DESIGN 218

Who won the competition?

On 29 January 1957, Premier Cahill announced the winner: an unknown 38-year-old Dane from Hellebæk, with Design 218.

Jørn Utzon sent twelve drawings from a modest office north of Copenhagen. The assessors came back to them again and again, and wrote that they were convinced they presented a concept "capable of becoming one of the great buildings of the world."

When	What happened
1955–56	Bennelong Point was declared the site. On 15 February 1956, Premier Cahill released an international competition for "a National Opera House at Bennelong Point." The guidelines came in a 25-page booklet known as the Brown Book.
December 1956	Utzon sent twelve drawings to Sydney just before the competition closed. His design was numbered 218, one of the last of more than 223 entries received from 28 countries. He received £5,000 for the winning design.
29 January 1957	"Premier Cahill announced that the winner of the competition was Design 218 by Jørn Utzon, the unknown 38-year-old Dane from Hellebæk." The assessors added: "Because of its very originality, it is clearly a controversial design. We are however, absolutely convinced of its merits."
2 March 1959	A crowd gathered "under umbrellas, in the rain." Utzon had brought a bronze plaque. Premier Joseph Cahill "screwed the plaque into place and jackhammering immediately began." The plaque can still be seen on the steps today.

A roof no one had built before

Unique among the entries, Utzon placed the halls side by side, "their shell-shaped roofs cantilevering out over the end of Bennelong Point, evoking Sydney's cliffs and the sails on its harbour." Between 1958 and 1962 the roof design moved through parabolic and ellipsoid geometry, and then to a sphere — so the pieces could be prefabricated, and tiled as a single pattern.

A fifteen-minute meeting

At noon on 28 February 1966, Utzon met the minister Davis Hughes in Bridge Street. After a meeting of barely 15 minutes, he walked out. Hughes told the press that Utzon had resigned. On 3 March, a thousand people marched on State Parliament, led by the architect Harry Seidler and the author Patrick White, asking that he be reinstated.

A short quiz

1. What number was Utzon's winning design given?
2. On which date did jackhammering begin on Bennelong Point?
3. Who led the march on State Parliament on 3 March 1966, with Patrick White?

Answers. 1. 218. 2. 2 March 1959. 3. The architect Harry Seidler.

Sources: sydneyoperahouse.com, "Jørn Utzon AC," "Interesting facts about Sydney Opera House," "Construction begins," "The spherical solution," and "Utzon departs the House," checked 17 November 2026.