The 2016 Jim Kerr Address

Joseph Skrzynski AO
Good evening ladies and gentleman. It is a pleasure to be back here at the Opera House, especially in this room—the first interior by Utzon himself. When I was first approached to do this lecture I was a little bit surprised as my assumption was that this group’s interest in conservation heritage was fundamentally around expert knowledge in conservation of physical structures. When it was explained that it also extended to cultural heritage and that an outsider’s view might be of interest then I saw a glimmer of hope that I wasn’t entirely inappropriate to the task. So perhaps I should start with the cultural heritage part and share with you some of my experiences and reflections in that sphere, taking culture in its broader sense.

My earliest experience goes back to Sydney University days in the late sixties when I got involved in student politics and was treasurer of the Students’ Representative Council as well as of the Student Union and under that heading had the responsibility for funding the clubs and societies on campus. Clearly there is a long tradition that part of what you do at University is get involved in the world of ideas as well as the specifics of your professional training.

It turned out to be more than that for me as this coincided with the Vietnam War period and a very active time of students being involved in protest against Australia’s engagement in that war and a few other things.

It is a fundamental building block of our style of democratic society that there is the right to protest. What I hadn’t anticipated was a requirement on my office as treasurer to come up with refundable bail money for any students who might be arrested during a protest. Cast your mind back to the late 1960s when this was occurring and in those days banks closed at 3 pm and cash is what you needed for bail money.

I was happy to observe that the police understood their role in this right of protest by agreeing to street closures to allow the march to proceed in an orderly fashion from the University of Sydney to the National Service Centre at Chifley Square. But as marches generally started around peak hour traffic time for maximum effect I wasn’t prepared for the next step which was that I was able to actually get a quote from the police about 2.30 pm as to how much money I would need about three or four hours later, and thus be armed with sufficient cash to bail out all of those arrested.

I was also intrigued to note that the newspapers seemed to have their camera people at exactly the right spot to witness the arrests of students by the police.

As I developed a working relationship with the head of the police division responsible for this activity, it became clear to me that the wide discrepancy in the quotes I was given from between A$5,000 - A$30,000 coincided with how Question Time was going on that day for...
the Premier, and if it was going badly there seemed to be a need for law and order to be on the front page the next day, and by some magic co-operation between Politicians, police and media, there it was!

For a ‘young feller’ under 21 at the time it was a really interesting insight into the culture of how power is exercised across the Legislative, and Executive arms of Government and the fourth estate.

In the 1970s I was privileged to join the Board of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Limited, an organisation set up under the auspices of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council. The mission was to enhance the appreciation of Aboriginal traditional arts and crafts and to lift them out of the roadside souvenir category to curated and documented art displayed in galleries. We established galleries around Australia and had field staff collecting and documenting the work.

This was important for a number of reasons. Firstly, this was a tradition of artistic Endeavour clearly going back many centuries. The bark paintings of Arnhem Land had a great innate beauty even if in traditional usage once they had been made in the process of telling a story or explaining certain secret knowledge they would have been discarded. Now they could be collected and appreciated for their intrinsic artistic value, albeit without the secret knowledge hidden in its abstract designs being violated.

The second important reason was that, at a time when traditional life was being disrupted by younger people being able to access the dole or ‘sit down money’ as it was called and have spending power, including on alcohol, the traditional authority structures in Aboriginal society were being rapidly eroded. By paying proper prices for bark paintings as well as other artefacts, the stature of the elders, the knowledge keepers, was reinstated within the tribal group. Reinforcing respect for the elders in the face of a new monetary society was important.

Along the way, an interesting by product of this growing serious interest in Aboriginal art was the spawning of a whole new art form in the central desert area, around Alice Springs.

Bark painting was not a tradition there. However, the laying out of areas for dance ceremonies by marking out positions with the white stones was a stepping off point for the new art form of dot painting. It started as an abstract aerial view of sacred grounds and then extended to birds-eye impressions of traditional areas by their owners in highly abstract form. It was indeed exciting to witness the development of a whole new art tradition which flowered and got global recognition within a relatively short period of time culminating in exhibitions and, acquisitions by serious galleries at home and abroad. A new culture assisted by conservation of an old culture.

A sensitive issue at the time was staffing of the galleries, which were in urban areas. We had an initial policy of employing Indigenous staff, but experienced gallery managers who were white. Some junior Indigenous staff believed it was more important and culturally appropriate to be Indigenous than experienced in order to work with Aboriginal art. Under the guidance of Indigenous Board members, Dick Roughsey and Lowitja O’Donaghe, experience won out, but of course training programs were put in place with all or most managers to be indigenous over time.

