

TIM MORRIS

Jorn Utzon's summer house

The retirement home on the island of Majorca of the architect of the Sydney Opera House has been restored and is available for those interested in studying his work.



The cliff-edge site is covered with pines and myrtles. (Photo: Torben Eskerod)

Jorn Utzon conceived the dramatic curves and inspired the technical brilliance of the Sydney Opera House in 1956, and was involved in the project for the following 10 years. He won the competition against 233 other entrants, many of them celebrated architects. It was his first-ever design for a public building: previously he had only designed housing.

His involvement in the project came to an unfortunate end when he was forced to resign from the project. Frank Gehry, one of the judges who awarded Utzon the Pritzker prize, stated that 'Utzon made a building well ahead of its time, far ahead of available technology, and he persevered through extraordinarily malicious publicity and negative criticism to build a building that changed the image of an entire country'.

In his early life Utzon was told that the only profession in which he stood a chance of succeeding was architecture. After qualifying he met some of the other great architects of the time, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and Alvar Alto, whom he worked for. He later travelled to Morocco, where he fell in love with the traditions of African farmers and the way in which their houses were not laid out in a uniform row but followed the path of the sun, the places of the trees and the natural relationship of the buildings.

After his involvement in the Sydney Opera House had finished, Utzon designed his own summer home just outside Puerto Petro in the south eastern corner of Majorca. The town is a lively place, with bars and restaurants dotted around its harbour which maintain their vitality all year round. The area is known for its calas – small coves and beaches. Utzon's house is located between Puerto Petro and the largest cala, that of Mondrago, and situated in the local nature park. In other areas the land falls dramatically into the sea. High vertical cliffs and shimmering views of

the Mediterranean are punctuated by ships and boats criss-crossing.

It is said that, having fallen in love with the island over successive visits, Utzon asked a local farmer if he had any land for sale. He was offered three sites, which he described as 'beautiful, marvellous and paradise.' He chose to build his first home just outside Puerto Petro. It was a long, thin site with a track at the front and a vertical cliff at the back, punctuated with pines and myrtles. Here he designed Can Lis, named after his beloved wife.

He came up with the concept by placing sugar lumps on a plan of the site. Five staggered blocks along the cliff edge reflected his earlier influences from meeting the African farmers. Each block is individually adjusted to the contours of the land and the existing trees. Each block has its own function. There is a kitchen and dining block with a colonnaded outdoor eating and seating area; a separate living area; and two bedroom blocks, each with its own sitting area looking out to sea. One has to walk outside to move from one functional area to another, which is a perfectly acceptable experience in the Mediterranean climate, especially a summer house.

The living room in particular is a breathtaking space, with a circular sitting area and carefully located windows giving carefully orchestrated views to the sea and bringing in shafts of light during different times of the day. The experience is heightened by the window frames not being visible from the inside of the room, and the views to the Mediterranean and the passing floating traffic being framed by deep stone walls. There is no furniture as we would know it. Everything is built in, including ceramic tiled arm chairs with white linen cushions, shelving, and beds formed of stone recesses.



The roofs are made from standard concrete I-beams, spanned by local arched terracotta tiles. (Photos: Torben Eskerod)

The local stone which was used – a butter-coloured sandstone in standard sizes with rough circular saw marks still evident – makes the house is at home with the surrounding natural colours. The roofs were made from standard concrete I-beams spanned by local arched terracotta tiles. ‘My father loved working with the local craftsmen,’ recalled Utzon’s son Jan some 30 years later when he collected the Prizker prize on his behalf. ‘When he appeared at the building site with some bottles of wine, the craftsmen know that he’d had new ideas during the night and that some of the work already done would have to be changed.’ On the basis of the changes carried out from the initial plans, the quantity must have had a positive impact on the local Rioja business.

As Utzon grew older, the glaring surface of the sea became too much for eyes weakened by a lifetime studying pencil drawings. And the number of sightseers knocking on the modest front door became invasive. The Utzons decided to move further inland to the ‘paradise’ site close to S’Horta. There Utzon designed a second home called Can Feliz, which has more distant views of the sea.

A visit to Can Lis is inspiring. The spirit of one of the greatest 20th century architects is embodied in the house which he designed for his retirement. The public side of the house is quietly understated, with one simple wooden front door with the number 77 etched into it and one high-level clerestory window. It shows a modest but highly thoughtful and intelligent man who wanted to live a simple life looking at the light reflecting on the sea. The man serving in the local corner shop told me that Utzon had been his best friend and was a genius.

Utzon died in 2008, aged 90. When the Queen opened the Sydney Opera House in 1973, the architect did not



receive an invitation to the ceremony and his name was not mentioned in any of the speeches. But he was recognised later when he was asked to update the design of the interior of the opera house. The Utzon Room, overlooking Sydney Harbour, was officially dedicated in 2004. Utzon wrote at the time: ‘The fact that I’m mentioned in such a marvellous way gives me the greatest pleasure and satisfaction. I don’t think you can give me more joy as the architect. It supersedes any medal of any kind that I could get and have got.’ However, he never returned to Australia to see the completed work.

Following his death, the family passed the house to the Utzon Foundation, which has recently restored it impeccably. The house is now available for architects, artists and other researchers to apply for up to three months of residency. When I visited the home it was occupied by a brightly clad Danish lady visual artist who was playing with a jolly mosaic of brightly coloured pieces of fabric on a white background in the morning sun, enhanced by the brightness of the Mediterranean. Jorn Utzon would be smiling as he looked down on her, content with his legacy.

Tim Morris is an architect specialising in the project management of regeneration schemes.