

## **Peter Murphy Pre-Publication Archive**

This is a pre-publication article. It is provided for researcher browsing and quick reference.

The final published version of the article is available at:

‘Sacred Icon: Jørn Utzon’s Sydney Opera House’ in Makarand Paranjape (ed) Sacred Australia (Melbourne: Clouds of Magellan, 2009), pp 287-305.

# **Sacred Icon: Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House**

*Peter Murphy*

**Peter Murphy**  
Associate Professor of Communications  
School of English, Communications and Performance Studies  
Monash University Clayton Campus  
Wellington Road  
Clayton Victoria 3800  
AUSTRALIA  
[Peter.Murphy@arts.monash.edu.au](mailto:Peter.Murphy@arts.monash.edu.au)  
<http://www.petermurphyweb.net/>

## **The Sacred and the Secular**

Australia is a secular society—in many ways, an emphatically secular society. There are few visible traces of organized religion in the daily life of its people. The process of secularization has bitten deep in the Australian psyche. Only a small minority of Australians attends church or engages in any form of corporate religious activity. When Australia was settled by Europeans at the end of the eighteenth century, churches were still an important social institution. Today they are marginal. Everyday habits continue to be shaped by the ingrained ethos of Protestantism and Catholicism. But organized religious activity and ritual has shrunk into the social background. It barely rates a mention in conversation.

The big turning point—the one that led to the loss of interest in institutional religion—occurred in the 1960s. This was an era of accelerated, sometimes even pyrotechnic, cultural modernization. In its midst, large numbers of Australians began to shrug off Christian morality—or else see it as simply irrelevant. As the Australian satirist Norman Lindsay had hoped, prelates and priests became figures of fun—dusty relics of an increasingly by-gone age. The wry, skeptical streak in the Australian character found traditional piety difficult to put up with—and so it was abruptly dumped. Attendance at church plummeted—and Australian society became trenchantly secularized. Yet along with cultural modernization came a counter-movement of re-sacralization. The more secular Australia became, the more a streak of the sacred persisted—and grew. The collapse of church observance emancipated the sacred from the constraint of traditional religion.

Traditional religion offered redemption in the afterlife and moral codes in this life. As cultural modernity spread, these lost their appeal. Yet as conventional religious observance declined, the influence of the sacred increased. Symbols of the sacred in effect began to replace the power of institutional religion in Australian life.<sup>1</sup> This begs the question, though: what exactly is the sacred—and by what means or media is it expressed? To define it negatively, the sacred is distinct from ordinary or profane life. It is what elevates, expands, and edifies. The sacred has a time and space of its own kind. It does not exist in ordinary time or space, but rather in an enigmatic space-time that is

‘mysterious’. ‘Mystery’ is simply another way of saying that something is ‘out of the ordinary’. This ‘out of the ordinary’ is the realm of the sacred.

One distinguishing mark of the sacred is the way it is communicated. The sense of the sacred is always indirectly communicated. One cannot command the sacred. Thus it is always better expressed by music rather than catechism—or by parable rather than judgment. The sacred takes the sanctimonious out of religious life. It resists and expels, and often satirizes, the moralizing and morbid dimensions of traditional religion. The English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams illustrates the distinction perfectly. For all of his life he was an atheist or agonistic, and yet he wrote some of the most beautiful sacred music of all time.

When the winds of cultural modernization hit Australia in the 1960s, traditional religion collapsed like a house of cards. A threshold was crossed—and crossing backwards proved impossible. The shattering of traditional belief happened suddenly. When it did, traditionalists expected moral anarchy and a crisis of meaning to follow. Australia did experience a little of that—but in reality not very much. For nature abhors a vacuum. In spite of plummeting belief in the moral law of the church, Australian society kept chugging along. Because the most fervent advocates of cultural modernity were often empty-headed—and not a little stupid—there was something in the complaints of the traditionalists.<sup>2</sup> Cultural change, innovation and progress frequently had a hollow, shallow ring to it. Despite this, cultural modernization did not produce widespread anomie. It did produce some idiots—but then all societies have their fools. We suffer them—easily or not—according to our temperament. Still it is notable that cultural modernization in Australia did not create a generation of lost souls. There was the occasional casualty along the way, and much of the posturing of the 1960s looks embarrassing in retrospect. But Australia did not descend into a mad maelstrom. The predicted worst did not happen—because of the paradox of secularization.

Secularization tossed aside the catechisms and law-codes of organized religion. Australian society became more complex and more hazardous as a result, but also more interesting. Australian cultural modernization, though, did not simply replace certainty with doubt—or faith with questioning. If it had, there would have been more serious problems. Rather secularization was met with the equal and opposite movement of

sacralization. Sacralization—it needs be stressed—was not simply the reassertion of faith in place of doubt. Rather the sacred was an ambidextrous condition in which faith and doubt coexisted. Faith and doubt, along with tradition and innovation, were intertwined and folded back into each other.

Traditionally, the sacred was an enigmatic—or quantum—quality that lurked in the heart of religious mystery. Secularization emancipated that mystery from institutional religion. To do so, it had to brush aside the doctrines, interdictions, and rituals of the churches. At the same time, it had to fill the empty vessel of modernization with the enigmatic substance of culture. *Cultural modernization had to overcome tradition and at the same time overcome itself.*<sup>3</sup> It had to retire tired meanings, while avoiding the narcissism and nihilism of self-devouring modernity. It had to indirectly communicate meaning that could no longer be directly communicated—at least in any plausible fashion.

