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SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE

MEMO. TO COMPETITORS 1957

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OPLRA HOUSE COMMITTEE,
C/- DEPARTMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT,
PUBLIC WORKS BUILDING,
Cr. PHILLIP AND BRIDGE STREETS,
S Y D N E Y, N.S.W., AUSTRALIA.

6th February, 1957.

Opera House Competition: Memorandum to Competitors.

In accordance with clause 16 of the Conditions of the above-mentioned Competition, I enclose a copy of the Assessors' report.

Identification of the authors of the designs mentioned in the report is as follows:-

<u>No.</u>	<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Country.</u>
26	LAURENCE PRYNN	ENGLAND
28	JOSEPH MARZELLA, LEON LOSCHETTER, W.W. CUNNINGHAM, WALTER WEISSMAN, MELVIN BRUCHER, ROBERT GEDDES, GEORGE QUALLS	U.S.A.
55	S.W. MILBURN AND PARTNERS	ENGLAND
62	BOISSEVAIN AND OSMOND	ENGLAND
63	L.P. KOLLAR AND B.A. KORAB	AUSTRALIA
65	H.D. KRALL	ENGLAND.
81	PROFESSOR WALTER HAMER	GERMANY
139	JOHN F. METCALFE	ENGLAND
192	GEORGE SUBIOTTO	ENGLAND
200	PLENDERLEATH AND CLARK	SCOTLAND
218	JORN UTZON	DENMARK
220	HARRY SEIDLER, A.G.H. YOUNG, R.M. PARKER, R.G. FITZHARDINGE AND R.M. YOUNG	AUSTRALIA
226	ROBERT A. DUNSTER AND PETER S. STAUGHTON	ENGLAND
244	OTTO LEITNER	GERMANY
247	DAVID A.W. BRUNTON, BERNARD H. JOYCE, BRIAN MILDREN AND JOHN T. LILLY	AUSTRALIA
272	DEREK A. COBB AND WILHELM HOLZBAUER	U.S.A.
286	TERENCE BLISS AND MICHAEL LE PELLEY	ENGLAND.

Deposits lodged by competitors who have submitted bona-fide designs will be refunded as soon as possible.

Encl:

R.J. THOMSON,
Secretary and Executive Officer.

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AN INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION FOR A NATIONAL OPERA HOUSE AT BENNELONG
POINT, SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA.

ASSESSORS' REPORT.

INTRODUCTION:

The Conditions emphasise that it is unlikely that the winning scheme will be built without alteration or variation and that the main purpose of this Competition is to select a sound basic scheme and a competent architect. Because of this fact, the Conditions were deliberately set out in the simplest possible form. It was recognised that designers would be free to produce conceptions which might vary very considerably; but this was felt to be desirable insofar as it left the designer with the widest possible scope. This condition has, however, presented the Assessors with the problem of judging the relative merits of schemes in which many different assumptions have been made.

The Assessors, therefore, must state at the outset, that the majority of the designs submitted would have to be changed in some degree to meet the requirements of an Opera House in Sydney. They fully realise that a precise programme will be worked out at a later date by a Committee working in collaboration with the selected architect.

The Assessors have of necessity made their own assessment of the desirable standards of accommodation on the basis of the requirements outlined in the programme and the information that they have received from their technical advisers. They have satisfied themselves that these standards could be achieved in any of the schemes recommended for the awards. The Assessors have then selected a scheme which, in their view, would produce a building of merit.

PROCEDURE:

The Assessors have proceeded by considering all the schemes submitted from the point of view of siting, the internal circulation and planning, and finally from the point of view of whether the resulting building will have an architectural significance.

We have been impressed by the beauty and the exceptional possibilities of the site in relation to the Harbour and we are convinced that the silhouette of any proposed building is of the greatest importance. We feel strongly that a large and massive building, however practical, would be entirely unsuitable on this particular site.

We have noted the way in which the massing of these projects has been related to Bennelong Point. We have also analysed many schemes by tracing the areas of accommodation provided for component sections of each scheme and assessing these on a comparative basis.

Our general comments are as follows:-

1. From our examination of the traffic circulation and car approach, we have formed the view that, in general, the number of cars and the pressure of this circulation has been under-estimated.

/2. The

2. The accommodation proposed for stage purposes has varied very considerably. Many competitors have devised ingenious methods of producing a flexible arrangement to meet the needs of orchestra, drama, opera, ballet, etc. The stage arrangements, both with regard to areas and the heights of stage towers, etc., are in many cases over-ambitious. We feel convinced that the special requirements of the stage in Sydney could be met by an adequate but economical arrangement.
3. The proportion of space allocated to foyers, bars and general circulation within the building differs enormously in the schemes submitted. We have made an assessment of what might be reasonable for this particular building and we consider that many of the proposals made by competitors have been too ambitious.

AWARDS:

As a result of these considerations, and the unanimous decision of the Assessors, we have made the following awards:-

Design awarded the First Premium - No. 218.

Design awarded the Second Premium - No. 28.

Design awarded the Third Premium - No. 62.

We also wish to make special mention of a number of schemes.

