A Search for Understanding:

The Architecture of R.J. Ferguson.

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Abstract.

This thesis is an historical study examining the work of Western Australian architect Ronald Jack (Gus) Ferguson (1931-). It argues that the regional practice of R.J Ferguson was one developed out of a global postwar “anxiety” over the role of architecture in a rapidly changing world, and is the result of a complex interplay of geo-political factors specific to Western Australia. Following an extensive tour of Africa, Europe and Asia between 1957 and 1960, Ferguson set out on what he termed a “search for architectural understanding”: seeking out lessons and principles drawn from a variety of traditional architectural practices as a way to mediate this anxiety.

Motivated by Perth’s geographic isolation, Ferguson’s search involved extensive travel, research and application, resulting in a practice that relied on evolving relationships between regional and global traditions. Through an exploration of Ferguson’s work between 1960 and 1975, this study contributes to a better understanding of the conditions which directly affected his practice, including geography, harsh climatic conditions, an active local discourse, and the pragmatics of construction.

The thesis explores three key campus projects: the Hale School Memorial Hall (1961); The University of Western Australia campus buildings, including the Law School (1967), the Sports Centre (1970), and the Student Guild (1972); and Murdoch University, Stage One (1975). These significant built works demonstrate the way in which Ferguson worked to construct a personal, locally responsive architectural language, through the careful study and application of lessons learnt during his extensive travels. The research focusses particularly on his interests in the vernacular traditions of the Mediterranean, Japan, and colonial Australia along with an interest in contemporary European modernism centred on the work of Le Corbusier. Underpinning Ferguson’s practice is the relationship between his search for architectural understanding, and his consistent and pioneering use of off-form concrete in Australia.

Through a close examination of these projects, this thesis provides new insights into a major Western Australian practice, and adds to a broader understanding of the diverse nature of postwar modern Australian architecture.
Declaration:

This is to certify that this thesis comprises only my original work towards the degree of Master of Philosophy.

Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used.

This thesis is fewer than 50,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed,

Andrew Murray
Preface:

This research project developed out of a keen interest, and long held admiration for the work of R.J. Ferguson.

Despite being widely celebrated, it is easy to ignore quite how pervasive and present the work of R.J. Ferguson and his practice, Ferguson Architects is in Western Australia. I have spent much of my life in and out of his buildings. I holidayed often at Rottnest Island, usually staying in his villas. I went to my first high school dance in a Ferguson Hall at St Hilda’s, I completed my Bachelors and Masters of Architecture in a Ferguson Building, and later worked in this building. My sister spent 5 years in his UWA Law School, my father was among the first cohort of students through his WAIT Art and Design buildings.

Throughout my degrees at UWA, I was always curious about Ferguson’s buildings, and particularly, what on earth the ‘sun symbol’ impressed onto all the buildings meant. Lecturers told us stories about it being an ancient hex to keep elephants away from the University. This sounded ridiculous, but they would always ask, ‘well do you see any elephants?’

This research project developed from these interests. The desire to know more about strange, and modest architecture of Ferguson that is pervasive throughout Perth, so often dismissed or just accepted as fact. As my interest in architectural history and theory developed, an interest in his work continued. The two years I spent researching his work, and the many more I spent inside them, have been incredibly rewarding, and this project in some way hopes to offer something back in return. It aims to illuminate his buildings that are so generous and so carefully constructed, and to demonstrate that they deserve further study and discussion.
Acknowledgements:

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of my two supervisors, Hannah Lewi and Philip Goad, and I am forever grateful for their generosity, encouragement and continued support. Julie Willis, the third member of the advisory panel, was extremely generous with her time, suggestions and encouragement. Thank you.

This thesis depended on the support and time of many people. Many interviews and discussions were had. A short list of those central to the thesis include: Anthony Brand, Peter Bruechle, Simon Holthouse, Duncan Richards, Robert Hanlin, Peter Deakins, John McLean, Katrina Chisholm, Graham Hutton, Simon Anderson, and Romesh Goonewardene.

The extensive archival research I undertook was also enabled by the following people, and their help was invaluable. These include: Barbara Johnson and Fiore Giovannangelo (Hale School); Maria Carvalho, Christina Garnett, Catherine Parish (UWA Archives); John Farley (Murdoch University Archives); Patsy Vizents (Rottnest Island Archives); Ursula Brimble (Curtin University/WAIT Archives); along with the staff at the SRO WA, SLWA, and the UoM Architecture library.

Thanks to Mum, Dad, and Louise for the support and never ending phone calls, discussions and research assistance! Thanks to Clare for the support, suggestions and feedback. I couldn’t have done it without you.