There are numerous forms of indirect communication of religious feeling. Music and architecture are classic examples—long associated with the churches. Everything from cricket pitches to detective novels to philosophy—culture in the wide-ranging sense—played a role during the twentieth century in expressing the sacred tangentially in secular societies. But if the arts stood out, this was not because art was a substitute religion, as some thought, but rather—and more simply—because great art was well suited to conveying the enigmas of the sacred. For what makes great art in practice great is its capacity to internalize and express contrary forces—to be traditional and modern, and both and neither of these, simultaneously.

Australians built beautiful churches in the nineteenth century. The neo-Gothic cathedral of St. Patrick's in Melbourne—designed by William Wardell—is a wonderful example of this. Buildings of this kind were artifacts of traditional religion. They were conceived as places of social congregation and spiritual retreat that underscored the moral laws of Christendom. They pointed back to a more unambiguously Christian time—the European gothic age. And yet the restlessness of Gothic architecture had a strong hint of modernity about it. The past, it seemed, contained the future. Even more enticingly, the Christian gospels hinted at an unfathomable mystery—at the 'faith-doubt' enigma and the irresolvable puzzle that there is no faith without doubt, and no doubt without faith.<sup>4</sup> Even

though the nineteenth century was the last age of traditional Christian observance, it was also the age of Kierkegaard.

The building of gothic piles in Australia was a comic mystery—hilarious in a way, and yet perfectly right. If they principally did what they were meant to do—which was to sustain traditional belief—the best of them nonetheless hinted at the double overcoming of tradition and modernity. In the 1960s, when the avenging angel of doubt hit with the force of a hurricane, the gothic edifices emptied out. The lesser examples were deconsecrated and sold off as cafés. No one seriously resisted this. Indeed, the epicurean strain in the Australian character relished it. Norman Lindsay smiled naughtily from above. Still, anomie did not rage through the land. For a sacred dimension asserted itself in the moment of disbelief. Ironically, it was the act of disbelief that made this possible. Modernity's angel of doubt turned out to be a paradoxical carrier of faith. How odd! This was a mischievous angel—one who impersonated the person of faith and the person of doubt simultaneously. You never knew quite who you were dealing with. As with all enigmas, you were dealing with both.

### **The Old and the New**

This angel—or was it a daemon?—sat on the shoulder of one of the greatest characters who ever washed up on Australian shores. In the 1960s, the Danish architect Jørn Utzon (1918- ) came to build Australia a cultural monument. Like most of those buildings, it could have turned out to be an unsightly dud. But it didn't. For Utzon was an enigma. He was filled with the modern spirit—a bearer of cultural modernism to far-flung foreign parts. Yet he was to create a work—the Sydney Opera House—in touch with eternity. This was a work that was an almost perfect example of the double overcoming of tradition and modernity. His mischievous angel-demon would smile forever on the future. This smile was the impish grin of someone who takes the pretentious clap-trap of tomorrow and the tired arts of yesterday and cancels them out, in the spirit of the uncanny, mythical, sometimes even magical, time and place of the sacred.

I grew up hearing, from time to time, the name Jørn Utzon. It was a name tinged with controversy. As I passed from childhood to adolescence, the Sydney Opera House was under construction (1959-1973). Like all great projects it had its detractors. Many

complaints were directed at Utzon. On the surface of things, the cause of complaint was cost overruns, the bug bear of all large works. The criticisms escalated in 1965 when a new state government in New South Wales was elected, under the premiership of Robert Askin.<sup>5</sup> The project costs had been under-estimated by earlier governments for political reasons. Utzon became the scapegoat for what then became inevitable—snowballing expenses.

But, in truth, as politicized as the cost of all large public works are, this was not the only—or even the principal—source of the antagonism towards Utzon. There were deeper, more complex, resentments at play. One argument advanced at the time was that Utzon was a victim of philistinism. He fell foul of a public sentiment that was culturally immature and hence uneasy about modern architecture. There was doubtlessly an element of this at work. But this is also a story that echoes all too closely the self-flagellating but oddly self-promoting narrative of ‘no one understands our genius’ that the Modern Movement in art and architecture at the time so liked to tell about itself. Out of self interest, it overestimated the public’s resistance to Modernism. Indeed, in a curious way, the legitimacy of architectural Modernism often depended on the idea that there was fierce resistance to its ideas. ‘I am right because many people tell me I am wrong’ was (more or less) the view. The qualities of virtue and heroism that Modernism rather too easily ascribed to its own self were justified by stories of a philistine world that was frustrating art.

It is not clear, though, that Australian publics of the 1960s were especially philistine or even especially resistant to Modernism in architecture. Since the 1820s, the state of New South Wales had had a long history of constructing architecturally elegant and sophisticated public buildings, including universities, museums and art galleries. The extensive, often exquisite, public architecture that populated Sydney and other Australian cities was traditional in style and spirit—memorably so.

