

Participatory Culture and the Social Value of an Architectural Icon: SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE



Cristina Garduño Freeman



'This is an important and timely book that proposes novel ways of understanding social value, identity and engagement with world heritage sites in the digitally mediated age. It will undoubtedly progress thinking and practice on the conception, representation and management of heritage.'

Hannah Lewi, Professor Architecture, University of Melbourne, Australia

'Focusing on the Sydney Opera House, Cristina Garduño Freeman's first monograph explores the persistent issue of "social value". In addition to providing a sustained exploration of heritage engagements within the context of the Opera House, her book also makes astute observations that are transferable well beyond those specifics, offering fresh empirical evidence and insight into the emerging relationships between heritage, online technologies and their associated modes of communication. The result is a strongly theorized monograph that will no doubt make an impactful and important contribution to the literatures supporting heritage and conservation studies.'

Emma Waterton, Associate Professor, Western Sydney University, Australia

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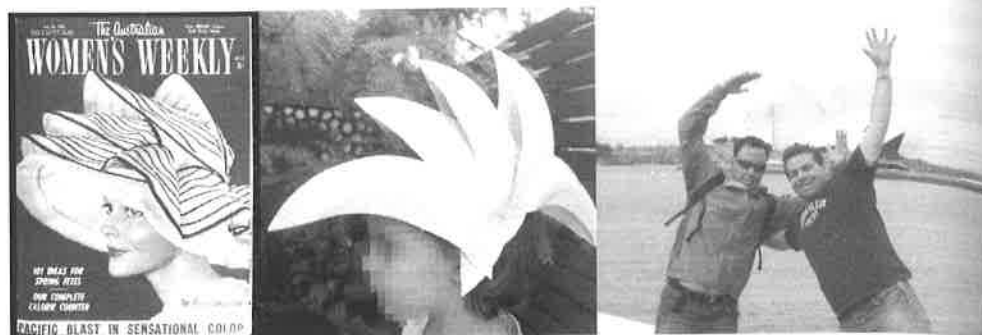


Figure 4.7 Hats: serious, handmade and performed.

Sources: left, 'The Opera House Hat' designed by Peter Morton featured on the 25 July issue of the Australian *Women's Weekly* magazine in 1962. Archives of the publication held in the Trove digital collection at the National Library of Australia (© Bauer Media Pty Limited/The Australian Women's Weekly, 1962); middle, 'Sydney Opera House Hat made from paper plates' (© www.laughingkidslearn.com, 2016); right, photograph posted to Flickr.com showing a performed-opera-hat, titled 'Brez and Tim share an opera house hat' (© Anna Oakley, 2008).

repurposing is a strategy for *critique* it is also implicated in practices that employ *making* representations as a form of cultural engagement with the Sydney Opera House. Representations can be interpreted in a number of ways. For example, 40 years after *The Other Taj Mahal* was published, Susan Giles, an artist, produced a series of sculptural works titled *Spliced Buildings* (Figure 4.8). In this series of paper models one is a hybrid form; part Taj Mahal, part Sydney Opera

