

A SYMBOL BUILT TO LAST

In 1980, Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser turned the first sod for the construction of Australia's new Parliament House. On the 25th anniversary of the event, the building's design architect, Aldo Giurgola, talked to Peter Cotton about his enduring passion for the structure.





Danish architect Jorn Utzon had a wretched time in Australia implementing his design for the Sydney Opera House, but his bad experience had an unexpected beneficiary: the architect of Canberra's new Parliament House, Aldo Giurgola.

In 1957, Utzon won an international competition to design the Opera House, but triumph soon turned to misery when he was blamed for delays in construction and cost blow-outs.

The New South Wales government withheld his payments and rejected his design ideas and construction methods, all of which forced Utzon to resign from the project in 1966, leaving controversy in his wake.

"It helped us a lot what happened to him," says Aldo Giurgola, "because we found a very different atmosphere when we came here. Everyone was more cautious and didn't want what happened to Utzon to happen to us. They tried hard to avoid it and said openly that they didn't want another experience like that."

Giurgola first heard of Canberra in the 1940s when his architecture professor in Rome showed the students Burley Griffin's winning design for the new Australian capital.

"I was fascinated with the concept and design for the city, and from then on always thought of Australia as the last frontier, a place to expand your horizons," he says.

In 1979, Giurgola was a partner in the esteemed New York architecture firm Mitchell/Giurgola when he was asked to help judge an international competition to design Australia's new Parliament House.

He declined the invitation, opting instead to enter the competition.

At the time, the only architect in Mitchell/Giurgola's New York office with any knowledge of Canberra was Australian Richard Thorp and he was immediately brought onto Giurgola's design team for the competition.

"Ric is a character and a very good architect. Having him there helped us a lot," says Giurgola. "He

was always moving around, commenting loudly, with lots of energy, so we had an expression of 'Australian-ness' in the office."

Though Giurgola had never been to Australia, the detailed briefing documents provided by competition organisers enabled him and his team to respond to the requirements for the proposed building.

"They provided us with a clear concept," says Giurgola. "The building had to relate to Walter Burley Griffin's plan for Canberra as a democratic city, and it had to have a relationship with the surrounding landscape."

While he prepared a set of sketches and perspectives for the competition, Giurgola drew inspiration from Patrick White's novel *Voss*—"It gave me a sense of the atmosphere of the country"—and Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*.

"When I told an Australian architect that I'd used Clark's *History* for inspiration, he said there were two histories of Australia. He said one of them was told from the English point of view, and the other was from an Irish standpoint. It turned out that Clark's is the Irish version."

So what were the architectural principles Aldo Giurgola employed in his winning conception of Parliament House?

He says: "As an architect, when you consider the design of a very large building, you can go high and make a tower, which is often an imposition, a sudden violence on the land. Or you can make a block building, which is also high.

"We thought that neither of those sorts of buildings belonged in this place. It needed something that was open, not a solid entity, and it should be a place which gave those inside it views of the landscape around them."

Giurgola says he also drew guidance from Griffin's notion that Australia's Parliament House should be a democratic place.

"Democracy obviously stems from the people and you get a sense

from Manning Clark that in Australia there was a core of people who became agitated and wanted to find a way to govern themselves, but they had lots of difficulty doing that,” says Giurgola. “So we thought of a place that would be open to the public, as much as possible. There would be no steps up into the iconic parts of the building. It had to be available to people, and not massive or showy.”

As well as the public who would visit Parliament House, Giurgola and his team also considered how the building would function for those who worked in it every day.

“One of my philosophies in architecture is that it is healthy to interrupt your hours of sitting by moving from one place to another and being exposed to a different geography, like a courtyard, a passageway or a big room, because then your mind relaxes properly, but is still active. That’s what we sought to achieve in this building,” he says.

“I always say to clients that I don’t care for towers because in a tower you go up or down in a lift and you never see anyone, or maybe you do, for a few seconds, but you can have no meaningful exchange in that time.”

One criticism of new Parliament House is that it lacks the equivalent of King’s Hall in Old Parliament House, a public place that politicians have to pass through on their way to the chambers.

Giurgola says the competition brief for the new building required two circulation systems, one for the public, and a separate one for members and senators and their staff.