From the days of the colonial governor Lachlan Macquarie, in the early nineteenth century, a large investment in public building was a distinguishing mark of Australian life. Max Dupain, Australia’s greatest photographer, spent a large part of his career photographing this brilliant architecture. Much of it, stylistically speaking, until the 1960s, was historicist. Classical, Italianate, and Gothic styles were very popular. But the

Modernist proselytizing idea that a shocking break with a historicizing past had brought forth a revelatory Modernism was an exaggeration. For instance, it was the most natural of things for Max Dupain to go down to the Opera House site every week while it was being constructed to take photographs.<sup>6</sup> There was a natural continuity between that work and Dupain's beautiful images of early colonial Australian late Georgian architecture.<sup>7</sup> In the inter-war period of the twentieth century, Modernism had already made a big and stylish impact on Australian use of classical form in architecture. The stripped classicism of Australia's Provisional Parliament House (1927) is a case in point:

One of the best examples of the fusion of modern ethos with classical form in Australia is the Royal College of Surgeons (1935) building in Spring Street, Melbourne—designed by Leighton Irwin. In the buildings of the inter-war generation, architects had already accepted Adolph Loos' arguments against ornamentation.<sup>8</sup> Doubtless full-fledged Modernism in architecture in Australia in the 1960s still took some getting used to, yet in retrospect it all seems very tame, even (now) very traditional. As the public became accustomed to the new multi-storied office building type, and as the discomfort that it initially provoked dissipated, the classic form, or classic geometry, of the best of these buildings became easier to recognize and appreciate. Of course there were many bad examples of Modern buildings constructed, but then atrocious building dogs all architectural periods. There seems to be no escaping it.

The continuities are just as apparent as the divergences when we look at the juxtaposition of the 1930s-era Royal College of Surgeons building and Melbourne's first glass curtain-wall skyscraper built across the road from it. Orica (formerly ICI) House was completed in 1958. Designed by the modernist architectural firm Bates Smart and McCutcheon, it was located just outside Melbourne's Central Business District in order to avoid height restrictions, a typical modernist defiance of ordinance. But moving around Melbourne today, one is struck by the chasteness, even modesty, of such buildings. Perhaps, as with all art, it takes time for the meaning of buildings to become clear. First they are loaded with the claims of their own time—many of them ridiculous. Then they have to live with the inevitable repudiation of those claims. Finally, the real judge of things, Time, does it work, and buildings of real virtue, whatever their style, emerge as classics.

### **The Envy of Creation**

If High Modernism sparked voluble, and at times interesting, debates about architecture in the 1960s, these were also (so far as their practical import was concerned) short-lived. Modernism was already the establishment architecture of Australia by the 1970s. As Max Dupain photographs of the time illustrate, architectural modernism was the triumphant—and in practice the only coherent—aesthetic of the new generation of tall office buildings that appeared in Sydney in the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> The Sydney Opera House was simultaneous with this. Construction work on the base and pedestal of the Opera House proceeded through 1957-1963, but the signifying geometry of the project—the buildings' great sails—were erected through 1963-1967, a period neatly book-ended by the two monuments of Sydney sixties' modernism: Peddle Thorp & Walker's 1962 AMP Building on Circular Quay and Harry Seidler's 1967 Australia Square Tower in Sydney's Central Business District.

Perceptions of the power and orthodoxy of Modernism in the 1960s has been muddied by the fact that Modern Movement architects were often the last to acknowledge this, relishing as they did their status as radicals and provocateurs. But then all modern establishments behave in exactly the same way, because they derive their legitimacy from claims to reform. Everyone comes to power with a reform agenda. Whether a reform movement has any value, though, and whether it succeeds in generating meaning—or whether it is just a lot of hot air—depends on whether it can create durable classics. It has to turn the promise of change into the reality of continuity, and contemporaneity into immortality. That is exactly what Utzon did.

Interestingly, it took a shorter time than in most cases for this to be generally acknowledged. Thus it is not at all evident that Utzon was vulnerable to removal from the Sydney Opera House project because either the general public or art-supporting elites had traditional aesthetic tastes. Indeed it is far from obvious that this was actually the case. Utzon *was* vulnerable, though, when ministers in government and ambitious figures in the architecture profession undermined him. Their motives were not to rebut his aesthetic but rather to grab control of it.

What drove Utzon's enemies was envy. It was the envy of his peers for his great abilities. The envy of ability is the homage that mediocrity pays to great talent. One should, I suppose, at a great distance, be pleased for it because it always the first sign we have that something exceptional is afoot. There is never a Mozart without a Salieri.

Utzon's talent was enormous. He designed, and oversaw much of the construction, of a building that will be the Australian icon forever. It is a building that ranks with the Parthenon and the Pantheon. This is the real reason that Utzon was chided and berated. Not because he was an incompetent project manager. In fact, his early work with Ove Arup, the engineer on the Opera House project—to find efficient engineering solutions for Utzon's radical design—appears to have been both effective and ingenious. But Utzon, like the great generally, also played the Sun to the wings of Icarus when it came to less talented engineers. As Arup's partners at the Sydney site assumed greater and greater responsibility for the project, Utzon found himself without friends on the project.

Beware when the second rank deal with the first rank! The result is rancor. Those of first rank are very demanding, and they always make demands that the second rank, the average of a profession, cannot meet. Without intending to do so, those of first rank humiliate the second raters. But those who are humiliated, those who harbor hurt feelings, still want to be like the giant who humbles them. Rancorous feelings of envy and jealousy result. These are paradoxical feelings. The rancorous person dismisses the person of great talent (as an incompetent) and yet wants to be like them (a person of superior talent)!

