

Adapted from **ANTICIPATE: The Art of Leading by Looking Ahead, Chapter 6, Your Visionary Self** by **Rob-Jan de Jong** (AMACOM; January 8, 2015; \$27.95 Hardcover; 978-0-8144-4907-3).

---

### **Utzon's Masterpiece**

Imagine you are an architect living in the 1950s. You are about a decade into your career, and so far you haven't established a big name for yourself. The world you live in differs greatly from the way it is today. Letters still get written by hand or typewriter; color television is a novelty; phone booths dot street corners; news travels slowly; the world has not globalized in any significant way; many words--the Internet, frappuccino, iPhone, Dubai, and even Walkman, video game, laser printer, credit card, and McDonald's--have yet to enter our vocabulary. In your world of architecture, the focus is predominantly on postwar housing projects in a society trying to recover from the Second World War. Even the ugly concrete jungles of the 1960s and the 1970s have yet to be designed.

As you are trying to build your business, you notice a little announcement in your favorite architect's monthly. There's an international competition for a new project, on the other side of the world. You decide to enter, spend time creating a number of sketches, and submit them as requested. But your expectations are modestly low. After all, your portfolio is still limited, your name is unknown internationally, you submitted only a few drafts, and you live far away, two full days by air travel (remember, it's the 1950s), from where the building is to be erected.

But to your surprise, six months later you are declared the winner, beating 233 competing designs from around the world. Apparently, you submitted something that stood out.

Fast-forward more than half a century. Today your building stands as one of the most beautiful ever created. American architect Louis Kahn has been quoted as saying that "the sun

did not know how beautiful its light was, until it was reflected off this building.” Your name is Jørn Utzon, the competition is for a national opera house at Bennelong Point, and the building is the magnificent Sydney Opera House.

The conception of the Sydney Opera House is a fascinating tale of visionary thinking with, at its center, the Danish architect Jørn Utzon. What kind of person, what kind of brilliant mind, and what kind of creative process did it take to design something so beautiful and complex, a structure that half a century later is still considered futuristic, and still stands out as one of the most acclaimed and recognizable buildings in the world?

When the Sydney Opera House was declared a World Heritage Site in 2007, Utzon became only the second person ever to receive such recognition during his lifetime. And when he was granted architecture's highest honor, the Pritzker Prize, in 2003, one of the judges declared that "Utzon made a building well ahead of its time, far ahead of available technology, and he persevered through extraordinarily malicious publicity and negative criticism to build a building that changed the image of an entire country.” And he sure did, because Sydney, and in fact Australia, will never be the same without it.

The tragic backstory is that Utzon never saw his masterpiece with his own eyes. After spending a few years creating the detailed plans in Denmark, he and his family emigrated to Australia in 1962 to be present during construction. But a redesign dispute with the newly elected Liberal Government in 1965 threw his life upside down. With his payments withheld, Utzon was forced to close his office, lay off his staff, and retreat from the project in March 1966. He returned to Denmark with his family and vowed to never set foot in Australia again. And he never did. For many years, his pivotal contribution was even omitted from the official Opera House history; in fact, during the grand opening by Queen Elizabeth II in 1973, his name was

never mentioned. Utzon passed away in 2008 at the age of 90, having only seen his amazing creation in pictures.

But the fascinating question that arises out of Utzon's story is: What allowed him to invent such an elegant and unique structure, without any real reference points and without the technological means available today? We marvel at his creativity, imagination, and visionary capacity, and speedily file it away as purely a stroke of genius (which it was). But now, let's instead try to figure out how Utzon's process of unconventional thinking might have happened.

First of all, the architect had a deep appreciation for nature. His designs mimicked nature's patterns of growth, an approach he called Additive Architecture. He famously said, "If it grows naturally, the architecture will look after itself." In Katarina Stübe's impressive photographic testimony to the beauty of the Sydney Opera House and a true tribute to Jørn Utzon's life (created in cooperation with his son Jan), Utzon says that "nature knows nothing about compromise, it accepts all difficulties, not as difficulties as such, but rather as new factors that configure a totality."

Thus, his inspiration came from a source very different from those commonly used for other designs. Before the Sydney Opera House competition, Utzon traveled the world, from China to Africa, with a mind open to vastly different construction principles. He purposefully rid himself of traditional constraints, finding ideas and drawing parallels from nature to feed his imagination. Utzon's open-mindedness, curiosity, and willingness to recategorize his thinking are important aspects of visionary behavior that we will review in more detail in Chapter 7.

Utzon possessed another crucial quality, however--one that is held by most (if not all) visionaries. When you hear how he was ousted from his masterpiece project after having relocated his family to Australia, and how he was relentlessly pestered by government officials

who seemingly robbed him of his dream, you might assume that Utzon became a bitter and cynical man. It seems all too reasonable, in light of the hardships he endured.

But he didn't. Instead, he always communicated positively about the project and about the people he worked with, even those who stood in his way. His son Jan Utzon recalls, "He was the most positive person I've ever met. He never talked about things or people he did not like. Always only positively about what interested him."

Jan also recounts an anecdote that speaks to his father's character. As they walked together around Palma, Mallorca, Jan and Jørn paused to admire the wonderful building of the great Palma Cathedral. His father stopped one of the custodians and asked him when construction of the cathedral had begun. Somewhere in the twelfth century, the man replied. Jørn then asked when it had been completed. The custodian smiled and answered that it hadn't been completed yet--"It's an ongoing process." Jørn turned to his son and said, "This is why I think the Sydney Opera House has been a wonderful event in my life. To have been allowed to conceive the idea of it. To have been permitted to work there for so many years. To know that it is continuing and that people are fond of the building." Jørn Utzon believed that the building was more important than the architect, and he was proud of his contribution. Some might say that he was too modest, and perhaps he was. But his character and values--his *ethos*--prevented him from projecting his ego and self-esteem onto the building, and therefore from becoming cynical and negative.

The outlook of a visionary is positive, optimistic, and hopeful (we're going to call it "mindful" in Chapter 7). In fact, as we discussed in Chapter 3, cynicism is among the biggest drains on one's leadership, and definitely on one's visionary capacity. Remember the Historian archetype? The one whose strength lies in connecting the dots but whose weakness is seeing

things early--and who's prone to cynicism? Those who exhibit this destructive quality can't succeed as visionaries. Even if they suffer life events that give them good reasons to become cynical and negative, visionaries resist these tendencies, as Utzon did.