“Richard Thorp told us about the vibrancy of King’s Hall, and so, while we accommodated the brief by providing two separate circulation systems in the building, we did something that allows the parliamentarians to change their mind on this matter,” says Giurgola.

“We allowed the Great Hall to be connected to the Members’ Hall to enable the public to circulate through the Members’ Hall, the space on the ground floor directly under the flag mast.

“If the Presiding Officers ever decided that this should happen, it would restore the spirit of King’s Hall. It probably won’t happen, but at least we allowed for the possibility.”

While he built in this option for change, Giurgola says he is strongly opposed to any structural changes to the building. Then again, his design does allow for the Australian system of government to become a unicameral system requiring only one chamber.

At present, Australia has a bicameral system with two houses of parliament, the House of Representatives and the Senate.

“With a unicameral system in mind, we developed a fallback plan for the building that had a chamber in the space where the Members’ Hall is now. It would take a massive physical change to the interior of the building, but that space gives future legislators the ability to do that. We had to think of everything in the design phase.”

As for other changes, Giurgola concedes that future incumbents might alter the structure and flow of Parliament House to allow for new technologies and efficiencies.

“I understand that there will be changes, but they should fit within the spirit of the origins of the building, otherwise things will disintegrate,” he says. “No Pope would order structural changes to the Vatican. He knows it doesn’t belong to him. It’s a symbol that was built to last.

“In the same way, the initial brief for Parliament House took years to write, with input from hundreds of people,” he says. “Then we went through eight years from the time we won the design competition until the completion of construction, developing our ideas and submitting them to a joint standing committee almost monthly.

“It was an open, democratic process that ended with a building that has lasting meaning, conveyed in the structure itself, in the art and craft work it contains, and through the history of its occupants.”

A major change to Giurgola’s conception in recent times has been the construction of the low security wall that now rings the building. “I was asked to consult on the wall and initially I didn’t want to be involved. But I reconsidered. After all I’m a citizen too, and out of a sense of duty, I said I’d help.

“It’s a change I don’t like very much, but it still allows public access to the slope and it doesn’t disrupt the

basic principle of the building. I just think that every time you do this sort of thing, you lose a battle. You build a wall to defend the building against terrorists, and that prompts them to come up with other options. It’s in the nature of their twisted minds.”

Giurgola is stung by criticism from some quarters that the symmetry of Parliament House makes it the last



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building of its architectural era. “These days, they say ‘We prefer to celebrate chaos’, but I believe this building is beyond the fashion of a certain moment in time,” he says.

“A private office building has to be designed for today, and that’s it. But this was different. It had to contain symbolic elements, as well as be functional.

“It was also important that it have a clarity so that people visiting it could relate to the symbols it contained, like the forecourt, the chambers and the mast that holds the flag. On the other hand, when people ask what a certain feature of the building symbolises, sometimes we don’t know what to say because it’s just a functional element. An architect gives form to a building, and people give that building their own meaning.”

Interestingly, Giurgola's favourite places in the Parliament House precinct are its exterior spaces. "I like the view of the city from the top of the building," he says. "It shows the relationship of the place to the other elements of Burley Griffin's design for Canberra, so I love to go up there.

"I also like the courtyards very much because they work nicely and

no distance from it. "But there's nothing I would have done differently because I still feel that it was the right thing for a building that has to last 200 years," he says. "And I hope it'll still be there in 1,000 years.

"When a building reaches that sort of age, people treasure it, like they treasure the old buildings in Rome."

Aldo Giurgola visited Canberra

the New York office. Three of them stayed after the project was completed. Hal Guida has set up an architectural practice in Canberra. Pamille Berg, who supervised the art program for the building, is now a Canberra-based art consultant. And architect Richard Thorp now lives and works in Sydney.