In short, the reason that Utzon got a hard time was the envy of his peers. The most appalling case was the architecture professionals who happily grabbed the direction of the project from Utzon when the state government offered it to them. The strangest case of envy, though, was that of the New South Wales Minister of Works, Davis Hughes, who at times seemed to think he could personally take over the project from Utzon. And we think that architects are egomaniacs! Hughes badgered Utzon not just about costs and the timetable of construction, but about the design itself.<sup>10</sup>

In the end, the minister stopped paying Utzon, who then had no choice but to resign from the project. Utzon left Australia in 1966, and never returned. This was a shameful episode. Yet the irony of it is that Australians love Utzon's creation. They know

it is their icon. It represents them to the world and to themselves. They see their own selves reflected in that building. The Sydney Opera House is to Australia what the Parthenon is to Greece. Official amends were eventually made to Utzon for the shoddy treatment of him. He was awarded an Order of Australia, and an agreement was made with him in 2000 to have him work on redesigns of the building. But none of that official atonement is anything like the simple enduring respect that Australians pay Utzon by visiting, admiring, and musing on this most remarkable of creations.

### **Portal City and Plastic Spirit**

Why is the Sydney Opera House such a great building? The answer, simply, is the form of the building. One of its most notable aspects is the starkness of its form. It is not embellished. It is not decorated, or not in such a manner that detracts in any way from the power of its form.

In conceiving the idea for the design of the Opera House, Utzon took an orange and divided it into segments. That was the essential act of creation. Those segments, transformed into the shells of the building, and arranged artfully with regard to its site on Bennelong Point, are the essence of the Opera House. In some sense, this act of creation was child's play, but child's play of an impossibly high order. An act of creation that will last millennia, and that is not just vogue or fashion, is elemental. That which is the most difficult is the simplest of all.

The segmented hemisphere on which Utzon based his design echoes the form of the orb or sphere that is found throughout nature—from the glories of planetary systems to, yes, the humble orange. What great architecture does is to mimic the forms of nature. In the architectural act of creation we see the re-creation of the proportions, symmetries, ratios, and shapes of nature. Architecture is pure artifice. But, at its most powerful, it is an artifice that is a second nature. Architecture, thus, is different from nature but it is also very like nature. From that paradox, it draws its power.

No matter how difficult a project is, and in engineering terms the Sydney Opera House does seem to have been quite difficult, the success of architecture rests on something essentially simple. It draws its power from the subtle elegant geometries of nature that all human beings understand intuitively at a glance.

Most architecture, in the end, is a failure. It fails because it cannot outlive the era in which it was built. It cannot do that because it draws its meaning, and thus its power, from the signifiers, the meaningful symbols, the styles, of the day. Most architects cannot resist trends. They are no different from novelists, painters, film makers, journalists, and academics. They are all the same. They love the surge of importance that comes with saying and doing in the dominant style of the times. The illusion is only compounded when the dominant style fancies itself to be subversive or transgressive. But even if every single contemporary says that what has been done is important, style still cannot create works of importance.

There are only ever a handful of such works. They transcend the conventions of their time. Utzon created one of those rare works. That granted him immortality. His work will outlive him. Most works die with their creators. They fade from memory. They become neglected, forgotten, weathered, chipped, and eventually will be torn down or, worse still, stored in some dark archive as an embarrassing relic of the bad taste of the period.

Hundreds of thousands of Australians visit the Sydney Opera House each year. Some come to see productions staged there. Many more come to visit Utzon's creation. It is now one of Australia's most sacred places. It is not a temple or a church. It has none of the trappings of institutional religion. It is not even a work of romantic aesthetic religion. Rather it is an artifact of Australian civil religion. It is one of the places where Australians come to think about who they are. The Australian War Memorials in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney play a similar role in the national psyche. These are places where Australians can ask themselves the question "what kind of people are we?"

Of all of Australia's sacred artifices, the greatest is the Opera House. It is the Australian Parthenon. But, significantly, it is *not* located high up on a hill, on an acropolis, but rather on the edge of a great harbor on Australia's East Coast. It sits like a white trireme, eternally ready to sail into the distance.

For the most part, the nationality of an architect does not matter much. But in Utzon's case, nationality is significant—for he brought from Denmark to Australia something that Australians understand very well and take very seriously. This is an architecture inspired by the watery margin of a society by the sea. This has a great

significance for Australians. To understand what the Opera House means to Australians is also to understand that its architect was a Dane, and that he grew up at the very far west reach of the Baltic—a child with a love of sailing who was raised in a naval architect's home.

Australia is a littoral society. Most of its population is concentrated in large cities on its coastal circumference. Almost from its beginning Australia has been one of the most urbanized societies in the world. While Australians have always enjoyed romantic stories about their thinly-populated continental interior, these have had little practical impact on the urbanized maritime Australian form of life. By the 1990s, four out of five Australians lived in cities, one in four of the population lived within fifteen minutes drive of the coast, and population growth was almost entirely confined to urban coastal corridors.

