

WWW.BUILDING.CO.UK / FRIDAY 09.04.09

WWW.BUILDING.CO.UK/GLOBAL

Building



INSIDE THE KINGDOM

WHAT IT'S REALLY LIKE TO WORK IN SAUDI ARABIA





AUSTRALIA'S GRAND OPERA HOUSE

Sydney is finally going to restore Jørn Utzon's awesome opera house to his original design – but there is a big price to pay, says **Amanda Levete**

WHY DON'T POLITICIANS HELP US AND THEMSELVES BY BEING COURAGEOUS AND OPEN ABOUT THE REAL ISSUES? WE ARE NOT STUPID; WE CAN FOLLOW AN ARGUMENT

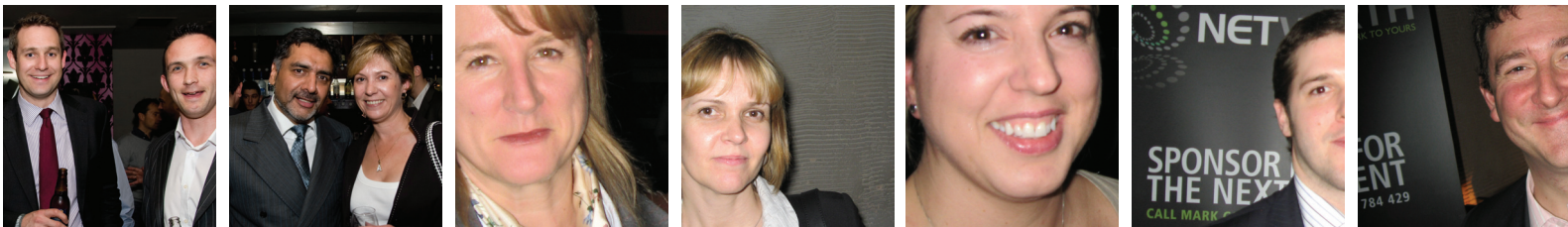
I have just come back from a trip to Melbourne and Sydney, cities I last visited in 1992. Obviously much had changed since then but the same difference between the two was evident – Melbourne is more urbane, more European; Sydney more laid back, more of a beach culture. These differences were exemplified by the question everyone would ask in Melbourne: "What do you think of our new buildings?" and in Sydney: "Have you swum in the ocean yet?"

I suspect that because of their geography, Australians are more conscious of their national identity than we are. And yet as a

general rule (and I exclude the out-of-town house and the beach house, which as a genre have been perfected by Australian architects) the architecture of their cities exploits neither local nor international talent. This is puzzling given that architecture is such a powerful force when it comes to creating and expressing national identity.

In Melbourne there have been opportunities, with the regeneration of Federation Square and the Docklands, to create architecture of world-class significance but they were missed. There is now another opportunity. A large area of Melbourne is up for review but

NET WORTH ... BUYS A PINT FOR BUILDING



Chosen watering hole: Babble, Berkeley Square Ambiance: Posh bar in the heart of London's property land Topics: Dragons, recession and how to win

Joey Gardiner, from *Building*, and about 200 construction industry professionals ...

For once it wasn't *Building* digging deep into the corporate pocket to stand a few rounds – it was the jolly folk at Net Worth, on the occasion of the debut of their construction and property networking club. A debut that was admirably timed, it must be said, just when lots of us need that kind of thing most – in the depths of the recession. And to kick things off they got hold of James Caan – he of *Dragons' Den* fame, not the man that acted opposite Al Pacino in *The Godfather* – to give a speech on how to make a buck in tough times.

Now, this particular James Caan

'JAMES CAAN SEEMED TO BE BELITTLING PEOPLE WHO AREN'T DOING BRILLIANTLY'

seemed to provoke a certain amount of controversy among the attendees of this inaugural event. (You can see what he actually said on *Building*'s website.) Well known for his disparaging put-down of every hopeful scheme that comes his way, Caan confessed that he wouldn't even have put money into the first investment he said "yes" to – a treadmill for dogs – if his family hadn't nagged him for being a scrooge.

For Neil Stanley, Net Worth's chief organiser and principle host for the evening, the speech was inspirational. But for others, there was a certain

the Victoria government has decided, after a long process of selection, that the prudent way forward is to road-test two rival schemes and gauge public reaction before deciding on which architect to appoint. Hard to believe that they will make the right decision with this process but it goes to the heart of what I perceived as a lack of national confidence.

In Sydney there was a huge debate going on about the proposed refurbishment of the opera house. This is one of the truly great buildings in the world. Its sail-like roof glistens in the sunlight atop a raw and brutal brick plinth. It sits proudly on the headland, a magical backdrop for passing liners, but the best views are up close: the finesse of detailing beneath the concrete shells, the awesome 20m cantilever, the delicacy of the two-tone ceramic tiles and the rich timber interiors. Like many great buildings, its construction was mired in controversy and intrigue. Its creator, the recently deceased Jørn Utzon, was not just brilliant but difficult and romantic, and his character is part of the mythology of the building.

