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Jepe Utzon | Architecture & Design | Copenhagen, Denmark

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Jepe Utzon: Thoughtful Design in Denmark



Jepe Utzon

Jepe Utzon founded his architecture and design firm in 2004. He was educated at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture in Copenhagen, Denmark, and spent a year studying in Paris as part of an architecture exchange program. After graduating with a degree in architecture in January 1999, Jepe worked with his uncle, Kim Utzon, and father, Jan Utzon, at their respective architectural firms. His grandfather, Jørn Utzon, was the architect who created The Sydney Opera House, and Jepe Utzon continues a rich family tradition through his work in the art of architecture.

WHERE THE ROAD TAKES YOU

Jepe Utzon's journey took some interesting twists and turns after school. After a short time at his uncle's firm, he left architecture for three years to start a company called Flicker Motion Graphics with an artist friend. "It was a lot of fun because it was totally different from architecture since we were working with different aspects of design," he notes. This experience gave Jepe invaluable hands-on time with graphic arts and motion design, which would later influence his work. He returned to the field of architecture in 2002 and incorporated more design work into his portfolio. Jepe now designs both residential and larger housing projects as well as kitchenware and electronics. How does he view architecture versus product design? "It's like the difference between doing a whole film score and one sound effect," he says. "In a house there are a lot of small design projects that all have to come together in symphony while in [product] design it's basically just one." He enjoys both.

Jepe comes from a family of well-known architects and designers. "Everybody is into something creative," he notes. His great-grandfather was a boat designer, and his grandfather Jørn was the 2003 Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate. When family discussions turn towards architecture, the architects all share the same basic ideology. "We pretty much agree—it's kind of hard to start a debate when you

all agree. Rather than talk about particular projects, we discuss the ideology in architecture—like what's good architecture and what's bad architecture, what's the wrong way to do it and what's the right way to do it—philosophical subjects," he says. "So in a way we communicate very well as we can separate style from ideology when discussing architecture. And our architectural styles do indeed differ in my family—we sculpt differently. For instance, I could do a more curvy architecture while my uncle would tend more towards straight lines. So we have a slightly different artistic tendency but we all try for honest architecture."

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Jeppé was drawn to architecture because of its blend of creative and mathematical aspects. "I've tried painting in art but it's really difficult when I don't have a brief. I'm more suited for solving problems." Amazingly, Jeppé's famous grandfather first discouraged him from becoming an architect. When Jeppé decided to abandon his lifelong dream of becoming a marine biologist to instead pursue architecture, Jørn urged him to reconsider, arguing that the field of architecture is a frustrating one as it is overwhelmingly likely that you will not design a single building with which you'll be completely satisfied. At least that was his experience. "And I think that's actually true," says Jeppé. "If you expect to go out and make the perfect building, you're going to die a very disappointed architect. Architecture is probably one of the most complex creative fields because so many people and trades have to collaborate to make a building. And the more people involved and the more complex the project, the harder it will be for you as an architect to stay in control. And basically some things will escape even the most diligent architect in each and every project. So you're never going to get exactly what you wanted. But I also think it's very interesting to not be in complete control. I think it is one of the most important aspects of architecture—one that makes architecture so interesting. You can't control everything—even though you try to some people will make decisions without asking you; you're going to think that something will work and it won't; you'll get some surprises that you didn't plan for. In fact, if you just get exactly what you expect, I think it would probably be boring. In the end, I firmly believe that what makes architecture frustrating is also what makes it so interesting. And as you mature as an architect it also seems you somehow learn to make the unpredictable or uncontrollable aspects work to your advantage in the respect that they make your designs even better."

Jeppé's philosophy has yielded some happy and unexpected results. For his innovative take on the barbecue—the Electrolux Jeppé Utzon BBQ—Jeppé won an Australian International Design Award in 2006 from Good Design Australia™, a prize also bestowed upon products from well-known brands like Samsung and Philips. He also received the U.S. Bottom Line Design Award in 2006 for "Ingenuity in Business Success," an honor also conferred upon Apple®. In 2010 Jeppé earned a grant from the Danish National Arts Foundation to further pursue



The sleek contemporary Electrolux Jeppé Utzon BBQ with movable cover panels that slide open to reveal the grill and hot plate.

design work. And in 2011-2012 he was appointed the architectural ambassador of Bo Bedre—the premier Danish design magazine.

A DESIGN FOR THE OTHER 355 DAYS

In 2003, Jeppé was approached by the appliance giant Electrolux to create a high-end barbecue for its Australian market. His inspiration for the grill was greatly influenced by his Danish background and native climate. "My basic view of barbecues was that they're really nice to cook on when you're barbecuing but when you're not barbecuing, they're in your way—and mostly ugly. If you barbecue ten times a year you have 355 days where you don't. So I was trying to tackle it as a problem—I wanted to make it useful when it's not in use." Jeppé designed a sleek contemporary stainless steel and Corian table with movable cover panels that slide open to reveal the grill and hot plate. These panels can be easily closed when not in use, rendering the grill a clean and beautiful patio table. The handcrafted barbecue sold out its first two production runs at a retail price of \$7,100 AUD.