The success of Aboriginal art gave impetus to greater interest and respect for other aspects of Aboriginal culture, and for Aboriginal rights. Of course there is still more unfinished business in terms of our relationship to our indigenous people, but respect for its culture has been an important enabler of progress.

Coincidently in the 1970s, I also had the great privilege of being involved with the re-emergence and robust growth of another very important story telling tradition, namely, Australian films for cinema and television.

Australia was an early player in the development of cinema and film, credited with making the first feature length narrative film, The story of the Kelly Gang, in 1906. In the ensuing three decades, such great films as The Sentimental Bloke by Raymond Longford, For the Term of his Natural Life, and In the wake of The Bounty which was the first film to star Errol Flynn,
were great and popular successes in Australia. Film as a popular art form is very important in reflecting a country to itself. Unfortunately, the predatory expansion of the American movie industry virtually snuffed out the Australian film industry from the 1940s onwards, until its revival in the late 1960s and its flowering in the 1970s and 1980s.

It is remarkable to think back to the 1960s and to realise that the Australian voice was simply not present in films and in theatre. It is hard to remember that our great actors of the day spent their professional lives putting on English, American, Russian and French accents. Up until the late 1960s the only time they used their Australian accent in theatre was the occasional revival of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. The programming of the cinemas and the theatres was overwhelmingly British and American and so the values, the humour, the stereotypes that we were fed in those days on stage and screen were anything but those of our own country, our culture, our people.

That is what is so important about the revival of the Australian voice on stage and screen, in the latter case originally on TV in the 1960s and then on the big screen in the 1970s.

In the early 1970s I think I was the only fellow in a suit and tie that some of the filmmakers that I got to know at University had any contact with, and I found myself being asked to raise money for some of the early films which included, *My Brilliant Career* and *Gallipoli*. Certainly *My Brilliant Career* had a prophetic title launching as it did the careers of Judy Davis and Sam Neill and its director, Gillian Armstrong.

As a result of this involvement with financing these and other films, I was invited to become the Chief Executive of the Australian Film Commission in 1979. This was a marvellous opportunity to work on policy at an industry wide level as well as of course, direct support through grants and investments in film and television production. It was also an opportunity to project our Australian voice overseas where we established a youthful and somewhat daring presence at the Cannes and Los Angeles Film Festivals.

Compared with the other art forms, film has had the biggest effect in projecting an image of Australia overseas and propelled our actors to go on to great international careers in the film industry. The effect of cinema on a nation’s self-image should not be underestimated. It was important in the 1970s and 1980s to make *The Man From Snowy River*, *Phar Lap*, *Burke and Wills*, *The Dismissal*, *The Light Horsemen* to name a few of the iconic stories on film of Australia’s own myth and legend. It is of great concern to me then that the hard won support mechanisms for the industry such as quotas on television and direct funding support are being undermined now, concurrent with the onslaught of overseas product through the various new forms of digital distribution such as Netflix. Frankly unless successive Governments reverse the trend of cutting funding to Screen Australia, the ABC and SBS, then the Australian voice is going to grow fainter and fainter on our screens large and small, overwhelmed by a tsunami of overseas product.

Some years later I was invited to join the Board and subsequently Chair, SBS. As a migrant kid who had to learn English to go to school and where at home at noon *The Polish Hour* on SBS radio was religiously turned up every day, this seemed an apt thing to do.

SBS is a truly remarkable organisation. It broadcasts in over seventy languages weekly—more than twice as many as the next most prolific multi-lingual broadcaster, the Vatican Radio or as we used to say ‘in twice as many languages as the voice of God’!

I believe that SBS has been an important part of a range of Federal and State Government programs designed to promote the successful integration of successive waves of migrants to Australia. There is no doubt that we are the most successful multi-cultural experiment in the world. It is easy to forget that some 45% of us have one or both parents born overseas, and the notion of what it is to be an Australian is an evolving amalgam of these diverse influences.

Amongst the SBS radio languages are twenty-five that are spoken between the west of India and the east of Japan. There are 2.5 million Australians according to the last census, who speak one of those languages at home.
If this is the Asian century and we are to harness it to our benefit then what an extraordinary resource we have in our multi-cultural population. However part of our success is, I think, that we have struck the right balance between acknowledging and valuing the different cultures that people have brought with them as they migrated to Australia and at the same time enabling them within a generation or so, to have become Australian.

