

Utzon Room

Building Name	Utzon Room (<i>formerly Reception Hall</i>)
Location	Sydney Opera House, Bennelong Point, Sydney
Owner/client	Sydney Opera House Trust/Sydney Opera House Building Development Group
Architects	Utzon Architects (Jørn and Jan Utzon) and Johnson Pilton Walker (JPW) (Richard Johnson)
Project Cost	\$4.6m including restoration work, tapestry and wheelchair lift
Builder	Hansen Yuncken
Heritage Architect	Trevor Waters
Project Manager	CGP Management
Heritage Impact Statement	James Semple Kerr
Structural, Acoustic and Fire Engineering	Arup Structural, Arup Acoustic, Arup Fire
Quantity Surveyor	Rider Hunt Sydney
Concrete Restoration	Lucas Stuart (specialist restoration of concrete beams and walls)
Tapestry	Jørn Utzon, <i>Homage to Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach</i> . (Wool and cotton, woven by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, July 2004). Lin Utzon (Jørn's daughter) supervised the creation of the tapestry.
Mechanical and Electrical Services	Steensen Varming (<i>established in Australia by the Danish practice in 1957, after winning the original commission to design the Sydney Opera House with Jørn Utzon</i>). http://www.steensenvarming.com.au/
Fire and Hydraulic Services	Warren Smith & Partners Consulting Engineers
Joinery Floor and Mobile Wall Unit	H Dallas Industries
Flooring	Southern Tasmanian Blue Gum (<i>Eucalyptus globulus</i>) with soapy wash finish, bronze floor boxes for access to services.
Walls	Southern Tasmanian Blue Gum (<i>Eucalyptus globulus</i>) with soapy wash finish (hand applied)
Doors	Southern Tasmanian Blue Gum (<i>Eucalyptus globulus</i>) (Soap Wash Finish), existing bronze restored, Sydney Opera House white birch veneer doors (to match existing)
Lighting	Erco track with Erco Domotec spot (77246.00), Erco Track with Erco Unipar wall washer (77553.00), Custom-made light fitting designed by JPW – manufactured by Pierlite
Furniture	Nanna Ditzel 'Trinidad chair' – Fredericia Furniture
Windows	Existing bronze window frames (as per Bagsværd Church, Copenhagen by Utzon)
Bronze work	Creative Metal Fabrications:
Kitchen	Omvivo Ulisse wall outlet hand basin spout, Omvivo soap dispenser, Corian wash basin
Suspended Ceiling units	Charles Heath Industries
Time Frame	Completed September 2004 (Design and documentation, 9 months. Construction 9 months)

There are two major areas of focus in the timber design/refurbishment in this room, the wall lining and the floors.



The Utzon Room tapestry and Trinidad chairs (Source <http://www.jpw.com.au/interiors.htm>)

General use and design intent

The Utzon Room, the newly refurbished former Reception Hall, is accessed by climbing the steps under the concourse of the Sydney Opera House and then taking a sharp right turn. The main entry, in the south west corner of the room, opens out unexpectedly to reveal a long, well-lit space lined in pale timber and concrete (on floor and ceiling respectively) with colour provided by a long tapestry opposite the windows.

The Utzon Room is designed specifically to cater for seminars, meetings, chamber music performances and receptions (including small weddings and cocktail parties). This range of activities would normally demand a space that is functional, flexible and robust. In this case it is all of these things; however, through clever design of the lighting (and understanding the prevalent light qualities of the site) and timber detailing in the floor and walls it is also a very beautiful room.

This space is the only true Utzon interior at the Opera House; it remained structurally intact after Utzon left the project in 1966 (to never return to Australia to see his vision completed). In his letter of reply to Jørn Utzon (17th October 2005), Bob Carr, the Premier of NSW, acknowledges that

No one else could have finished the work on the Opera House. No one else would presume to do so. I rejoice that its architect is again engaged on the building, bringing all the wisdom and experience of his mature years, all the

resources of his mind and imagination and his undiminished enthusiasm to complete the task he began

Jørn Utzon's original vision for the room, as an extension of the Utzon Design Principles (a 'blueprint' that operates as a management plan for the Sydney Opera House), has been finally realised by collaboration between Utzon Architects (notably Jørn's son Jan) and local Sydney practice Johnson Pilton Walker, under the guidance of JPW Director Richard Johnson. The former practice focussed on design, the latter on the coordination and commissioning of local consultants and contractors; both were responsible for design development.

Although Jørn was not present to oversee work on this room, he had completed sketches to address the client brief. These were then discussed further in consultations between the client's representatives (notably the Chair of the Sydney Opera House Trust and key proponent of the project, Joseph Skrzynski), consultants and project managers.

Design development was a process of active dialogue and experimentation; one builder on site even commented that contractors were involved in solving design issues, such as the form and mounting of the suspended ceiling service units. The tight time frame required strict programming of, often conflicting, contractors on site. Work undertaken included the removal of the existing green carpet and parquetry dance floor. More importantly, the existing and discoloured timber fittings and fixtures were replaced, painstakingly, with Southern Tasmanian Blue Gum (*E. globulus*). The timber was hand picked by the architects (for colour matching) and, although Utzon's original preference was for a pale European wood such as Ash or Beech, the Australian choice is better suited to the high traffic and the constant movement of furniture across the floor.