The Opera House is Sydney. And like the handful of buildings around the world that shift the architectural debate (the Pompidou Centre being another example), it generates an income that is almost incalculable. But the public are outraged that in these times of

THE BEST VIEWS OF THE OPERA HOUSE ARE UP CLOSE: THE AWESOME 20M CANTILEVER, THE DELICACY OF THE CERAMIC TILES AND THE RICH TIMBER INTERIORS

financial crisis, the government could contemplate spending a billion Australian dollars on such frippery. Yet 35 years after its completion, the air-conditioning system and scene-moving machinery have come to the end of their natural life.

Now is clearly the moment not just to bring the mechanics up to date but to review the whole building and assess the areas where mistakes were made. To do this all you need do is look at Utzon's original design. He had envisaged a higher, more cathedral-like space that would have created better sightlines and a more spectacular interior. And this is now the brave new plan. But to realise it requires excavating 18m below ground and closing the opera house for two years. It's one huge challenge but it is thinking on this scale that a building like this demands. Expensive? Very. Worth it? Without question. Instructive?

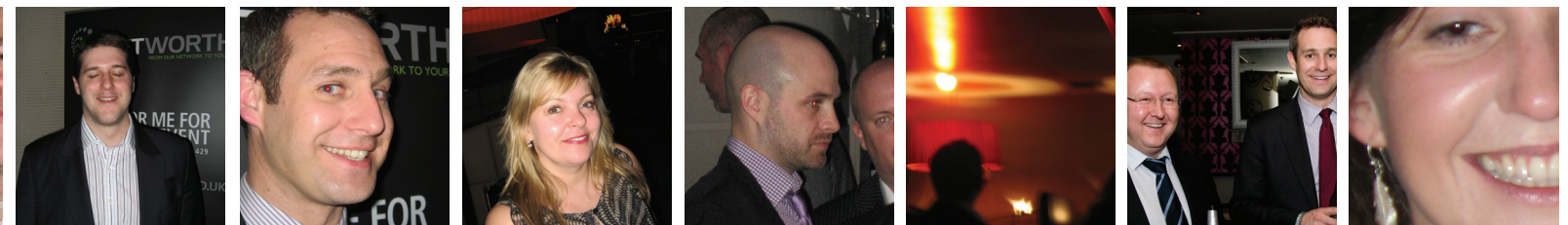
It shows that there is a big price to pay for not being true to the original.

As with many politically sensitive projects, presentation is everything. Did the politicians confront the issue head on? Did they say that although the expenditure would be huge, it was not money that would otherwise be spent on hospitals or schools; that it was about preserving what is essential to Australia's culture? No. The project was presented out of context, with the inevitable public backlash, and I just hope the politicians now hold their nerve.

When will they learn? And this is as pertinent here as it is in Sydney – why don't they help themselves by being courageous and upfront about the real issues? We are not stupid; we can understand an argument and we can also understand the difference between money and value. In these uncertain times, that difference has never been more acute.

I loved Australia. I loved the friendliness, enthusiasm and generosity of the people. I loved the vast expanses of land, the freshness of the produce, the great wine and fabulous restaurants. I didn't think much of Melbourne's buildings but I did have a swim in the Pacific ...

Amanda Levete is principal of Amanda Levete Architects



friends and influence people Drinks drunk: Who's counting?

element of, well, smugness about it. One said: "He seemed to be belittling people who aren't doing brilliantly for not working hard enough. But by definition, if we're here at this event we are working hard to improve our networks."

"Slightly patronising" was the verdict of another attendee.

But not everyone was offended. One of the networkers, Amanda Recknell from architect Tilney Shane, defended the dragon: "He seemed to know what he was talking about. What he thinks is important is the people. Not the product being sold, but having faith in

THERE'S NOT MUCH THE CORLEONE FAMILY NEEDED TEACHING ABOUT ENTREPRENEURSHIP

the people behind the business."

Inevitably, conversations drifted from the event itself to the gloomy state of the industry. Cue much earnest discussion of the importance of networking when you don't know where your next dollar is coming from. Carl Carrington, who has a day job as a director at engineer Delap & Waller as well being one of the team at Net Worth, said he was disappointed that the public sector lifelines being offered to the industry seemed always to go to the big players. "You look – most of the people here are small practitioners. These frameworks,

like the Olympics, they just get mopped up by the big contractors – the smaller practices are squeezed."

The popular view at the event seemed to be that increasing entrepreneurship is the way out of the recession, hence the choice of the Beeb's Caan to give the opening pep talk.

Mind you, there's not much the Corleone family needed teaching about entrepreneurship – and I'm sure Santino "Sonny" Corleone had one heck of a mean network. Would another James Caan have been a better choice?