The Australian form of multiculturalism is not about having ghetto clusters in our population living a totally separate life from the host nation as has been the problem in parts of Europe. We have encouraged early citizenship and full integration into Australian society. We have used SBS to also widen all Australian’s views of the world. And we have used SBS to make flagship programs like Go Back To Where You Came From to trigger discussion between different newly arrived Australians as much as with those here for many generations.

However, this success cannot be taken for granted. We have to redouble our efforts as the scale and complexity of migration patterns today in a globally communicated world presents new challenges to our continued success in social cohesion.

My first engagement with built form heritage was when I was invited to become the Chair of the National Capital Planning Authority in Canberra in 1991. This gave me the opportunity to familiarise myself with the origins of the city’s planning and with the competition winning plan drawn up by Walter Burley Griffin in 1911.

There are some interesting parallels and coincidences between Griffin and Utzon. The government department running the competition gave him the prize but then took the control of the planning process, excluding Griffin. It planned to pick and choose elements it liked from various other entries. The Minister for Home Affairs, King O’Malley, fortunately intervened and not only insisted that the building plan be respected but appointed Burley Griffin to progress the project. Unfortunately, this appointment was not to last and he was subsequently removed from that position and the development of Canberra proceeded without him, but at least incorporating many of the key elements of his design.

A distinguishing feature of Griffin’s and Utzon’s winning plans was the respect they showed for the landscape of their sites. Griffin used a large contour map of the site to design a city that centered on the topography of the site; Utzon studied the contour maps of Sydney Harbour, noted its unusual headlands, and the fact the site would be overlooked by the city office blocks, so would have to be designed in the round, with five facades. No other entry did this.

Some of the issues that came up during my time in managing the development of central Canberra were interesting for different reasons. By the 1990s some elements of the city’s fabric were coming up for renewal. For example, the Royal Canberra Hospital on Acton Peninsular, on the foreshores of Lake Burley Griffin, had come to the end of its useful life and the question arose as to what to do with the site. We ran charrettes, public meetings, to involve the local citizenry in terms of thinking about the next generation of use for that land and other foreshore areas. These explored the idea of a more active frontage to the lake in selected places, as at that time there were very few opportunities to have an entertainment style experience near the waters edge such as restaurants and so on. Ultimately, the site was used for the new National Museum of Australia; with the more active entertainment and restaurant precinct in the less prominent foreshore area of Kingston.

Compared with such an exercise in other cities, the town planners involved told me that there was an extraordinary high rate of response in Canberra. Not only did people arrive in numbers, but they arrived armed with fully drawn plans of their own proposals. Either they had worked very late at night at home or certain parts of the Government bureaucracy in Canberra had been otherwise occupied for weeks before the events! Another controversial aspect of conservation, was that some of the plantings, particularly the elm trees along some of the avenues that were succumbing to old age and to disease. As a preventative measure it was better to actually bring them down to clear the way for fresh planting, respecting the original design. In the meantime of course, all hell broke loose at the idea that these trees were being chopped down.
The Griffin design for Canberra is still studied around the world in town planning courses. The central feature of the Griffin design was the central triangle, however only two of its corners have been clearly laid out as corners, with the third corner, up in the Defence Zone having a dogleg in it and it is not a proper corner. Kings Avenue does not join Constitution Avenue as it should.

The Department of Defence proposed a major new building, aligned to the existing dogleg. Despite opposition from the Minister and other influential people, we held the line on the footprint being moved back so that when the roadway was eventually straightened out the building would mark that final corner of the triangle. I trust that Walter and Marion Griffin noted this from up on high.

As a further historical co-incidence, the runner up plan in the 1911 Canberra competition was submitted by Eliel Saarinen, a Finnish architect who had migrated to the United States and worked around Chicago. Nearly half a century later, his son Aero Saarinen, was appointed a member of the Committee judging the competition for the Sydney Opera House and anecdotally is said to have rummaged through the reject pile and resurrected Utzon’s design which in several ways was a non-complying design in terms of site coverage. Aero Saarinen at the time was working on the designs of the TWA Flight Centre at the New York International Airport with its massive curved reinforced concrete roof shells.

So turning now to the Opera House where it was my great good fortune to join the Trust as we approach the twenty-fifth anniversary of its opening in 1998. Very early on in my Chairmanship several well respected architects called upon me and urged on me the idea that the only course that had integrity was to close the place down, get out the plans on the interiors from the Mitchell Library that had been drawn up by Utzon, tear out the current interiors and build it according to those Utzon plans. The passionate belief they had in this idea was palpable. It was not matched at my end with any hope that the Government would be open to such a proposition. More importantly, there were a series of intrinsic problems with that approach.