Because Australia always had a strong urban bias, it was also by default a society that heavily invested in science and technology—what today we call a knowledge society. This is a pattern that we find widely repeated among littoral, island, archipelago, and peninsular societies across the world—from the British Isles and Ireland to the Coasts and Great Lakes of America, from maritime East Asia to the Baltic and the Mediterranean. These societies—along with their riverine cousins such as Baden-Württemberg at the triangular intersection of the Rhine and Danube rivers—have been the world-historic centers for the development of economies based on the arts and sciences.<sup>11</sup>

In part this is because these places become nodes for the regional and global trafficking of goods, persons and information. But, in equal part, this is also because these are places that manage, at the same time, to create strong identities which anchor the flows that occur in and out of them. This is the enigma of portal cities and littoral societies. They combine qualities of flow and fixture, liquidity and plasticity, change and stability, fashion and civilization in equal measure. They are dynamic and impassive, local and global, open and bounded. Their strength follows from this paradoxical mix of things. Successful portal societies embody powerful incongruities that they effortlessly unite into a seamless whole.

That also explains the success of their arts and sciences. For great arts and sciences are founded on powerful paradoxical enigmas like the unmoved mover, space-

time, the wave-particle, learned ignorance. From Aristotle to Eisenstein, Heisenberg to Socrates, this has been true. Knowledge at its deepest vein is structured like a parable of Kierkegaard. It is a brilliant conjunction of opposites, a mesmerizing union of contraries.

The arts and sciences always concentrate. They cluster in a relatively small handful of places. One of the most common places is the portal city. This is because, being where they are, by the sea, and doing what they do—trading and trafficking—portal cities encourage the kind of boundary crossing and cross fertilizing that is one of the conditions of knowledge formation. But, and this is an important qualification, the flow in and out of portal cities is not the only key condition of a knowledge society. For as well as being cities that live from flow, the most successful of these cities embody the very antithesis of this. They are great plastic entities.

Sydney is both. It has powerful flows in and out. But it also has an equally powerful identity embodied in a distinctive plastic form. We see this contradiction, this enigma, this paradox, perfectly captured in the Sydney Opera House. It is sited by the sea. It is the emblematic sailing ship—the signature of movement in and out of the portal. Yet it is also a great impassive plastic creation. Utzon's building is a sculpture. Meditating on Bennelong Point with a genius' eye for potential, Utzon observed that 'this peninsula popping out in a harbor would mean that it would be looked upon from all sides'. Or as the ancient Judaism held: *God sees from all sides*.

This is the essence of the portal. Its architecture signifies not just flow, the in and out of global traffic, but also the circular motion of circumnavigating the unmoved mover represented by the divine sculpture, the temple of the gods—that is, the fixed point of flow, the impassive anchor of activity, the sign of a cosmic necessity at the center of the world of freedom and contingency.<sup>12</sup> This is the necessity that endows human contingency with meaning. It is nature's geometry. This geometry, elevated or translated into architectural sculpture, is what gives the Sydney Opera House—like the Parthenon—its enigmatic iconic power as an inexhaustible source of meaning.

### **Australia's Dreaming Imagination**

Utzon designed his masterpiece using the sparse simplicity of Euclidean geometry. He simply sliced up a sphere. The result was a perfect Platonic form—resistant

to time and fashion. Utzon in the end was hounded out of Australia in a frenzy of political backbiting and devious ambition. But the raucous bunch of politicians and jealous professional peers, who caused Utzon to be removed, still allowed Utzon's creation to stand. They envied it, they feared it, they wanted to shine in its light, but above all they could not, and did not, destroy it.

Utzon's creation is an example of immortal architecture. There are not many such examples. It is a creation that echoes the design of the cosmos. Utzon's fellow Dane, Kierkegaard, would have understood why this was so. In its absolute fidelity to things, Utzon's creation escapes the deadweight of moralism and the kinds of sentimental hand wringing and dry appeals to duty that so often pass for civics, citizenship, and religion. By the sea, close in spirit to the cosmos, its simple geometry and its graceful sails are a representation of a tremendous Heraclitean necessity—an order beyond law that is by turns pleasing, beautiful, demanding, exacting, buoyant, and terrible. This is an order for which sacrifices are made. It is an order of things beyond calculation, will, or choice. It just *is*. This great order can make us better than we are. It can move us to do more than we would otherwise do. It can lead us up, out of everyday life and care, into the dreaming domain of the imagination.

This dreaming imagination begins its work on the beach—the hospitable strip between the infinity of the ocean and the empty expanses of an island continent. The children playing at the far end of the beach in Max Dupain's classic 1940 photograph *The thin man* are the imagination's apprentices. Some will become masters of making, shaping and creating. Others will grow up simply enjoying the fruits of that creation. A small number will do what Dupain himself does in *The thin man*. They will summon up the abstract forms of a beach civilization. The same curvilinear geometries that Utzon employs echo through Dupain's image—the curve of the seashore and the contrasting arc of footprints in the sand. This is the social physics of a world where two straight lines on the surface of curved space can enclose an area. In such space, margins converge to make a center, and the center is always on the periphery.

In this world, children grow up playing on the beach, speculating about patterns in the sand. These speculations are the first inklings of art and science—and the greater human puzzlement about the pattern of creation. Eventually these children morph into

adults like the one in Dupain's *Bondi sand patterns with figure—1940s*—a purposeful strider, marching erect across the beach, thoughtful, immersed in creation, surrounded by its larger force, relaxed in its embrace, not cowed by it but also quietly aware that in the lengthening shadows of the late afternoon light a storm may be brewing that will tear up creation's rippled sand pattern only to have tomorrow's placid nature remake it once more.

