

Book Mark

Sustainable Place

Christine Phillips



Jonny Anstead

In *Sustainable Place*, Christine Phillips adopts a refreshingly broad-based approach to the issue of sustainable development, dealing in terms that encompass the social as much as the economic, and the cultural as much as political. Phillips goes far beyond the clichés of waste reduction and energy efficiency, tackling more demanding (and essentially qualitative) issues such as the sustainability of cultural identity, and exploring the possibility of a sustainability 'aesthetic': Here, sustainability is taken to signify something much more than the limitation of man's impact on the environment – it incorporates a complex network of interconnected concerns, including the potential of development to fulfil the social, cultural and psychological needs of the individual.

Beginning with a summary of global policy development, including the infamous Kyoto Climate Treaty, Phillips makes evident her disillusionment with the nominal efforts of Western nations to convert much talked-about ideals of sustainable development into meaningful policy and action. For Phillips, sustainability should inform every area of local and global development, and should not be restricted to 'a few benign examples of design strategies for the city'.

At the heart of *Sustainable Place* are two extremely detailed (if somewhat unwieldy) case studies, examining the historical development of San Gimignano, Italy, and Ludlow, England. Phillips traces the history of each area from its earliest developments, extracting lessons from past successes and failures in order to establish principles to guide future development.

Phillips presents a system for the objective measurement of a location's sustainability, based around a series of key indicators in four areas: physical conditions, functional needs, institutional requirements and cultural identity. Cultural identity, the least tangible of the four, and certainly the most resistant to quantifiable analysis, proves problematic; the author's review of Ludlow's cultural identity – drawing on extensive extracts from AE Housman's poem, *A Shropshire Lad* – sits uncomfortably in an otherwise compelling record of the town's development.

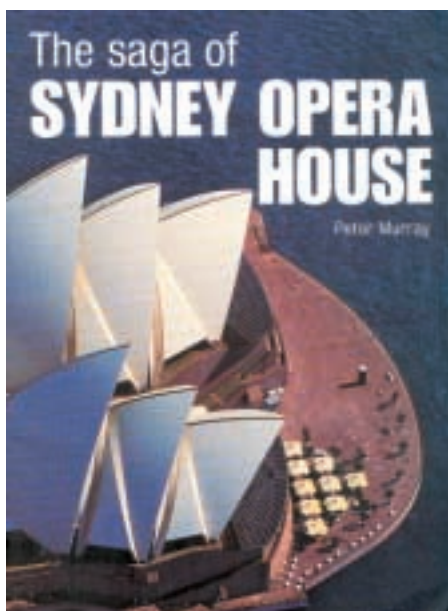
The text is at its most enlightening, however, in its consideration of the possibility of establishing an aesthetic for sustainable development. The discussion draws on a variety of writers, from 15th century architect Leon Battista Alberti to 20th century academic Jay Appleton. Emphasised throughout is the necessity for design based not only on physical function, but on the potential to satisfy a range of human psychological needs and to exploit the richness of heritage, tradition and 'sense of place'.

Sustainable Place is a dense, demanding and ultimately rewarding text. Exploring tensions inherent to the concept of sustainability – global / local, quantitative / qualitative, objective / subjective – Phillips challenges the reader to consider sustainability in a new light.



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The Saga of Sydney Opera House

Peter Murray



Jim Roberts

After seventeen years in gestation, four premiers, one resigned architect and a cost overrun that even the British government would wince at, the Sydney Opera House was born.

Peter Murray's *The Saga of Sydney Opera House* is a dedicated and thorough audit trail of an epic story of triumph over tragedy. The book, arranged in chronological order, seeks to unravel the mysteries, the personalities and the political motivations that dominated the Sydney Opera House development. Murray's research draws from a mix of project correspondence, public information and press reports, and personal accounts of those involved. Much of the research material has remained unread for 35 years.

There is no question that the Sydney Opera House is a success. As a venue it has just reported record breaking attendance figures and turnover for 2003. But it is its value as a brand which sets it aside from the rest. As one of the most recognisable 'iconic' buildings of the last century, it is Australia's unofficial national flag.

Tragically, Jorn Utzon, the Architect whose brilliant concept was to become reality, and who inspired so many working on the project, was forced to resign and hand over control to an ex-Public Works Department Architect, Peter Hall. He left Australia never to return to see his finished masterpiece. Much debate and controversy surrounded Utzon's departure. There were public demonstrations, highly charged correspondence, accusations between all concerned, and interventions from the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

Sadly, it took over 30 years to recognise Utzon's triumph, but his achievement was eventually acknowledged when in March, 2003 at the age of 83, he was awarded the Pritzker Prize, Architecture's Nobel equivalent.

Many books have focused on Utzon's leadership of the project and have attempted to speculate about his infamous departure. However, Murray leaves the speculation and judgement about Utzon's departure squarely with the reader. In this respect, the book succeeds as an independent audit trail.

For me, it is clear that many of the crippling problems were spawned early in the development process and their eventual manifestation was, beyond that an inevitability. While the reader may want to point the finger of blame, it is clear that there were fundamental failings on all sides.

One would hope by now, almost 50 years on, that people had learnt from the blunders of the Sydney Opera House development and that the delivery of large-scale public projects was now well-informed and well-managed. But no, we only have to look at the last 5 years, let alone the last 50, to see similar failings elsewhere.

For anyone considering the tortures of commissioning, managing, entering or being in any way involved in a high profile design competition, this book is a 'must read'. On the one hand it presents a sad story of mismanagement: fluid objectives, changing personnel and leadership, a serious lack of budget control. And on the other, it demonstrates how valuable and effective, innovative and free flowing thinking can be.

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