Jeppé Utzon tackled several design issues as he developed concepts for the barbecue. The main hurdle however was to keep it simple. So instead of piling features upon features Jeppé tried to make the barbecue as simple as possible even though it was a technical product. He was pleased with the result, "It was fun to solve something so simple because there's only room for one or two ideas in a product like this. I like to simplify things—there's no need to complicate things because things get complicated all by themselves."

Working with Vectorworks® software and several other applications, Jeppé Utzon created the grill design in different perspectives and materials using a parallel workflow. With the Vectorworks program, he completed the elevation and plan sections. Then he created an actual handmade 3D model and even hand rendered the drawing for another look. He also used design software to draw the design in 3D and even wrote about it. This is the typical way that Jeppé approaches a project. "The more media you work in the better. It all helps. Every type of media has certain qualities with respect to revealing

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Designed to be handicap friendly, Æblehaven has no stairs and minimal doors.

a design's qualities and deficiencies and the more media you can translate your project into the better." Jepp Utzon will usually watch the 3D/animation sequence rendering as it develops over thirty minutes or more. "I also think it's very important to just sit still—to slow the process down." Jepp Utzon is thoughtful about the process of creating. In a world ruled by deadlines and quick turnarounds, he stresses the importance of taking enough time to complete a project well. "You never know when the idea will come. The longer I have to think about it, the better the chance I get a good idea," he says.

A HOUSE FOR ALL SEASONS

Through word of mouth, Jepp Utzon has received opportunities to design various residential projects, and one of the first was called Æblehaven. For this home, Jepp Utzon thought ahead to the next eight years, when one of the home's owners would be using a wheelchair due to a degenerative health issue. Jepp Utzon designed the entire house to be handicap friendly, with no stairs and minimal doors. In fact, the only interior door in the house is the bathroom door. Jepp Utzon also designed the house for versatility in entertaining. He fashioned large wool drapes that can be opened to create one

large airy space or closed for smaller rooms. These colorful drapes can also be easily moved for greater wheelchair accessibility.

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To create continuity throughout the house, Jepp Utzon customized every detail. He designed the ornate oak floor tiles and also designed the drapes in hues of orange and grey to match the sunset, which can be viewed from the westward facing house. Even the bricks, made perfect after many attempts, were fired in just the right temperature. Looking beyond aesthetics, Jepp Utzon also included about 30 closets to accommodate significant storage requirements. "All of this was custom made and was actually a lot of fun," he says. "The clients still call me about every three months and tell me how happy they are."

Æblehaven, located on the island of Funen in Denmark, took about three months to design and one year to build. "I designed it in Vectorworks and CINEMA 4D," Jepp Utzon says. "The most important feature of design software in my opinion is for a program to allow you to do exactly what you want to do and otherwise stay out of your way. I hate dialog boxes with a passion because every time one pops up you're being forcefully taken away from your work, and you have to make some kind of decision before you can return to your drawing. In the Vectorworks program I'm drawing on a piece of paper basically. I'm looking at it. I'm trying to get as close as possible to the classic way of drawing—and basically I just want a CAD app that is really good at drawing various types of lines. It shouldn't be technical but instead let me design as freely as possible. Most architects I know just want a good way to draw lines." He prefers Vectorworks software to other design software packages because "it's more aesthetic. It doesn't get in your way as much—it's a more intuitive and natural way to design. And while it has advanced features it doesn't force them upon you."

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The large wool drapes can be opened to create one large airy space or closed for smaller rooms.

INSPIRATIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

“Of course, my grandfather and my family,” Jeppé says when asked who has inspired him most. He also mentions 1987 Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate Kenzo Tange, the late Japanese architect who was credited for conceiving structuralism. And he’s nostalgic for the past. “Today, I think there’s a tendency to rush things too much. I don’t know why, actually. I think every architect wants as much time as possible, but maybe the clients are pushing and the architects aren’t demanding enough time. I think it’s important to have enough time to make it as good as you can make it. Time to contemplate and let your projects evolve and mature.” Jeppé’s views have changed since he first entered the field of architecture. “When you go to school you’re very idealistic and then when you come out the world works differently. I think with architecture, the bigger the project the more chance that it won’t go through. It only takes one thing to stop a project, and the

bigger the project, the more things can stop it. And if you play it safe and don’t challenge the client or the normal methods there’s a bigger chance that your project will go through—but your project will also be more boring. And generally life is much too short to do boring projects.”

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