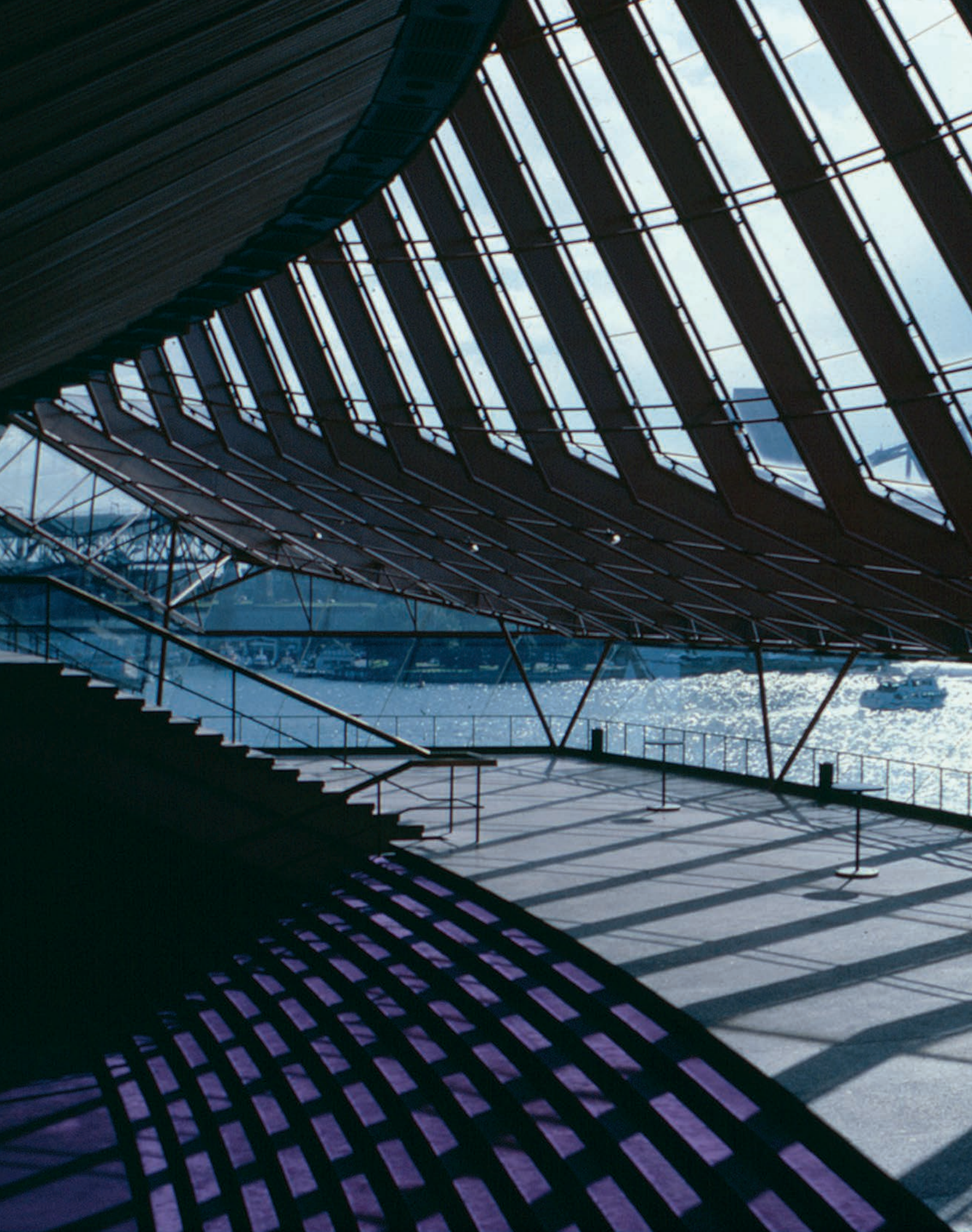




## SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE

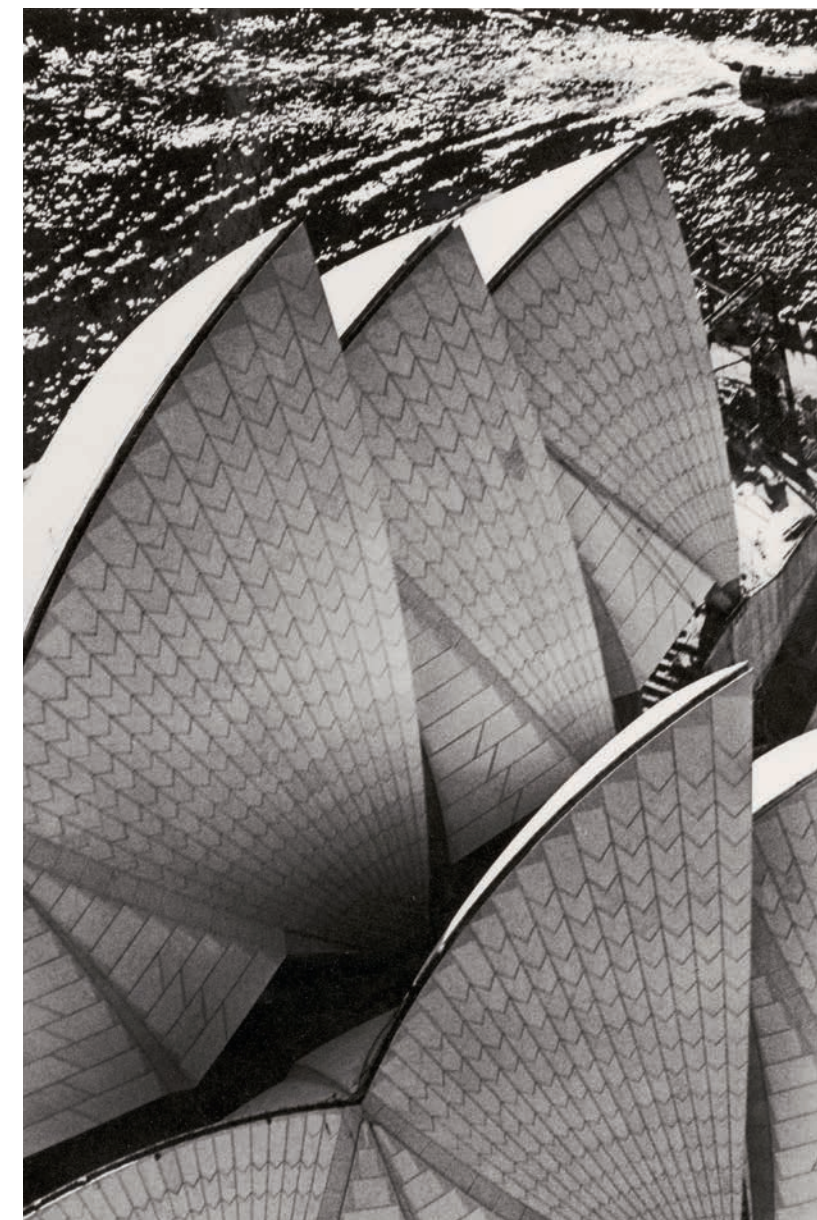
Imagine listening to Beethoven's magnificent Fifth Symphony in the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House with more than 2,000 other people. This space has been shared by many performers, not just the resident Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Above the stage, the high, vaulted ceiling rises 22 metres through a layer of 18 acoustic reflectors, past the world's largest mechanical action pipe organ to the astonishing giant sails. Here, we sit within one of the greatest indoor performing spaces on earth. Beneath us the foundations contain a raft of other rooms and facilities, enabling the full complexity of modern entertainment and artistic support. Even further below on the Bennelong peninsula, jutting out into the harbour waters, there are fragments of the past from before Europeans, from the days of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. This land has seen gatherings of many peoples through time, sharing experiences, joyous voices and the sounds of music. It brings a diversity of culture together, linking ancient lives with modern creations, all within an exceptional architectural monument.





**THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE** was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2007 as a masterpiece of twentieth-century architecture. Covering just 5.8 hectares, it is the most recognisable building in Australia. In nominating the site, the Australian Government noted that the design by brilliant Danish architect Jørn Utzon 'represents an extraordinary interpretation and response' to the breathtaking setting of Sydney Harbour. Opened in 1973, the building is made of three sections of interlocking, shell-like vaults that house seven performance spaces and a restaurant. Centred on a large terraced podium, the complex continues to function as a venue for diverse performances.

The history of the Sydney Opera House is almost as famous as the design. In 1956, the New South Wales Government, led by Premier Joseph Cahill, announced an international competition to design a new opera house and appointed an independent jury to assess entries. The competition brief was very open and neither set extensive parameters nor provided a cost limit. The design required, essentially, two performance halls, one for opera and the other for symphony concerts. Over 900 architects registered and 233 submitted designs (all anonymous). The outstanding concept drawings submitted by 38-year-old Utzon were chosen unanimously, a decision the Australian Government described in its World Heritage nomination as 'unexpected, bold and visionary'. At that stage, no structural engineer had been consulted and it was not clear whether these design ideas could actually be put into practice. Novel engineering techniques and materials were required and it was fortunate that an excellent partnership developed between Utzon, engineer Ove Arup and others to bring the Opera House to fruition over the following 16 years and beyond. It was not plain sailing. Disagreement over cost, and media criticism, led the new Robert Askin government to force out Utzon when the building was only partly completed. Fortunately, the continuing work by architect Peter Hall mostly followed Utzon's original design parameters, enabling its successful



