The Correspondent

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UTZON UNTOLD

KUWAIT NATIONAL ASSEMBLY: THE MAKING OF A MASTERPIECE
Jan Utzon greets me warmly, even in his native Denmark he is strikingly tall. Looking much younger than his seventy-plus years his limber frame and sparkling eyes are remarkably reminiscent of his father, Jørn, with whom he worked so closely throughout his life.

Jørn Utzon died in 2008 having won almost every architectural prize and accolade, and having been lauded for his visionary designs. Columbia University Professor, Kenneth Frampton, wrote in the Harvard Design Magazine “Nobody can study the future of architecture without Jørn Utzon.”

But while his name will forever be synonymous with his inimitable Sydney Opera House in Australia, it is the great sweeping strokes of Kuwait’s National Assembly that show his architectonic craftsmanship and environmental sympathies most eloquently: a building that, when it first opened, epitomized the simplicity and the sensitivity of Utzon’s understated brilliance as much as his love of the Middle East.

Even before it was completed, the late British architectural critic Stephen Gardiner wrote “When finished, it will be one of the great buildings of the world”.

In 1968, when the competition to design the Kuwait National Assembly was being held, Jan was just starting out on his own career in architecture in Denmark; he had already been working with his father on the groundbreaking design for Bagsværd Church in the outskirts of the Danish capital. Jørn invited Oktay Nayman, a top Turkish architect with whom he’d worked in Sydney, to make the drawings for the competition proposal that
he would ultimately win; he asked Jan to make the first model of the Kuwait National Assembly. Speaking to me from Istanbul Oktay says that “From the first sketches, so simple and so beautiful a concept, I thought it was a winner”. He speaks warmly of Jan’s charisma that in many ways, has been inherited by the following generations of creatively-minded Utzons, “especially Jan”. He recalls Jan’s own description of the design for Kuwait as ‘the art of noble simplicity’.

To formalize the project, Jan flew to Kuwait to meet H.H the Amir. He and Jan were met at Kuwait airport by Geoff Pollitt a young British engineer who had been hired to manage the build. Pollitt warmly recalls the two tall Danes towering over the flowing white dishdashas in the Arrivals Hall. Though Jan and Jørn would work together on the National Assembly from the early designs of the 70s through to the National Assembly’s completion in 1982, it was Jan who did the traveling to and from Kuwait. Pollitt tells how while driving the guests to the Sheraton Hotel in Kuwait City Jan yelled for the driver to stop on a busy roundabout in chaotic traffic. Jan leapt from the car and returned within minutes, clutching a large pebble grabbed from the side of the road. Taking out a pen he signed the rock and held it up to his audience jubilantly “That will be the color of the National Assembly building!”

Geoff Pollitt later confesses that there was no way to control the color consistency of the hundreds of precast concrete elements that were being fabricated on site. In the end, the entire building was subjected to the indignity of an all-over whitewash. Over lunch, in barely-accented English, Jan describes his father’s upbringing in the northern Danish town of Aalborg and how creativity coursed through two previous generations of Utzons.

It was Aage Utzon, Jan's father, a highly respected naval engineer who brought his family to live in Aalborg. Aage Utzon was known for his thoroughness and attention to detail – a virtue keenly embraced by the later generations of Utzons, not just in architecture or drawings, but in the textiles, ceramics and glassware produced by other family members. This meticulous nature could be found in the boat-building techniques and scale models that Aage Utzon created which would influence Jan immensely. It was Aage who helped Jørn build the first model of Sydney Opera House.

Aage Utzon’s voluptuous, hand-built sailing boats can be seen at Aalborg's Utzon Center, surrounded by endless displays of Utzons’ drawings, models and photographs, as well as regular seasonal exhibits. Lasse Andersen, the Center’s Director, points out the delicate curves of the boat’s prow and turns to a small scale-model of Sydney Opera House. The shape of the Opera House roof is unmistakably a reflection and repetition of the shape of the front of the boat, mounted vertically.