GENERAL COMMENT:

Design awarded the First Premium:

The drawings submitted for this scheme are simple to the point of being diagrammatic. Nevertheless, as we have returned again and again to the study of these drawings, we are convinced that they present a concept of an Opera House which is capable of becoming one of the great buildings of the world. We consider this scheme to be the most original and creative submission. Because of its very originality, it is clearly a controversial design. We are, however, absolutely convinced about its merits.

In the first place, it has the merit of great simplicity of arrangement.

A massive base emphasises the character of Bennelong Point. The auditoria are arranged like Greek Theatres in this rising base and are approached either underground from cars or externally along a magnificent ceremonial approach. This approach and the auditoria steps form a rising plateau in which the highest point of seating is about 40 feet above the ground. This conception solves by elimination, all the complex needs of escape which form so much dead space in a multi-storeyed building.

/Within . .

Within this plateau, are the workshops, the rehearsal rooms and the dressing rooms. The workshops areas are adequate and well placed in relation to the stages. They are placed in positions which would allow problems of sound insulation to be effectively solved in the developed scheme. The common foyer for actors, leading out as it does to the lower level of Bennelong Point, is well conceived, but we recognise that the dressing room and rehearsal areas would need re-arrangement.

The great merit of this building is the unity of its structural expression. One of the most difficult problems of opera house design is to relate the stage tower to the separate and surrounding buildings and this becomes of particular importance on this exceptional site. The solution suggested in this scheme is that the two auditoria should be roofed by a series of interlocking shell vaults in which the high stage is only one of a series of separate shells.

This creates a striking architectural composition admirably suited to Bennelong Point. The white sail-like forms of the shell vaults relate as naturally to the Harbour as the sails of its yachts. It is difficult to think of a better silhouette for this peninsula. The dynamic form of this vaulted shape contrasts with the buildings which form its background and gives a special significance to the project in the total landscape of the Harbour.

It should perhaps be stated that the technique of building shell vaults has now been developed in many countries of the world; in particular in the United States, Italy, England, Germany and Brazil. The use of this form of construction seems to us to be particularly appropriate.

There are in this plan many points of which we are bound to comment. There is, for example, the author's conception that the walls surrounding these auditoria could be entirely opened up. He has stressed this point, not only in his report, but has emphasised it in the way in which he has made his drawings. In our view, for the majority of performances, the movable walls which he has shown on section would need to be closed. This would give a plan in which each auditoria is surrounded by two sets of walls and in which the stage is insulated by heavy construction. When closed, four separate walls would separate the auditoria and we consider that these could be designed to a satisfactory standard of sound insulation.

We have confirmed with our advisers that adequate stages could be provided within this scheme.

Whilst this scheme substantially conforms to the Conditions laid down, we are aware that it is open to many points of detailed criticism and a number of corrections would have to be made, but we feel that, at this stage, the general breadth of the imaginative concept is an over-riding consideration.

It is perhaps not unimportant to mention that we have had approximate estimates made for all the schemes which have been given places and several others in addition. The scheme which we now recommend for the first premium is, in fact, the most economical scheme on the basis of our estimates.

/Design

Design awarded the Second Premium:

In this scheme again the building forms a complete architectural entity. The circular plan and ascending spiral form of structure which, although heavy and massive, would form a total mass well suited to its position on Bennelong Point. The author conceives his building set on a simple spacious area of paving.

There would be some difficulty in bringing an audience to a covered entrance but once at the entrance they would move along an ascending spiral into the main entrance lobby serving both halls, the lounges, the bars and restaurants which follow each other in an easy and natural sequence.

The initial disadvantage of any spiral form of this kind is a possibility of restriction and limitation of plan arrangement, but we must acknowledge that in this scheme the areas of the plan are extremely well arranged in relation to each other. The administrative offices, workshops, kitchens, rehearsal rooms and back-stage dressing rooms, etc., all have their appropriate positions. The main criticism arises in the limitations of the stages themselves. These, we think, would have to be changed in some ways to meet particular requirements.

Whilst the massing is good and the architecture robust, we feel some doubt about the heaviness of form which characterises the structure and detail of this building.

Design awarded the Third Premium:

This scheme proposes that the two halls should be designed as separate buildings. We have an initial criticism of proposals of this kind on the grounds that they involve a duplication of back-stage arrangements, many of which can be used in a flexible way when the stages are brought into closer proximity. We also consider that the stage provision is over-ambitious. But we have given a third premium to this scheme first of all because it avoids the difficulties of siting which are involved in a single massive building and because it forms, in our view, a simple arrangement of buildings designed with a human scale and well placed around a pedestrian promenade.

We have not been called upon by the Conditions to award any special commendations; we feel, however, that a certain number of schemes have raised points of special interest and we would like to mention these as follows:-

We first of all want to mention the very skilful planning of Scheme No. 63. Other schemes which we have noted for various reasons are Nos. 26, 55, 65, 81, 139, 192, 200, 220, 226, 244, 247, 272 and 285.

Signed:

H. INGHAM ASHWORTH

JOHN LESLIE MARTIN

COEDEN PARKES

EERO SAARINEN

January, 1957.