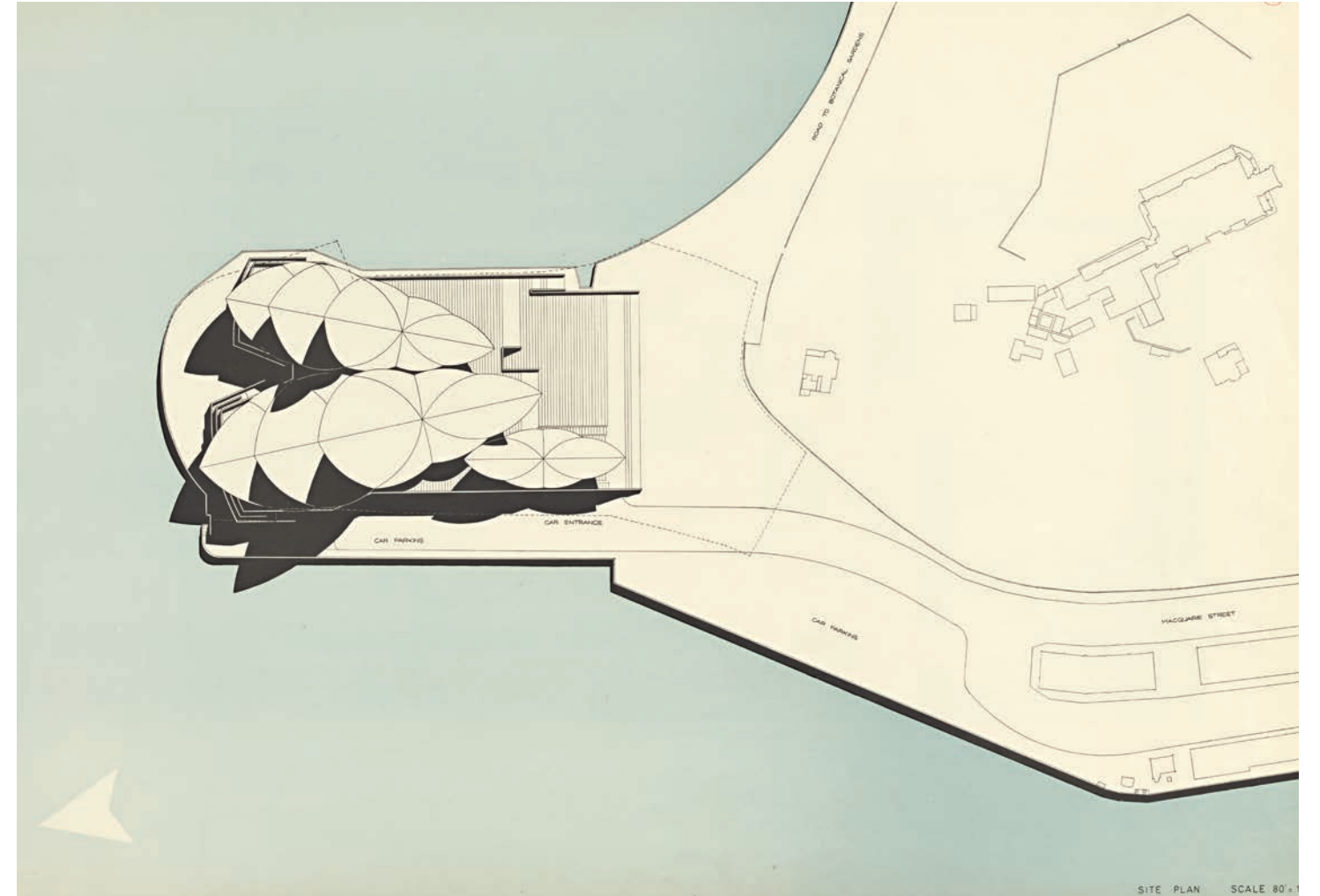
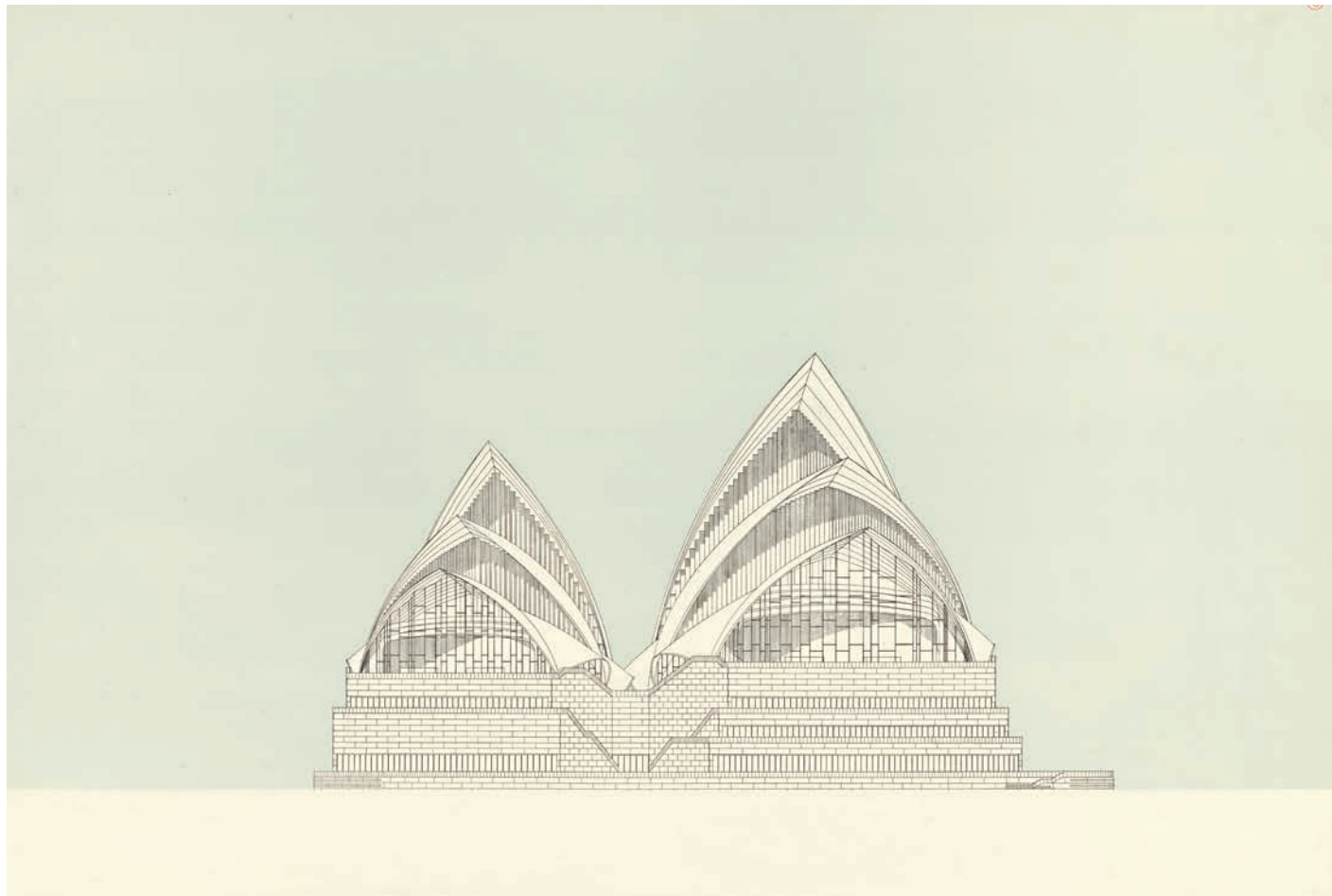
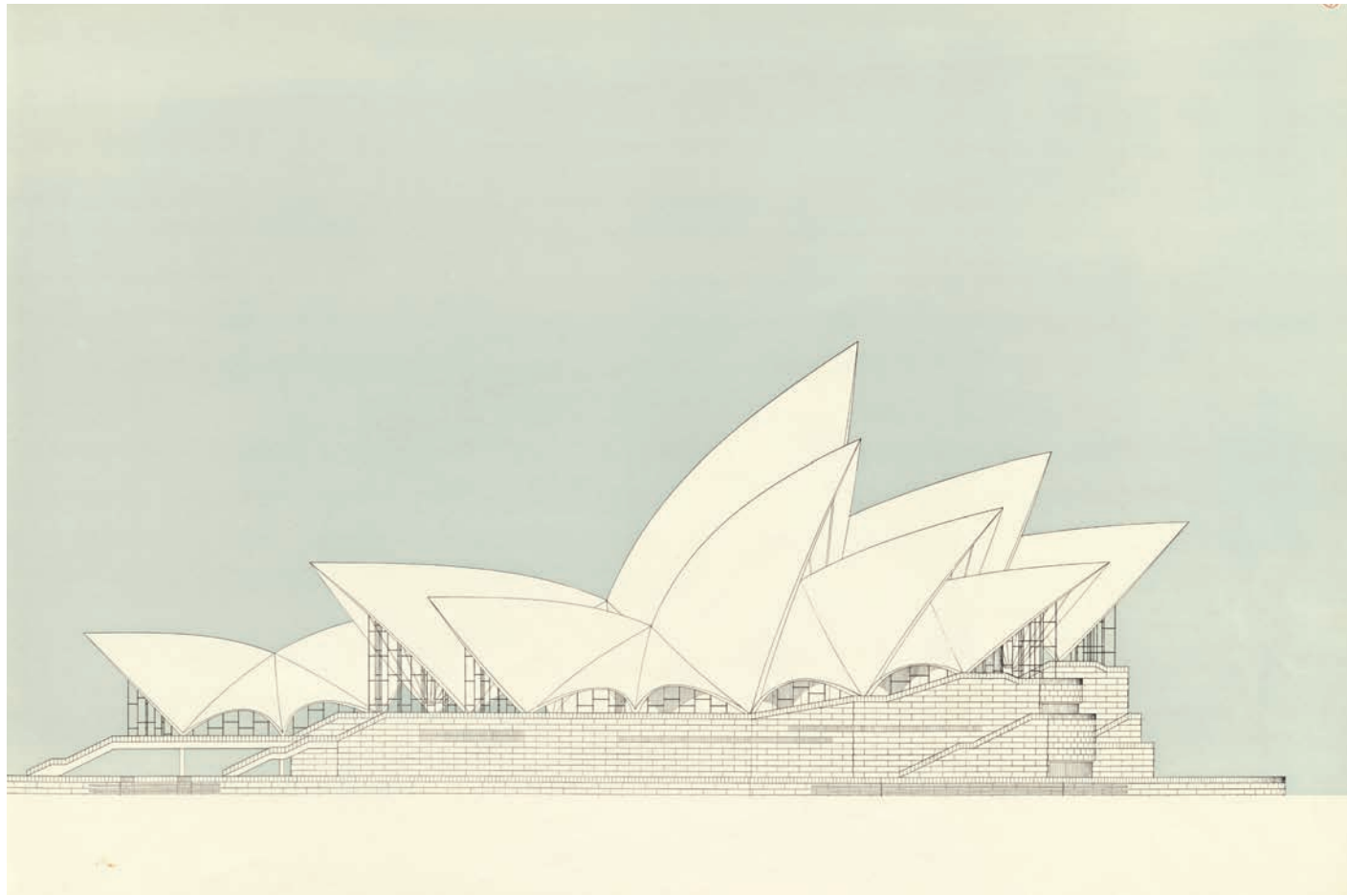
completion. Utzon was re-engaged as Sydney Opera House architect in 1999 and has since completed new works that have brought great benefits to the building.