The family had grown up surrounded by nature and Jan and Jørn’s works are deeply influenced by landscape. Though Jørn was not academically gifted, he had barely scraped through his school exams, he quickly became a talented draughtsman. On a trip to the Utzon Center in Aalborg I reflect how the Utzons’ home town shared striking parallels with the culture and traditions of Kuwait, both places were rooted in historic seafaring traditions, shipbuilding and shellfish, especially oysters, shells of which have been found on 8th and 9th century archeological sites in Kuwait.

The tall windows at the entrance of Kuwait National Assembly building allowed the turquoise sea to be seen and Kuwait’s strong sunlight to flood into the building’s main central corridor. Stephen Gardiner claimed this was no coincidence: “...Here there is an echo of the sea; the Kuwaitis lifeline for survival”.

Even in his some of his early sketches of the Kuwait National Assembly Utzon incorporated the sea, always connecting man and nature. When Jan visited, he often rented a boat to view the site from the water.

Jørn Utzon’s work in Australia and his controversial early departure from the Sydney Opera House project in 1966 produced “extraordinary malicious publicity and negative criticism” according to American architect Frank Gehry, who went on to praise Utzon for persevering through the vitriolic backlash “to build a building that changed the image of an entire country.”

When the Opera House was ultimately finished, it was evident that many of those tiny, but technically brilliant details of Utzonian genius — such as the original plan for the internal acoustics—had been sorely overlooked.

After what Jørn himself termed “the scandal” of Sydney, the Utzons relocated to Hawaii. In 1968 Jørn was encouraged by respected British architect Sir Leslie Martin—who coincidentally had been one of the judges of the Sydney competition, to consider entering a similar competition to design Kuwait’s National Assembly. Australia’s loss would be Kuwait’s gain.

Jørn Utzon’s innate curiosity in different cultures, styles of building and especially vernacular architecture, added to his Scandinavian roots and work in Aalborg shipyards, gave him a vocabulary unlike any other. His early wanderings through Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Iran and his impromptu foray into China in the late 1950s (where he jumped off an official tour and ventured solo into the rarely seen Chinese hinterland) would all profoundly inspire and influence his work, including the National Assembly. Today, perched across from the glittering shores of the Gulf on Kuwait City’s main coastal artery, Utzon’s gloriously serried columns that form the National Assembly’s unmissable exterior façade are juxtaposed with an avenue of interior columns that reflect Chinese bamboo, sliced so as to create a crescent-shape cut-out at its tip. Immense bottle-shaped pillars appear invisibly interlocked with an undulating precast concrete canopy that crowns the porte-cochere, the roof being inspired by the flowing fabric of Bedouin tents.

The many modular elements that give the National Assembly’s footprint a mosaic-like effect reflect a concept that has been traditionally used widely across the Far East, South East Asia and the Middle East, where extended families live in shared quarters and spaces, connected to courtyards, pools or gardens. This is the Utzon genius. In an interview Jørn Utzon explained that large structures were “much more easily and naturally managed by building complexes which are divided up into different entities”, and told of...
his inspiration in part, by the work of the great Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto. This same modular design interspersed with courtyards and colonnades can also be seen in the two homes Jørn built for his family on the Spanish island of Mallorca.

In the Jørn Utzon Logbook, Volume IV Prefab, published by Edition Bløndal, Jørn Utzon underlines how the National Assembly in Kuwait needed to incorporate local traditions. “And as a guideline for Jan and me” he wrote, “it was obvious that it had to be the Arabs’ way of life and customs in this place”.

To that effect he based the plan of the Kuwait National Assembly on the plan of a Middle Eastern ‘souq’ or market whereby a central axis, or avenue, would form the spine of a grid, from which smaller ‘streets’ radiated at right angles. Offices consisting of a series of square modules would be punctuated with small courtyards.

Jørn understood the strength of the Kuwait sun, how shadow was an important element of any structure and how regular repetitions of simple geometric shapes could produce a further dimension to surfaces when sun, or shadow were brought into play. Thus Kuwait National Assembly brought together a vast array of influences and building techniques that crept into later projects such as the Paustian furniture showroom and restaurant in Copenhagen where we are taking lunch. From the restaurant I find myself facing a strangely familiar white concrete arcade comprising of tall regular columns and a high-vaulted, precast concrete canopy.