As part of the consultation, I arranged a dinner for a number of these proponents and some other well informed parties to discuss this issue. One of those invited was Alex Popoff because, frankly, he was the only architect living in Australia who had any extended contact with Utzon after he left Australia by virtue of his marriage for a period of time to Jorn Utzon’s daughter Lin. And whilst now separated from Lin they were all still in touch. Alex made the very important contribution at this dinner by posing a question to the architects present as to how interested would they be in pulling out the plans for something that they had designed a quarter of a century earlier, blow off the dust and say ‘right, let’s just build it’. Clearly with the passage of time, and changes in technology it would be a stale and professionally unchallenging exercise; even before the changed use of the building made it impossible to follow the original plans.

Originally, the client brief for the Main Hall was for three principal uses: Symphony Orchestra, Ballet and Opera. In 1956, that might have been a sensible client brief from the point of view of presumed usage, in terms of season lengths of these art forms. Technically, a proscenium arch stage would serve the Opera and the Ballet but was quite unusual and quite suboptimal for the Symphony Orchestra work. But that was the brief.

Not surprisingly at the time of Utzon’s dismissal, the ABC took the opportunity to intervene politically to have the uses changed so that it got the major hall designed as a conventional concert hall for Orchestra with no proscenium arch stage and the Opera and Ballet were decanted to the smaller theatre which in the original client brief was a Drama Theatre. So to go back to the original plans and restore the main hall to a proscenium arch Stage was simply not feasible from a user point of view as those three art forms were by now running seasons of a cumulative 18 months per annum and clearly could not share the one hall. Nor would anyone now dream of putting symphony orchestra into a proscenium arch stage hall.

Clearly re-engagement with Jorn Utzon as original architect was something that simply had to be done as a moral right. But it had to be done in a way that was constructive for him as an architect and for the building as it was now used. In the meantime, the push to achieve UNESCO Heritage Listing needed to be slowed down until we resolved this important question.
In considering how we were to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary we decided not just to look backwards to celebrate the many wonderful events, performances and occasions which had been held at the Opera House in its first 25 years, the worldwide acclaim showered upon it and the fact that it now had become the iconic image for Australia superseding Ayers Rock, the Harbour Bridge and the Kangaroo.

We wanted to take the opportunity to look forward at least twenty-five years and indeed far longer in the knowledge that like one of the great cathedrals of Europe this building properly maintained would be there in two, three, four hundred years time and more.

Over that time, there would be several occasions when its interior would have to be renewed because of the various utilities that would be obsolete and probably because of further change in use. It became clear that we needed a set of design principles that would inform any architect working on the building in future as to how to design at that time within the framework of the principles that were formed by the original architect of the building, and he was still alive! This presented itself as a solution both as to how we could approach Jorn Utzon for a re-engagement, and how to set up a framework for the future management of this building.

Around this time I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Lin Utzon by my dear departed friend, the artist Martin Sharp. Having explained this approach to her and gaining her support for it, we enlisted her help to convince Jorn Utzon, her father, to have an initial meeting with myself and Richard Johnson, the Opera House Architect at the time.

Whilst architects are known for their professional longevity, nevertheless as he was approaching his 80s there was an unstated question as to his mental state for the task. At the airport on the day of flying out, I saw the front page of *The Australian* with a huge photograph of whales in Sydney Harbour, one with its tail raised in the air in front of the Opera House. I bought it and soon after meeting Utzon I plonked it down and said ‘Isn’t that amazing?’ His immediate response was: ‘I know what sort of whales those are’. ‘Really?’ ‘Yes, they’re new south whales’. Clearly his mind was as sharp as ever and that proved to be the case as our discussion progressed. He understood the changed nature of the building’s usage in terms of the Concert Hall and the Drama Hall and agreed it would be pointless to try and change that back.

The next major question of design integrity, was the use of the podium for the three performance spaces which had been inserted into it after his dismissal. Those spaces under the Concert Hall had previously been taken up with machinery and support activities for the proscenium arch stage above. There was the stated version of his design approach that the podium was like the great structures of the Mayans: that is to say, stepped platforms rising above the everyday and on their plateau top the ceremonies would take place. In other words, the podium was where the preparations occurred and the theatres on top in the shells was where the performance occurred. We needed to know whether in his opinion the introduction of performance spaces into the podium so violated this approach that they would eventually have to be closed down and performance restricted just to the two Main Halls.

