

# Family Ties

Nearly 50 years have passed since Sydney Opera House architect Jørn Utzon left Australia but his creative family's connection with Pittwater remains strong.

Story by Rosamund Burton

On 28 April 1966 Danish architect Jørn Utzon, his wife Lis, and their three children left Australia on a Qantas jet. As the plane flew over the harbour Utzon looked down at Bennelong Point and his design for the Sydney Opera House only a quarter completed. This would be the last time Utzon saw the building which would come to symbolize Sydney.

From 1957 to 1966, while he was working on its design and construction, Jørn Utzon based himself in Pittwater, and the Utzon family lived first at Palm Beach and later in Bayview, planning to make a permanent home here. Utzon had bought land at Bayview and submitted plans for a home. But due to the politics playing out around the construction of the Opera House Jørn Utzon was forced out of the country.

Jørn Utzon never returned to Australia, but his descendants have been drawn back to Pittwater and the Utzon family's creativity is still making an impact on the area.

Jørn's daughter, Lin, met Australian architect Alex Popov, when the family were still living in Pittwater, and their son, artist Mika Utzon Popov now lives in Avalon with his wife Kirsten Fazio (a director and writer in film) and children. Mika was born in Denmark in 1971 and grew up there and also on the Northern Beaches,

completing Year 11 and 12 at Barrenjoey High and a four-year degree at Sydney's National Art School. He and Kirsten have lived in Sydney since 2005, but it was only in 2014 that they moved back to Pittwater.

"I wanted to be back in an environment that has left a really deep impression on me in terms of its natural habitat," Mika explains.

Of his grandfather, he says: "[His] influence is always there... I'm not an architect, so it differentiates that way, but I'm inspired by his approach to art and architecture, and I share his love of nature."

Jørn Utzon had an office on Iluka Road, Mika explains, and apparently every so often the architect would think it was too beautiful a day to be working indoors, and would take his team sailing Broken Bay on his yacht.

Also enraptured by the natural beauty of Pittwater is Jørn's great niece, Anna Utzon. Anna grew up in Copenhagen and moved to Australia in 1997 with her Danish then husband. For the first month they stayed in Alex Popov's beach house at Bungan. The couple always talked about moving to the city, but never did. They lived at Palm Beach for 10 years, and had their two children, Oscar and Carla. "We started off in the best spot," she says. "It is so beautiful here and quite magical."

Anna is another family member with a natural creative bent. Trained in London as a graphic designer, she held the position of Art Director for Vogue Living for many years. Currently she works with Vampt Vintage Design in Newport, the company which specializes in Danish mid-century furniture design.

Following in her great uncle's footsteps five years ago, Anna moved with her children from Palm Beach to Bayview, where she now lives with producer, Tim Berriman. She sits on the balcony of their Minkara Road home and behind her the fleet of white yacht sails in the evening twilight race can be seen gently inching down Pittwater.

"My Mum's dad was Jørn's brother," Anna explains, as she points out a painting by Mika on the main wall of the living room. "He and his wife both died when my mum was very young, so she and her younger sisters grew up with Jørn and his wife. So Jørn and Lis were the grandparent figures in my life."

Jørn Utzon bought land in Bayview and working with the site's natural environment designed a home for his family. "It was designed as three pavilions," Anna explains, "which is very much Jørn's style, with a courtyard in between." It took five years to conceive and pass through Council, but the approval came too late. Jørn Utzon wasn't paid for his

work on the Opera House for many months; when they left Australia the family was penniless and Utzon had to sell the Bayview home site.

Being the only Utzon listed in the telephone directory Anna used to get letters and drawings from people expressing how much the Opera House meant to them. "I passed them on to Jørn, but I wish that he had experienced that himself," she said.

When Jørn and Lis Utzon moved from Palm Beach to Bayview in the 1960s Kim, their youngest son, attended Loquat Valley School. In 2013 their older son, architect Jan Utzon, was in Sydney for the 40-year celebrations of the Opera House. He went to talk to the children at Loquat Valley School about his experience of living in Pittwater and the Opera House.

Anna's son, 11 year-old Oscar, finished Year 6 at Loquat Valley School in December. Every Year 6 student had to

do a graduation project, and initially Oscar was going to do his project on his great-grandfather, Danish architectural photographer Keld Helmer-Petersen, who taught photography at the Danish Royal Academy's School of Architecture. He and Jørn Utzon were good friends.

"My great grandfather, like me, did macro photography. I like his photos," Oscar says. He opens a large book of photographs Helmer-Petersen took between 1941 and 1995. "I first started looking at this book at the beginning of last year, when I started my graduation diploma."

Oscar built up the courage to make his end-of-year project about his own photography and not hide behind the past. Overcoming his reticence to show his work, he also decided to raise money for the Luke Batty Foundation by selling his pictures. The eight photographs in the exhibition sold within two hours and raised \$800, and he has had requests for 10 more.

Taken on either his mother's iPhone or an iPad his work expresses innate Utzon creativity, with unique capturing of detail. "When I first started I photographed signs, only signs," he says, "but now I'm shooting close-ups and textures and patterns that most people don't see."

Many of the images were taken on a recent trip to Cockatoo Island. Photographs of blocks of colour on corrugated iron sheds, peeling paintwork beside a disintegrating concrete block illustrate he has an exceptional eye and a true artist's ability for highlighting detail.

*\* Continuing to raise money for the Luke Batty Foundation Oscar Utzon's photographs are being exhibited at Vampt Vintage Design in Newport during January. Mika Utzon Popov is one of 10 Pittwater artists involved in the Ku-ring-gai pH project and exhibition, which will be shown at the Manly Art Gallery later in 2016.*



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Oscar Utzon is the latest generation of the famous creative Utzon family to call Pittwater home; Oscar, mum Anna and sister Carla with Jørn Utzon at his home in Denmark in 2009; Oscar's keen artistic eye as shown in his stark photography of Cockatoo Island; the Sydney Opera House during construction in 1966, the year Jørn Utzon left Australia (*bottom right*).



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