Yet Jørn Utzon’s real passion came from the people, affirms Jan over lunch. He saw the National Assembly building being about the people not just serving a function. Jørn was an architect who was above all inspired by humanity.

Since its inception Utzon’s National Assembly in Kuwait has seen a series of modifications and serious damage during the Iraq invasion. Ever the pragmatist, Jørn himself knew that change would be inevitable, asserts Sheridan Burke, who works with Jan and a small team to conserve the Utzonian legacy in Sydney. The team laid down certain principles in Sydney to ensure the Utzon vision would be honored and the spirit of his work retained. In terms of its legacy, Kuwait National Assembly was not simply a gift to Kuwait but a timeless contribution to global architecture that exemplified the brilliance of Utzon and the farsightedness of Kuwait’s leadership.

Almost a century after his birth, the Utzon legacy lives on in Jørn’s children and grandchildren, who are continuing that creative bloodline.

To this day, the Kuwait National Assembly remains an outstanding piece of work and stands together with Utzon’s most innovative masterpieces: Bagsværd church in Denmark and the Sydney Opera house in Australia. The majesty of the Kuwait National Assembly is tangible both inside and out: the powerful use of the light, the sea and Utzon’s beloved linear repetition.

In an echo of Gardiner’s prophecy many would conclude that not only is this one of the great buildings of the world but, in its original form, it was quite simply, the greatest. A building that encapsulated a love for a region and a profound respect for its inhabitants.

When finished, it will be one of the great buildings of the world.

- British Architect and Critic
  Stephen Gardiner
Here there is an echo of the sea; the Kuwaitis lifeline for survival.

- British Architect and Critic, Stephen Gardiner

“Nobody can study the future of architecture without Jørn Utzon.”

- Ware Professor of Architecture Columbia University New York, Kenneth Frampton
Geoff Pollitt (Chartered Engineer; C. Eng; M.I.Struct.E) is a British-born engineer who arrived in Kuwait in September 1978 to work on the Kuwait National Assembly, a project that design aficionados regard as a global architectural icon. He ended up staying over 35 years. This is how he became part of architectural history.

“It was the opportunity of a lifetime to work with Jørn Utzon, the famous Danish architect who some years earlier, had designed the Sydney Opera House in Australia. To me, Sydney was, and of course, still is, one of the world’s most beautiful iconic pieces of architecture. It was Utzon’s far-reaching project, the Kuwait National Assembly (KNA) that brought me to Kuwait.

Over the years, what started as a professional relationship would develop into a deep, personal friendship initially with Jørn, and then with his son Jan, whose role was to implement the design through the entire construction phase. I had convinced my wife and twin daughters to come with me to Kuwait just for the duration of the project which was planned to be 32 months ... almost 40 years later I am still in Kuwait and my family has grown up here.

My initial role on the Kuwait National Assembly was as Assistant Resident Engineer, then later, Resident Engineer, for the construction on-site and off-site of the many huge, precast concrete elements of which the Assembly is composed. On leaving the UK, I first travelled to Zurich to meet with Jan Utzon and the Structural Engineer for the project, Max Walt and his team. I was briefed on the different aspects of the building and got to grips with the complex design of the building and the cutting-edge construction methods, of which I had very little experience at the time.

The day after arriving I started work in the Ministry of Public Works (MPW) offices in Kuwait City. While waiting for all project drawings to be delivered to Kuwait from the architect in Denmark and structural engineers in Switzerland, I was asked by the MPW Project Engineer if I would review the structural drawings for the Kuwait Grand Mosque. Upon a cursory review of hundreds of drawings I discovered a number of errors in the structural details. My report was sent to the designer who received my report warmly and was extremely grateful for my input.

The drawings for the Assembly Building eventually arrived in crates from Denmark and Switzerland. My first task was to catalog all the drawings to ensure they were complete. As well as representing Utzon, my job description also included representing the Ministry of Public Works (MPW), with whom I would build up an enjoyable relationship.

The majority of the building superstructure consisted of precast concrete columns and beams with all structural connections visible. The featured columns supporting the curved roof beams over the Assembly Hall and the Public Square adjacent to the Gulf Road were to be formed from individual variable-shaped precast elements.