### **Liquid Stone**

The beach—the meeting point of the land and the sea—is the most enduring aspect of the Australian demotic sense of the sacred. The beach is a paradox—both earth and water, the place simultaneously of family obligation and hedonistic escape, noisy abandonment and quiet musing. The beach is the everyday sacred place of Australians. It is beloved in a way that only sacred things are—the object of an endless ritual, the eternal return of Australians each year to the same places and the same patterns of behaviour: the building of castles in the sand and letting the sea swallow them up. This is not pantheism or a religion of nature, but enchantment with the enigmatic double—the mysterious thing that embodies its opposite. It is this that human beings find a cause of reverence. In the shadow of such things, human beings find a place to quietly dwell, for a moment, in awe of eternity.

The rituals of the beach begin with the fascination with a paradoxical place. This fascination draws people back. They return eternally. It is paradox, though, that explains the fascination in the first instance. Paradox is the driving force of the sacred, and the sacred is what is left of religion in the aftermath of the tidal wave of modernity. Modernity makes societies secular. Yet in doing so, it does not necessarily diminish their interest in the sacred. It may transform this interest, and reshape it, but it does not obliterate it. Indeed in modernity it is often the most secular societies that retain at their core the greatest sense of the sacred, while traditional religious societies are tempted by sacrilegious acts in the name of religion. That we should find the sacred amidst the secular is merely the zenith of other paradoxes of the sacred that we have already encountered. This reminds us of the centre that is a margin—or the still-point that sets in motion tumultuous flows.

The stillness that abides at the heart of motion—the unmoved mover—is perhaps the most common way in which the sacred is experienced in everyday life. Sacred space is the place where those who are born in time can step, momentarily, out of time. Whether we call this intuition of being ‘out of time’ eternity, immortality, mystery, transcendence, the uncanny or the enigmatic, it remains an indubitable part of the human experience. The sacred invariably evokes the sense of some kind of sanctuary from time and motion. In modernity, the sacred place is the quiet place of thinking that exists amid the pandemonium of the metropolis. The great sacred building marks out a space of quiet. It is the quiet of sanctuary. This is not just calm per se but the calm in the eye of the storm. The person who is on the run from danger finds sanctuary in the place that is sacred. This is the sheltering canopy where the heart no longer has to beat urgently in fear and anxiety. The sacred sanctuary releases us, for a time, from the temporal sense of mortality—a sense that danger always heightens.

In Christian societies, the primal emblem of that sanctuary was the medieval cathedral. The cathedral was surrounded by the market—and yet separate from its urgency and mutability. It was a place of quiet and contemplation amid the human hub-hub. As European societies underwent the painful process of modernization, the primacy of the church as a place of sanctuary diminished. Other more secular symbols of sanctuary emerged. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we see the appearance of the garden retreat in the city square—and later the landscape park in the midst of the great metropolis. The urban pastoral of industrial society—no less than the Norman church set among the green fields of the old English agrarian society—represented the paradoxical desire of mobile and animated human beings for immobility and tranquility.<sup>13</sup>

Religion of a traditional church kind provided a rich palette for describing, representing and embodying sacred calm amid profane agitation. Modern tourists still trek endlessly to old church yards to catch a whiff of this enchanted peace. But those who live in thoroughly modern societies have also invented their own ways of describing, representing and embodying the paradox of the sacred. The work of another of Kierkegaard’s countrymen, the great Danish painter Wilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916), exemplifies this exactly. Hammershøi was a master of portraying the uncanny stillness at the heart of a world in motion. We look at his paintings and recognize scenes of modern

urbanity. But these scenes have been translated by the painter into symbols of an almost perfect metaphysical stillness. Giorgio De Chirico did something similar. In Hammershøi's case, a metaphysical light penetrates the windows of the city apartments that he repeatedly depicted. He bathed these interior scenes in the lucid stillness of light—the universal constant of Einstein and the symbol of the divine of the Neoplatonists. When we look at Hammershøi's paintings we understand Einstein's conclusion that the faster you travel, the more time slows down. In Hammershøi's art, the speed of light begets stillness.

The mystical characters of Patrick White's great novels represent a parallel uncanny quality—in White's case, the rising of silence out of sound.<sup>14</sup> White's Australian characters personify the emergence of mute intuition out of breathless reason. White writes what cannot be written, and makes explicit what can only ever be tacit—which means that his words become something else altogether. As Wittgenstein observed—about those things that are important, we cannot speak. What we do, rather, is to depict them. We use language to paint pictures.<sup>15</sup> White paints pictures, and what he depicts—the intuitive and the mystical—are the characteristic media of the sacred.<sup>16</sup> In White's novels—the speculum of the Australian mind—speech and reason, always in a hurry, tire and turn into the subdued garden of silent metaphysical thought.

Reverence and awe—the feelings of the sacred—quiet us. We speak, if at all, in hushed tones in the presence of sacred things. This rule of silence applies to religious commandments as much as it does to anything else. No institutional religion, no religious law, no codes, no catechism, no interdictions—this is what becomes of religion in modernity. Religion thereby is stripped down to its sacred core. If this does not happen, then religion tends to mutate into violent reaction. This never happened in Australia—the most tranquil of societies. Instead religion simply shed its institutional clothes. This means that hardly anyone anymore goes to church. The pews are deserted. But this did not represent the end of the sacred—quite the contrary. Patrick White despised the Church of England of his Australian upbringing.<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard spent his adult life at war with the state church of Denmark. Yet both had an exquisite feeling for the sacred.