He took a great interest in this question, enquiring closely as to how these spaces inside the podium were used. We explained the nature of performance there which in an abbreviated way could be summarised as the young arts, the experimental arts as opposed to the major traditional arts of opera, ballet and symphony upstairs. He liked the idea of this balance of activities upstairs and downstairs and declared that subject to ensuring that the downstairs spaces were properly organised, that we should continue with that disposition and not close them down. This was an unforced view on his part but one that relieved a lot of concern at our end.

That decision then led subsequently to a review of how the audience experience their arrival and entry into these spaces downstairs which at that time was piecemeal and awkward. It needed to be closer to the experience upstairs where as you progress towards your entrance to a hall of performance you are aware of the building’s position and can look out on to the harbour rather than being in an internal labyrinth of passages, as is the case with most performing arts venues.
In the first instance however, the focus of re-engagement was on discussing with him the idea of setting out the design principles for posterity. He readily agreed to this and took the opportunity during the development of these principles to have his son comprehensively video record the interiors of the Opera House as built so that with that visual documentation he was able to imagine each of the spaces and participate in our discussions about them and the extent to which they complied or departed from the design principles. I have to say that in this discourse, he was most generous in his understanding of the difficulties that his successor architects wrestled with in terms of these spaces.

I also want to acknowledge the work of Richard Johnson, a major architect in his own right, who set aside his own well developed architectural vocabulary to immerse himself in the Utzon vision and to humbly serve the project, assisting Utzon.

With the design principles completed the next stage was to update the Conservation Management Plan of the Opera House which James Semple Kerr did as the third edition of that plan. With those two documents in place, a renewed effort was then made to secure the heritage listing of the Opera House, nationally and internationally.

When it was inscribed on the UNESCO list it was the first building of that century to enter the list and as I understand it, set the first precedent of a listing which involved a protocol for the progressive alteration of its interiors according to the Design Principles and the Conservation Management Plan.

It is gratifying to think that out of the tragedy and drama of the dismissal of Utzon, the process of his re-engagement established a precedent for the management of iconic buildings in having the original architect set down guiding principles for any future work on that building and to have those principles enshrined in its management plan.

Conservation Management Plans have to be reviewed periodically and the fourth edition is now in draft form. I am fortunate to be on the committee reviewing the draft prepared by Alan Croker. I know from first-hand experience the conflicting pressures on the management of an iconic building such as this, and Louise Herron here knows better than anyone.

It is a remarkably complex building which hosts probably the most diverse array of functions and events of any such building in the world. There is a neverending stream of requirements not only from maintenance but from practical use of the premises. At the same time, the funding is never adequate for either the maintenance or the development of the building and hence there is a great pressure to make do with practical and interim solutions and various forms of value engineering.

In other buildings this might be appropriate, as those buildings have limited life spans and are of limited community significance. Here at the Opera House we are looking at a different order of expectations and the bar has to be raised much higher in terms of what is acceptable in design terms and in quality of finishes.

The current edition has expanded from some one hundred pages of the third edition to over 270 pages in its attempt to look at all the practical issues which arise in managing such a building. Clearly this presents the danger that the volume of detail overwhelms the clarity of the principles and that is something the committee is working on with Alan.

One of the central issues that has become clear in the review is that one can well articulate the design principles and the vision for the building but nevertheless they will stay at an indicative and high level. Their interpretation will depend upon the genius or otherwise of a particular architect working on the building. Regrettably you can not legislate quality in this regard. Therefore management have to be absolutely painstakingly dedicated to utilising the best expert advice in selecting any architect to work on the building. It is not enough that an architect might have established a great reputation or won many competitions. The key filter has to be not only their talent but their preparedness to stop, step back and thoroughly immerse themselves in the Design Principles as well as the more practical conservation management plan and subjugate if necessary their own personal architectural vocabulary to enter the spirit...
of the Utzon Design Principles in whatever project they are doing that has material impact on
the House. The architectural profession is not immune from fads and fashions, and it would be
a tragedy if leading exponents of those at any one time were allowed to imprint their of the
moment design fingerprints around the Opera House in an attempt to be ‘modern’ as opposed
to being intellectually and aesthetically consistent with the Utzon vision.

Thank you, its been my pleasure to add my comments in this series of talks, commemorating
the work and legacy of Dr James Semple Kerr.