OPPOSITE: Shadows criss-cross the harbour-side foyer of the concert hall.

ABOVE: An aerial view of the world-famous sails shows the distinctive pattern of the pearly white roof tiles.

PREVIOUS PAGES: Sydney Opera House as seen from the water.





Utzon's original plans for the Opera House design competition, showing east (opposite, top) and north (opposite, bottom) elevations, as well as the plan for the whole site (above).





The nomination document offers a poetic description:

*[The Sydney Opera House] is a daring and visionary experiment that has had an enduring influence on the emergent architecture of the late 20th century and beyond ... The forecourt is a vast open space from which people ascend the stairs to the podium ... The podium steps, which lead up from the forecourt to the two main performance venues, are a great ceremonial stairway nearly 100 metres wide ... The final shape of the shells was derived from the surface of a single imagined sphere ... [They] are faced in glazed off-white tiles while the podium is clad in earth-toned, reconstituted granite panels ... The outstanding success of the building today is in large part due to the way it is grounded in the site: 'It appears to rise out of the ground as a landform almost as though it were a geological extension of the earth itself'.*

The site of the building, Bennelong Point, protrudes into the harbour from the botanic gardens just east of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, guaranteeing a beautiful setting. People have gathered here for thousands of years. Shell middens found in the area confirm that it was used by local Indigenous people before Europeans arrived. The peninsula, known as Tubowgule by the Gadigal, is a place where generations of Aboriginal people have feasted, sung, danced and told stories. The British, who arrived in 1788 to colonise the area, used Tubowgule to confine their cattle and horses, and renamed it as Cattle Point. Colonists crushed middens from around the harbour, including Tubowgule, and mixed the remnants with water to make a lime slurry to use as mortar. The promontory thus became known as Limeburners' Point. The present name honours Woollarwarre Bennelong, an Aboriginal man who was kidnapped by Governor Phillip and became a trusted advisor on traditional ways, a diplomat and peacemaker.

Utzon's design intentionally lifted the performance halls well above the surrounding environment. The tops of the vaulted shells soar above ground level and the terraces function as a stepped access to the entrances. This approach is partially inspired by Mayan architecture, in which living areas are elevated eight metres or more above the surrounds. The terraces create a podium from which there are views across the harbour. The two main halls sit alongside each other, their long axes running more or less north-south. The larger was meant to be the opera hall but the Australian Broadcasting Commission argued for it to become the symphony concert hall, with the smaller hall being re-designated for opera. There are over 1,000 rooms in the complex, almost all of which are beneath the podium, including all the control facilities for the performance halls. After he was re-engaged, Utzon redesigned the reception hall, celebrating rather than hiding the ceiling's concrete beams and designing a bright, wall-length tapestry to enhance acoustics.