Kierkegaard observed how, in modernity, aesthetic life competes with duties sanctioned by the old institutional religion. Bohemians poke fun at the pious

bourgeoisie.<sup>18</sup> Yet Kierkegaard rightly resisted the Romantic inference from this that art was somehow a new religion. It wasn't—though great art did prove in practice more able to represent the sacred than the old theologians. Paintings by Mark Rothko or Arthur Boyd convey a much more powerful sense of the sacred than any twentieth-century theology could. This is because great art convincingly depicts the impossible union of a 'full time' or an 'end time', the resurrection of the dead or a humanized god. It convincingly evokes stillness in an unstable world. What, after all, is a classic work of art—like the Parthenon marbles—but a contradiction in terms: liquid stone, sculptural stone that, to the eye, is animated and alive?

The art of the sacred is not the celebration of the ego of the artist—or even of the creativity of the artist. Rather it is a representation of the paradox of creation—of the impossibility that underlies the possibility of the act of creation. Art does not ask us to *believe* in the absurd or the mysterious. Art simply *depicts* what intrigues us: enigmatic images of fixity in flux, constancy in change, and the solidity of a world that melts before our eyes.

As Kierkegaard shrewdly observed, some of the best stories of this impossibility are the parables of Christianity—stories of lambs and lions, lost sheep, mustard seeds and fig trees, each with their paradoxical twists.<sup>19</sup> Great artists, like Utzon and White, create works out of paradox. The French Jewish Catholic mystic Simone Weil, a particular favourite of White's, called these paradoxes 'unions of opposites'.<sup>20</sup> Weil drew examples of these from both Christianity and the Greek Presocratics.<sup>21</sup> White also dabbled with the image of the Hindu and Buddhist Mandala—and with allusions to the Jewish Kabbalah.<sup>22</sup>

At the heart of all of these experiments in thought lies the double nature of creation. The characters that Patrick White created spoke of speechless intuitions and possessed hermaphrodite-like identities.<sup>23</sup> Such dazzling two-in-ones—enigmatic unions of oppositions: male and female, colonial and metropolitan, bourgeois and bohemian—animate creation. All creation is an analogy: the representation of one thing by another thing. In mimesis we create one thing in the medium of something else. Thus the interior of the Gothic church represents the primal forest in stone—just as Utzon represented the sea-side shells of his childhood in tiles. To the viewer, these tiled shells look like the sails of a ship billowing in the wind. This is the double nature of creation, the paradox of

liquid stone: the sculpture that seems alive—the sacred enigma that elicits eternal fascination.

An earlier version of this article was delivered as a paper at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture, Copenhagen, in April 2007. Thanks to Henrik Oxvig and Anders Michelsen who extended the invitation.

**Peter Murphy** is Associate Professor of Communications at Monash University and co-author of the forthcoming trilogy from Peter Lang—*Creativity and the Global Knowledge Economy*, *Global Creation*, and *Imagination*. His other books include *Dialectic of Romanticism: A Critique of Modernism* (2004), *Civic Justice: From Ancient Greece to the Modern World* (2001), *Agon, Logos, Polis* (2001), and *The Left in Search of Centre* (1996).

## References

- John Carroll, *The Existential Jesus* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007).
- Philip Drew, *The Masterpiece: Jørn Utzon A Secret Life* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant, 1999).
- Philip Drew, *Sydney Opera House Jørn Utzon* (London: Phaidon, 1995).
- Max Dupain and Morton Herman, *Georgian Architecture in Australia* (Sydney: U. Smith, 1963).
- Max Dupain and Rex Dupain, *Inside Sydney* (Frenchs Forest, NSW: New Holland Publishers, 2004).
- Max Dupain, *Beaches* (Sydney: Chapter & Verse, 2000).
- Helen Verity Hewitt, *Patrick White, Painter Manque: Painters, Paintings, and Their Influence on His Writing* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 2003).
- Vrasidas Karalis, *Recollections of Mr Manoly Lascaris* (Blackheath: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2008).
- Peter Murphy, 'The Art of Systems: The Cognitive-Aesthetic Culture of Portal Cities and the Development of Meta-Cultural Advanced Knowledge Economies' in David J. Pauleen (ed.) *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Knowledge Management* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007).
- Peter Murphy, 'American Civilization', *Thesis Eleven: Critical Theory and Historical Sociology* 81 (London: Sage, 2006), pp 64-92.
- Peter Murphy, 'Sealanes' in P. Beilharz and T. Hogan (eds) *Sociology—Place, Time and Division* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- Peter Murphy, 'Social Phusis and the Pattern of Creation', *Budhi: A Journal of Culture and Ideas* IX: 1 (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 2005), pp 39-74.
- Peter Murphy and David Roberts, *Dialectic of Romanticism: A Critique of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2004).
- Peter Murphy, 'Marine Reason', *Thesis Eleven* 67 (London: Sage, 2001), pp 11-38.
- Thomas C. Oden (ed.) *Parables of Kierkegaard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge, 1957).

Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956).

Patrick White, *Tree of Man* (New York: Viking Press, 1955)

Patrick White, *Riders in the chariot* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961).

Patrick White, *The solid mandala* (New York: Viking Press, 1966).

Patrick White, *The Twyborn affair* (London: Cape, 1979).

Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass: A Self Portrait* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Institutional religion was what the young Hegel had dubbed 'positive religion'.