The resilience of the Blue Gum to stains was unknown; the worst offender (as determined on a 'test floor' in JPW offices) was red wine, however even the depth of this stainer could be reduced over time through proper use of the sealing and

maintenance treatment, a traditional Scandinavian soap and kaolin wash. This wash, an initial series of applications on the floor *en situ* that requires several hours to dry between applications, leaves a softly glowing surface with only a slightly detectable 'bloom'. The maintenance and cleaning of the floor is done using the same technique, but only one wash is required. The mixture (a handful of each to a bucket of water) is simply mopped onto the floor and allowed to dry. Poor instructions, and a rotation of cleaning contractors has, however, resulted in the floor being machine-polished and washed with chemical cleaners, neither of which are appropriate. Accordingly, the floor has been resealed several times with the soap/clay mix, which, according to a builder, has served to make it more resilient, with less stain and heel damage being reported. The wall panels were partially treated before installation, finished *en situ*, and are now cleaned using the same mix (but less often than the floors and by hand).



The Utzon Room viewed from the Domain (Source <http://www.jpw.com.au/interiors2.htm>)

It is well known that Utzon had a special fondness for this room. Large east-facing windows allow light to penetrate and illuminate the floor, ceiling and wall-to-floor tapestry on the opposite wall (which conceals an acoustic chamber). The view is down the harbour seaward but does include Mrs Macquarie's Chair, over the end of the Domain and Farm Cove. The natural light provides an exceptional quality to this room and this is greatly enhanced by the tapestry colours and by the soft, neutral lustre of the floor and wall timbers. The general light fixtures are similar to those used in Utzon's Bagsværd Church in Copenhagen (built in 1976). The softer light

from these fixtures complements the sharper white light from the fittings suspended directly over the tapestry.

The folded concrete beams, also reminiscent of that in the Bagsværd Church, appear to hover lightly overhead and then drop to the floor, for structural and acoustic purposes, at the southern end. This effect of weightlessness is achieved through the milky white colouring of the folds (hand-rubbed to achieve a white and clearer pigmentation to replicate Utzon's original design) and the use of suspended strip lighting between the folds (the housing of which also contain the Room's other AV services).



Ceiling and light treatment in Utzon's Bagsværd Church in Copenhagen (built in 1976) (Source <http://www.utzon.dk/?acc=64>)

At the entry end of the room is a panelled 'wall' that is disconnected from its moorings on the floor and slid open. This provides privacy for a newly installed service zone (a Corian sink, servery and bar), which has access to a service lift. The catered food is prepared in the larger Opera House kitchens and delivered for final plating and dissemination to tables within the Utzon Room. The mobile wall unit conceals many functions which might be considered unattractive, or which once cluttered the entry to the former reception hall. Notwithstanding the functional value of this unit, it has also been designed and finished to become a sculptured piece of furniture within its own right, and the mechanism by which it is locked back into

place matches other bronze fittings in the room (such as the window frames and floor service boxes).

This, as with other design elements within the room, would have been prototyped; a process that Johnson says “enabled [Utzon] to still control the quality of the detailing and the project, even though he wasn’t there”ⁱⁱⁱ. This link, he says, was fundamental to enacting Utzon’s original and progressive visions of this room and its elements. Jan was integral to this process by viewing prototypes, and taking photos and samples back to his father for comment.

Although the original timber parquet floor was removed for this refurbishment there are references to it in the patterning of the floor timbers where they intersect and are flush with the bronze floor service boxes. A timber screen wall at the northern edge of the room conceals a drop-down projection screen (for presentations and seminars), which is further hidden behind a top ceiling rail. This wall screen is also sealed and cleaned using the soap wash treatment and provides additional acoustic balancing. Furniture in the room is also well considered – the Trinidad Chairs by Nanna Ditzel are light weight, stackable, pale timbered and easily (and safely) cleaned using soap flakes dissolved in hot water. Further, they do not distract from the quality of light and space Utzon envisaged and which his son and local practitioners have now realised.



Trinidad Chair by Nanna Ditzel (manufactured by Fredericia Furniture), which won the 1995 ID Prize, and which is also cleaned using soap flakes dissolved in hot water. (Source: <http://www.fredericia.com/>)

Kaolin: China clay, Clay, Hydrated aluminum silicate, Hydrite, Porcelain clay; Note: Main constituent of Kaolin is Kaolinite ($\text{Al}_2\text{Si}_2\text{O}_5(\text{OH})_4$). (Source <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npg/npgd0364.html>)

References

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Fredericia Furniture: Nanna Ditzel 'Trinidad Chair' <http://www.fredericia.com/>

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Reply to Jørn Utzon from the Premier of NSW, 17 October 2003,

http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/sections/media%5Froom/media%5Freleases/press_release.asp?idPressRelease=48&sm=5&ss=19, Steensen Varming

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Utzon Architects <http://www.utzon.dk/>

Endnotes

ⁱ Reply to Jørn Utzon from the Premier of NSW, 17 October 2003,

http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/sections/media%5Froom/media%5Freleases/press_release.asp?idPressRelease=48&sm=5&ss=19, 21 September 2005

ⁱⁱ Richard Johnson, in Lucy Denham, (2005) Utzon Room, *Artichoke*, Vol 2(09), p. 89