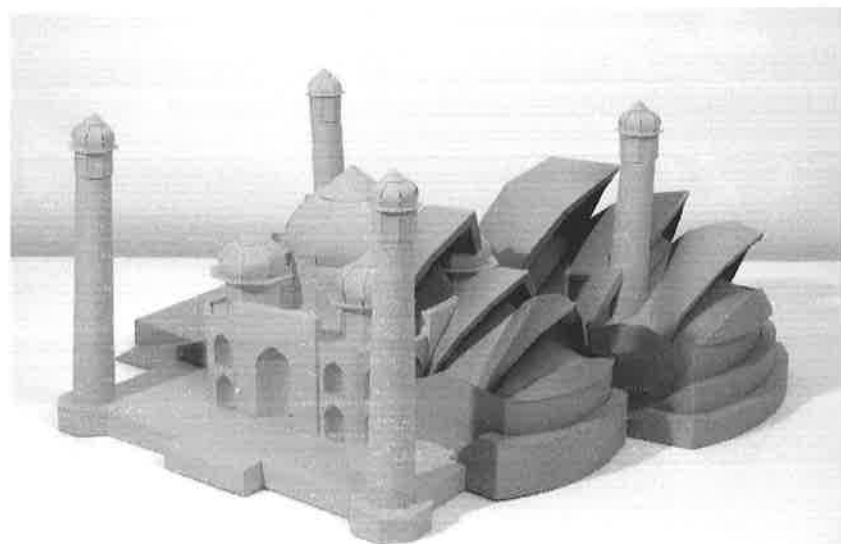


Figure 4.8 Susan Giles: *Spliced Buildings*.

From the artwork series *Spliced Buildings* by Susan Giles. This piece is titled 'Taj Mahal and Sydney Opera House'. Archival paper, 17.5 × 19 × 8.5 inches (© Susan Giles, 2008. Photograph: Susan Giles).

House, as if two hollow models had been superimposed at an awkward angle into each other. The Taj Mahal in yellow, the Opera House in grey. In these paper sculptures Giles states that she is exploring the power of architecture in the mind and the 'metonymic representation of place'.³⁹ Giles' artwork is both a *critique* of these two iconic buildings, as well as a form of cultural engagement, where *making* (as opposed to writing) offers an alternative means to communicate ideas about, and become familiar with, the Sydney Opera House.

Each of these references and reinterpretations of the Sydney Opera House embody the idea that lauding or subverting this national symbol is a way of engaging with this place. At the same time as taking part in an embedded cultural practice, enacting the building-as-hat performance or envisioning yet another visual metaphor for the building are vernacular forms of creativity. These metaphors at times become so well known that they prompt further reinterpretations themselves.

A personal Opera House in every home

In 1972, the year before the Sydney Opera House officially opened, Eric Thake (1904–1982) produced a linocut depicting gleaming white plates in a dish rack to adorn his annual Christmas card. Thake was an Australian artist from Melbourne, who exhibited infrequently and worked mostly as a graphic artist. His work drew on surrealist art's dreamlike quality and was little known except within his social circle and amongst collectors and curators. Some of his most well-known works are from his annual Christmas cards, which were vehicles for his sharp wit and sense of humour, and were 'private statements intended for those who knew him'.⁴⁰ In the card designed for Christmas 1972, Thake created an image of dishes mimetically posed to reference Utzon's architectural masterpiece. He titled the card *An Opera House in Every Home* (Figure 4.9). This pun has become a popular visual metaphor for this building and is probably Thake's best-known image. The linocut is now widely reproduced on postcards, aprons and tea towels, the 'Sydney Opera House as a dish-rack full of crockery' is a part of the visual rhetoric of this building.

On the surface it might appear that this work of art and the popular analogy it has inspired is an innocuous and trivial link to a work of architecture such as the Sydney Opera House. But it reveals how the building has been a site for critique, for participation through creative works and how certain images become embedded the public mind. Arguably, the tone of Thake's *An Opera House in Every Home* must be understood in the context of the ongoing rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne for cultural supremacy.⁴¹ The launch of the competition for the design of the Sydney Opera House took place in the year after Melbourne had positioned itself on the world stage by hosting the 1956 Summer Olympic Games. The fantastic forms of the Opera House and the controversy over the years of the building's realisation certainly superseded the attention Melbourne received for the Summer Olympics. In light of this, Thake, a staunch Melburnian, made a clever pun on Sydney's almost completed cultural icon. The carefully arranged plates sit in an ordinary wire washing up rack evenly tilted to form the radial arrangement of the shells of the building. Their gleaming clean surfaces made shining by Thake's stark use of a single black ink to depict the scene. The washing-up water to the right is Sydney Harbour, gently lapping at the crockery-building and the scene even offers a certain distaste towards the architecture by the presence of a fly sullyng clean