In those days Gulf Road was right on the edge of the shore, so the site looked directly onto the water. Jørn Utzon capitalized on this amazing location where, when completed, the tall columns of the façade would be mirrored in the waters of the Arabian Gulf, and the bright light from the sea would flood through into the interior through tall windows.

Jørn Utzon had travelled extensively in China, the Middle East and North Africa and had taken much of his inspiration from indigenous architecture he had seen in the Middle Eastern and Persian souqs and the deserts of North Africa, where he had photographed the sloping, canva-sent roofs that would ultimately give him the idea for the Assembly’s iconic roof - except that we had to recreate these ideas in precast concrete.

The huge curved roof beams were cast in concrete in-situ. All precast elements for the project and for the roof beams were cast using giant steel molds which were so huge they dwarfed the men working on them. Each element was made from first pouring concrete into the steel mold, then shifting it into place using a special track.

Following the erection of the columns and the curved roof beams, a procedure known as post-tensioning was carried out. In layman terms, this technique is performed by steel cables passed through the individual elements, tensioned by hydraulic jacks and carefully anchored - so all the elements act as one unit.

Although post-tensioning is used to fabricate individual structural elements, to my knowledge these structural design features had not been used before in Kuwait or in the Middle East for building structures. This challenging build, originally planned for the duration of 32 months, actually took six and a half years, due to the addition of a multi-story car park.

It would teach me a range of complex technical construction methods and cross-cultural communication skills that I still use today.

My experience on the KNA was a life-changing experience at the time. The assignments I went on to do in Kuwait were not just of greater magnitude but much more prestigious, giving me great job satisfaction. Moving to Kuwait is something I never regretted.
I believe the key benefit for any young engineer fortunate enough to work in Kuwait is the opportunity one is granted to gain valuable experience of the entire project throughout its life cycle.

Following my tenure on the National Assembly building, I was appointed Assistant Project Manager for the Kuwait University Building Program. Upon completion of the project, I joined a major consulting office Assistant Technical Manager until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, when I relocated to Bahrain as Technical Manager of the consultant practice. After my time in Bahrain I moved back home to Kuwait where I was appointed Resident Engineer for the Kuwait University Administration and Library building.

During the next years, my career brought me numerous exciting projects, including the Kuwait University, Gulf Investment Headquarters, Hilton Resort, Arraya and Courtyard Marriott, Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) building and Mowasat Hospital and Clinic. I also worked as a Project Manager for the Amiri Diwan and Bayan Palace as part of a consortium. More recently I was Project Manager on a project known as the Kuwait Compensation for Environmental Remediation and was involved in the updating of the Kuwait Airport Master Plan. These are just a small sample of the kind of opportunities that working here in Kuwait has offered me both as a Project Engineer, and as Technical Manager in one of the largest of the major Kuwaiti design consultant practices.

Kuwait has now become home. There is a great social life with other expatriates and I have many close Kuwaiti friends. Working in Kuwait for almost four decades has given me many business contacts and permitted me to develop professional working relationships with colleagues in the Ministries, local institutions, developers, local and international consultants and local contractors; looking back I am very satisfied with my career and all the jobs I have been involved in.

Having said that, I have also witnessed international consultants who are reluctant to pursue projects in Kuwait due to the bureaucracy and constant delays and postponement of planned projects. From my discussions with the Kuwait Municipality, the Consultant Selection Committee (CSC) and the MPW, I have been told the introduction of new international companies is always welcome; however a good deal of patience must be practiced by these new companies. Consultants from overseas need to embrace the fact that projects although planned, do not happen overnight. Even after a project is awarded, it could still take up to a year or more for the project to actually start due to the bureaucracy and lengthy government procedures.

Hopefully the authorities can endeavor to resolve these issues in time to encourage more new international talent to bring their respective expertise and innovative designs to Kuwait, which will further enhance the nation’s reputation for cutting-edge architecture.

When I left England all those years ago I could not have imagined the opportunities that lay ahead. With courage, expertise and patience any good engineer will find that Kuwait is one of the most dynamic nations in terms of its engineering and construction opportunities and that life here can be extremely enjoyable.”