<sup>2</sup> The intellectuals grouped around the Australian magazine *Quadrant* were among the most influential and interesting of the traditionalists.

<sup>3</sup> This view is most strongly associated today in Australia by the group of thinkers associated with the journal *Thesis Eleven* (Sage Publications) and the Thesis Eleven Centre for Cultural Sociology at La Trobe University in Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> The great Australian cultural sociologist, John Carroll, assays the enigmatic nature of the Gospel of St. Mark in his book, *The Existential Jesus* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007). Carroll emphasizes both the irrelevance of the church to the story of Jesus and the paradoxical message of the Jesus story: *For whoever wishes to save his soul will lose it, but whoever loses his own soul on account of me and my Story will save it* (p. 67).

<sup>5</sup> Australia has a federal system of government modeled on that of the United States.

<sup>6</sup> 'With hindsight, it seems inevitable, a blindingly obvious conjunction of architect, photographer and building: Joern Utzon, the Sydney Opera House and the man often cited as the world's greatest architectural photographer, the late Max Dupain. Indeed, as Utzon has recently written: "Max Dupain was the finest architectural photographer I have known. For the past 40 years I have kept his marvellous pictures of Sydney Opera House close at hand. They are a constant reminder of those wonderful years on Bennelong Point, when our dream of creating the Sydney Opera House was turned into reality.'" 'Seduced by the sails', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 4, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Max Dupain and Morton Herman, *Georgian architecture in Australia* (Sydney: U. Smith, 1963).

<sup>8</sup> On Loos' philosophy of architecture, see Peter Murphy and David Roberts, *Dialectic of Romanticism: A Critique of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2004),

<sup>9</sup> Max Dupain and Rex Dupain, *Inside Sydney* (Frenchs Forest, NSW: New Holland Publishers, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Philip Drew astutely observes that 'although Hughes would have vigorously denied it, somewhere inside him lurked a desire to be creative'. *The Masterpiece: Jørn Utzon A Secret Life* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant, 1999, p. 384.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Murphy, 'The Art of Systems: The Cognitive-Aesthetic Culture of Portal Cities and the Development of Meta-Cultural Advanced Knowledge Economies' in David J. Pauleen (ed.) *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Knowledge Management* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007), pp 35-63; 'Social Phusis and the Pattern of Creation', *Budhi: A Journal of Culture and Ideas* IX: 1 (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 2005), pp 39-74. On the American case, see Peter Murphy, 'American Civilization', *Thesis Eleven: Critical Theory and Historical Sociology* 81 (London: Sage, 2006), pp 64-92. The Australian case is examined in Peter Murphy, 'Sealanes' in P. Beilharz and T. Hogan (eds) *Sociology—Place, Time and Division* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 38-44.

<sup>12</sup> For a further discussion of this, see Peter Murphy, 'Marine Reason', *Thesis Eleven* 67 (London: Sage, 2001), pp 11-38.

<sup>13</sup> The paradox is personified in the character of Stan Parker in Patrick White's 1955 novel *Tree of Man*.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Hare, Alf Dubbo, Mordecai Himmelfarb, and Ruth Godbold in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961); Arthur Brown in *The Solid Mandala* (1966).

<sup>15</sup> On the nature of Wittgenstein's paradoxical and mystical picture language, see Peter Murphy and David Roberts, *Dialectic of Romanticism: A Critique of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> White's life-long interest in painting and painters is discussed in Helen Verity Hewitt, *Patrick White, Painter Manque: Painters, Paintings, and Their Influence on His Writing* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 2003). If White considered the medium of paint to be more direct, more powerful than words, and if he experimented in his writing with replicating painterly effects, he was also sensitive to the fact that the medium of painting itself was torn between surface and depth. White's life companion Manoly Lascaris described the tension this way: '...At the end of his life he became a Pythagorean! He rejected the Orphic enchantment with surfaces and colours which had earlier fascinated him, and took on the whirlwind of abstract geometries...' Vrasidas Karalis, *Recollections of Mr Manoly Lascaris* (Blackheath: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2008), p. 58.

---

<sup>17</sup> 'It was begun during the last of our eighteen years at Castle Hill. The painter Lawrence Daws had given me Jung's Psychology and Alchemy, which had a great influence on me. It projected me into my Solid Mandala. Jung's teaching also bolstered me up during a wavering of faith on realising I could not accept the sterility, the vulgarity, in many cases the bigotry of the Christian churches in Australia. Manoly [Lascaris, White's partner] seemed secure inside the structure of Eastern Orthodoxy. I had nothing from my upbringing in a kind of social C. of E. (a visiting card on the pew, clothes outgrown or no longer fashionable sent off to the jumble sale, a grateful rector and his wife calling to express gratitude for patronage.) So I evolved what I think Manoly has always seen as my non-religious or mystic circus.' Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass: A Self Portrait* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> A tireless proponent of Australian bohemia against the purportedly pious and philistine bourgeoisie was the artist Norman Lindsay (1879 - 1969).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas C. Oden (ed.) *Parables of Kierkegaard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>20</sup> On the philosophical history of the 'union of opposites', see Peter Murphy, *Civic Justice: From Ancient Greece to the Modern World* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge, 1957); *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956).

<sup>22</sup> *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961).

<sup>23</sup> Most memorably, the characters of Mordecai Himmelfarb in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith in *The Twyborn Affair* (1979).