

Can Lis

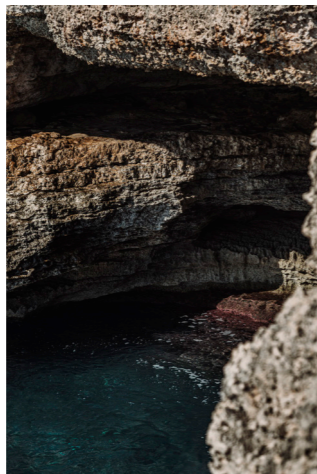


A building of poetic beauty on a raised site, overlooking the water. This description applies to two very different buildings designed by Danish architect Jørn Utzon: one, the Sydney Opera House, one of the greatest buildings of the 20th century, which has come to symbolise an entire country. The other is Can Lis, a private, unassuming abode on the southern coast of Mallorca that Utzon built for his own use. As architect Piers Taylor, who has made an upcoming film about the house, discovers, the uniting thread to both is Utzon's unwavering sensitivity to place, nature and the human experience of buildings.



In many ways, it is extraordinary that two adjacent buildings in Jørn Utzon's career could be the elaborate and very public Sydney Opera House and the incredibly simple and very private Can Lis in Mallorca, and yet it is entirely fitting. Extraordinary because an architect's career trajectory after designing one major cultural building is usually to capitalise on this and take on something of a similar scale – witness, for example, Richard Rogers with the Lloyd's building hot on the heels of the career-defining Pompidou Centre. Entirely fitting because, in the case of the Sydney Opera House, how on earth can a building like that be followed, except by something utterly unlike it, which at face value Can Lis is? Instead of billowing, curved-concrete, sail-like roofs in the centre of a major city, designed to encourage people to flock to it and see it from many viewpoints, Can Lis is low-lying and absolutely personal. However, once you scratch the surface, the two buildings are remarkably similar, in that they are both materially rich, exquisite, considered accumulations of separate pavilions that together sit raised on a plinth looking out to sea, offering both prospect and refuge.

I was first immersed in Utzon's work as a student in Sydney in the early 1990s, where his legacy loomed large – his built and unbuilt work, but also his sensibilities and ethos that had infused a generation of architects from Glenn Murcutt and Richard Leplastrier to Peter Stutchbury, all of whom owe Utzon a debt in terms



of providing a roadmap out of the straitjacket of academic modernism. Utzon had shown how a new, more contextual architecture could emerge, one that went way beyond the international style to be truly informed by its climate, culture and place.

Although Utzon's relationship with Mallorca predates his fleeing Sydney, Can Lis formed a new chapter in Utzon's life and work. Utzon was bruised by his time in Sydney (he quit the opera house project in 1966 before it was completed due to disagreements with the New South Wales government). To a degree, Can Lis is a direct response to this time in that it is a retreat from public gaze and from working on complex, large-scale urban public buildings. Utzon hated how the government had treated him and his vision for the opera house, but he had loved Sydney. When I first went to Can Lis, I was struck by how the landscape there is remarkably similar to that around Sydney – in particular the Heads, where the cliffs meet the water. Utzon had already designed several houses in Sydney (which were never built) and Can Lis is strongly related to these: a large volume broken down into small elements that each engage with the site in a distinct way and create spaces between them.

Utzon designed Can Lis for himself and his wife (by this stage, his children were older). Unlike the opera house, it is resolutely private. It is bound by a solid wall to the ►





east, away from prying eyes, but absolutely open to the west, the sea and the horizon. The arrangement of the house is at once formal and informal, sitting between high and low architecture. Although deeply rooted in modernism and conceptual ideas of spatial purity, Can Lis is also profoundly responsive to the vernacular buildings in Mallorca that are also often made from rough-hewn locally quarried Marés sandstone.

Perhaps the most distinct gesture in Can Lis is the breaking down of the separate aspects of life into different discrete elements. There is a courtyard that deals almost exclusively with arrival and the revealing of the sea in a theatrical manner, glimpsed through a moon-shaped opening, with public aspects in separate pavilions on one side and the more private on the other. Each of these public and private elements is further broken down: a bedroom pavilion for Utzon and his wife, with separate (almost monastic) cells for each of them and a further pavilion for Utzon's study, offering neatly articulated indoor and outdoor areas. The exterior space was set up as somewhere he could receive architectural visitors, while his indoor studio was a sanctuary to draw and watch the sea and the weather.

The centrepiece is a formal double-height living room, with framed (yet frameless) panoramic views, a single high-level westerly aperture allowing the afternoon light to wash the hand-hewn stone and exaggerate its textures. Like the other spaces, the furniture is fixed, controlling to a degree how the rooms are used. If this seems overly dogmatic and restrictive, there is also a delicious looseness in how the house has been adapted, developing and softening the original diagram. This is



initially expressed in how the kitchen was extended by Utzon during construction, but also in how, 20 years after it was completed, small pitched tiled roofs were added by Utzon to finally solve the leaking issues that had plagued the house since it was built. These roofs make the house even more vernacular and soften further the purity of the initial idea. They also make the building better: showing how, as we age, we relax, moderate the stance we might have taken as ideologically driven younger architects and truly embrace the idea that, instead of architecture and life being separate, they are utterly bound up in one another.

I went to Can Lis to make a film about the house for the Utzon Center in Denmark, which will be released in spring 2023. I hadn't expected it to be so revealing about Utzon – who he was, where he had come from, what he prioritised in his life and work and where he went next. After Can Lis became too public, but also perhaps too inflexible to live in every day, the architect moved to Can Feliz, another house he built for himself in Mallorca. Can Feliz is more conventional, and maybe more comfortable, but it is Can Lis's uncompromising relationship with the elements, however, that has stayed with me and where I'd be quite happy to grow old. ■