The Sydney Opera House continues to be one of the busiest performing arts centres in the world, each year staging up to 2,500 performances and events for 1.5 million performance patrons and an estimated 10.9 million site visitors. Beneath the sails, seven performance venues host an amazing range of events beyond the opera and symphony, including dance, music, theatre and talks. In a novel development, the vaulted shells are now used as screens, the special ceramic tiles lit at night for many kinds of presentations. A spectacular example is Badu Gili, a daily six-minute lightshow of artwork by Indigenous artists, celebrating and honouring Indigenous culture.

OPPOSITE: Looking out into the audience in the Concert Hall.

FOLLOWING PAGES: The Sydney Opera House is a commanding presence along the shoreline of one of the world's most stunning harbour cities.





*Like many other Australians, my first view of the Sydney Opera House was from an aeroplane coming in to land at Sydney airport. The beauty of the building and its setting took my breath away—photographs just did not do it justice. It helped that it was one of those gorgeous Sydney days with blue skies and even bluer waters. Since then, I have made many visits to the Opera House and each time I rediscover just what an amazing building it is. In November 2011, when I was a member of the National Landscapes Reference Committee, I was privileged to be taken on a walking tour around The Rocks area and immediate vicinity of the Opera House by a young Indigenous guide.*

*We talked about the former middens on the peninsula and inspected the original rock foundations of the Harbour Bridge and other areas where some of the material contained shells from the old middens. It seemed to me to create a positive connection between the original Australian people and this fabulous modern cultural icon, recognised globally as distinctively Australian. Some people see a visual link between the design of the Opera House and the shape of sea shells, another connection with the middens. I was struck by the symbolism of this heritage place also: the world's most outstanding modern building linked to the world's oldest living culture.*





## PATH TO WORLD HERITAGE

NO SOONER HAD the Sydney Opera House been officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II on 20 October 1973 than plans were formulated for appropriate international recognition. In 1980, Australia submitted a World Heritage nomination dossier referred to as 'The Sydney Opera House in its Setting', including the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the surrounding waterways of Sydney Harbour from Bradleys Head to McMahon's Point. ICOMOS recommended deferring the listing, partly because of the difficulty in assessing a building that had only so recently been completed. They suggested that inscription should be 'deferred until [the Opera House's] exemplary character or its role as model [appeared] more clearly attributable to the creation of Jørn Utzon'. Reflecting on this, the World Heritage Committee 'considered that modern structures should only be accepted when there was clear evidence that they had established, or were outstanding examples of, a distinctive architectural style'. There was interest in seeing a revised nomination for Sydney Harbour, based on the first European settlement in Australia, that might include the Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge, but not as primary elements.

In the following 25 years, much was written about Utzon and the outstanding quality of the building. The building continued to develop, and various alterations and additions, following Utzon's design principles, enabled the authenticity and integrity of the building to be retained. In assessing the 2006 nomination, ICOMOS was fully supportive of inscription. Its recommendation to the committee concluded that 'the Sydney Opera House stands by itself as one of the indisputable masterpieces of human creativity, not only in the 20th century but [in the] history of humankind'.

In 2018, the New South Wales premier instructed the Sydney Opera House Board to advertise a horse race on the Opera House sails, to emphatic community protest.

OPPOSITE: Queen Elizabeth II at the official opening of the Opera House on 20 October 1973.



This is in stark contrast to the Hiroshima Prefecture's approach to Hiroshima Peace Memorial World Heritage Area. As part of a beautification plan, nearby building owners avoid advertising on the walls of buildings facing the World Heritage site. Although possibly extreme, this indicates what might be expected of countries in respecting heritage. There is an illumination of the sails policy as part of the Sydney Opera House Conservation Management Plan for the site.

ABOVE: A public festival on the date of the official opening included fireworks and F-111 swing-wing bomber displays over the harbour.