced Cahill's Government in New South Wales, and 'after constant disagreements, had accepted Utzon's resignation on 28 February 1966'.

The consortium of architects that took over found that very little interior design had been done.

'We did all the working drawings and made the final decisions on colour,' one of the architects, Peter Hall, said later. 'There was a great deal more designing to do than I had bargained for.'

Inevitably, this produced some discrepancy between the interior and exterior.

The Opera House was finally completed 18 years after designs had first been called for — thanks greatly to the State's enthusiastic gamblers who freely contributed to construction costs via a special lottery. Reactions were — and still are — mixed.

'It reminds me of a lot of ships floating upside down, with their keels sticking out,' said Russian pianist Pavel Serebryakov.

To violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin, on the other hand, the Opera House is 'one of the great buildings of all time. It ranks with the Pyramids and Chartres Cathedral.'

But perhaps the last word should come from Utzon, the inspired architect who was so conspicuous in his absence on the day of the grand opening.

'The Australians are daring,' he once remarked, 'and said that we can make such a thing as this. I could not make such a thing in Switzerland.'