Aldo stayed too and lives in the Canberra suburb of Kingston. "I didn't

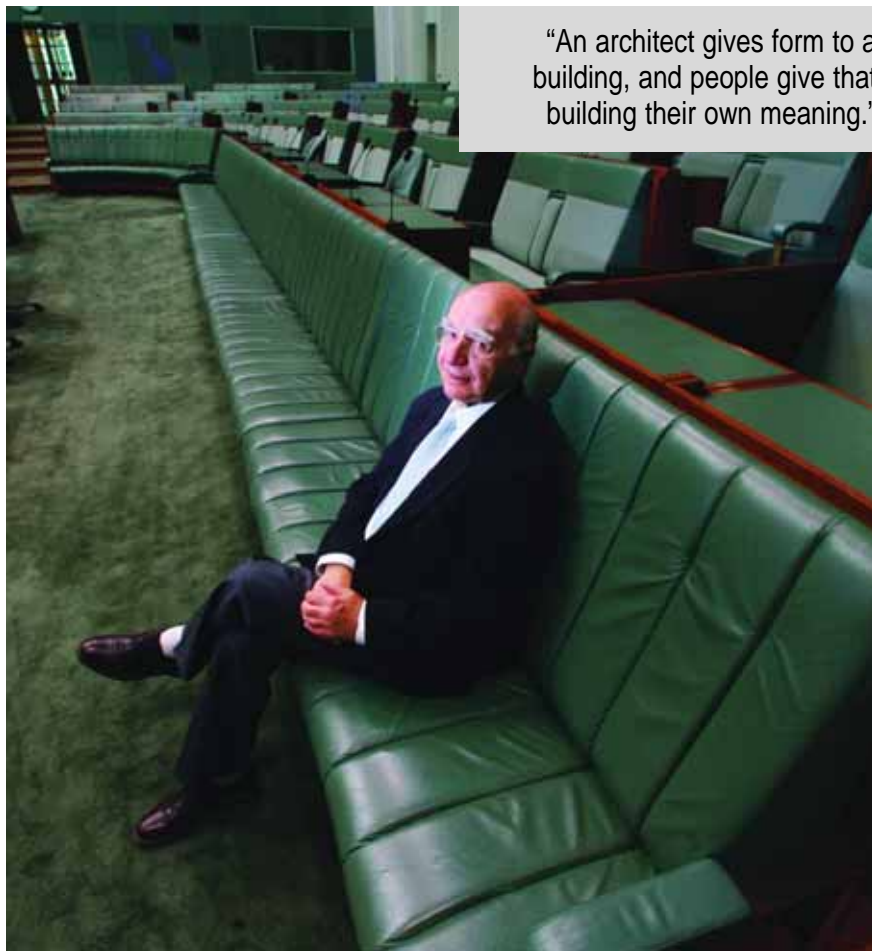


allow a lot of light inside the buildings. Yes, they are both outside spaces, but they are strongly formed by the architectural elements of the design."

Aldo Giurgola says his design of Parliament House is foremost in his mind when he thinks about his career. "Then again, I've made many other buildings that I have affection for. I designed a little church in [the Canberra suburb of] Charnwood and I mean, I really love that place.

"Parliament House is a very significant building and there are certain things about it that I love, and there's nothing about the design that I'd change on a conceptual level. That's why I'm passionate about it and why I feel somehow protective of it."

So is there anything in its design that he'd do differently now? Giurgola says it's a difficult question for him to answer as he still lives, breathes and dreams about the building and so has



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after winning the Parliament House design competition and, on his return to New York, he had a bundle of sketches and photos for colleagues working with him on the project.

Hal Guida, long time partner in MGT Architects, remembers Giurgola arriving back in New York after that first trip, how he was enthralled with the physicality of Canberra. "He loved the hills around the city and the rocky outcrops," says Guida. "He loved the trees and the colours of the place. And he talked a lot about the sky. He was quite taken with it."

When Giurgola returned to Canberra to implement his design, he brought a team of eight people from

*Opposite page: Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser turns the first sod for the building of new Parliament House, 18 September 1980. Photo: Collection, National Capital Authority Library & Information Service
Left: Aldo Giurgola inspects the finials on the Parliament House foyer staircase being sculpted by Anne Ferguson. Photo: MGT Architects; Right: Aldo Giurgola in the House of Representatives chamber in 2005. Photo: Andrew Taylor, courtesy of Fairfax Publications*

know Canberra before I won the competition, but as soon as I got here, I felt deeply that I love this place. I love Australia and I love Canberra in particular," he says. "You have to love a place to do a good job there architecturally. People here value original things. After all, Australia is a society that built its capital city from scratch." ■

Peter Cotton is a freelance journalist from Canberra.