Finally, a special thanks to Gus Ferguson. Thank you for opening your doors and archive to a clueless student. I will never forget the conversations we had, and it has been an honour to spend time researching your practice.
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Abbreviations used throughout this thesis:

PTC = Perth Technical College.
WA = Western Australia.
AIA WA = Australian Institute of Architects Western Australia. (Formerly the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Western Australia RAIA WA).
UWA = University of Western Australia.
WAIT = Western Australian Institute of Technology.
BFS = Brand, Ferguson & Solarski.
CPB = Chamberlin, Powell and Bon.
AUC = Australian Universities Commission.
TEC = Tertiary Education Commission.
CIAM = Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne.
PWD = Public Works Department.
Chapter 1. Introduction.

Since graduating from the Perth Technical College (PTC) in 1955, Ronald Jack (Gus) Ferguson (b. 1931), and his ongoing practice Ferguson Architects, have been a significant presence in both Western Australian and Australian architecture. Locally celebrated, the work of Ferguson has often been singled out as being representative of Western Australia’s contribution to Australian architecture. However, the work is yet to be the subject of any substantial analysis and critique, or inserted into a broader postwar architectural discourse in Australia. Best known for the University of Western Australia (UWA) Law School Building (1967), his work is usually discussed in terms of its contextual responses, and its attachment to a local “romantic school”. But the basis for these characterisations is yet to be interrogated. This thesis will explore the nature of his practice focussing on the period from 1960-1975, providing a nuanced account of Ferguson’s work and the ways in which it challenges the current understanding of Australian regional architecture.

As defined by Vincent B. Canizaro, regionalism is “the preeminent discourse in architecture that focuses on design in terms of particularity and locale.” Regionalism has played an important role in Australian architectural history as a way to understand the complexity and variety of practice present in Australian architecture. Philip Goad has described this condition, equating Australia to an archipelago: “Each Australian city is an island within a much larger landscape…[which makes] the notion of a coherent Australian architecture impossible to pinpoint.” And yet, despite the enormity of the country and the diversity of its regional identities, the specific character of Australia’s regional architecture has been little addressed. Traditionally, Australian architecture has been presented as a discourse that operated between the two centres of Melbourne and Sydney, and much work has been done examining the regional differences between the cities. However, architecture outside these centres has often been framed as a regionalism driven by responses to climate and landscape, rather the possible political, economic, or social factors. Jennifer Taylor illustrates this in her seminal book, *Australian Architecture since 1960*, where much of this regional work is featured in chapters titled “Attuned to the Land” and “Building for the North.” The latter notably divides the

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country into “northerners” and “southerners”, driven by climate and fashion respectively. Taylor’s discussion is more nuanced than this simple distinction, but it perpetuates an idea that architecture outside the centre is primarily produced in response to the natural environment that is still being challenged. There has been a range of excellent scholarship exploring the specific regional character of Australia, and research centres like Architecture Theory Criticism History (ATCH) in Queensland and The Architecture Museum at the University of South Australia in Adelaide have taken significant steps in recent years to redress the lack of regional scholarship, along with a series of publications, exhibitions and theses.

An example of this scholarship can be found in the writing of Geoffrey London and Simon Anderson. Building on the work of eminent Western Australian architectural historian Duncan Richards, they have identified the independent and distinct nature of architectural culture in Western Australia, one they suggest is more aligned with Europe than the east coast of Australia. This categorisation, London suggests, “led to a certain distance and independence from other modernist works in Australia which was more than geographic.” As an often identified representative of Western Australian architecture in national survey texts, Ferguson provides a useful example to examine, allowing significant insight into the distinct regional nature of the state.

But what is the nature of Ferguson’s architectural practice? In the introduction to his self-published book of travel photography, Architectural Images (2000), Ferguson provides a clear starting point:

The purpose of this collection of photographs is not to make a great architectural or photographic statement, but simply to put between two covers some images of buildings, details and places that have impacted on a personal search for architectural understanding.

5 Taylor, Australian Architecture since 1960, 116.
Understanding the precise nature of this “search” and how this informed his practice, forms the basis of this thesis. The idea of a “search” is a recurring theme in the postwar period as architects struggled with a “new world”, characterised by a series of dramatic scientific, technological and cultural advances, and an emerging working and middle-class prosperity. Manfredo Tafuri characterised this struggle as a “vague but widespread sense of crisis”, in which architects could only “launch anxious feelers towards an uncertain future.” This condition was later described by Sarah Williams Goldhagen and Rejean Legault as an “anxiety about the adequacy of their architectural culture to cope with and positively influence society in its new state.” Architects dealt with this uncertainty in many ways, including that which Goldhagen and Legault describe as ‘a search for the “authentic”’ – one which might “ameliorate the fast-paced impermanence and alienating individuality of consumer culture.” Ferguson’s undertaking of a “search” springs from this condition. His “search for architectural understanding” is largely a search for what separates architecture, from simply building. It is a search for properties which allows architecture to make a necessary and useful contribution to a society in a rapidly changing world. Responding to place was simply a part of this process.

Ferguson’s search was the result of a global postwar anxiety and the regional practice he developed provides an excellent example to examine how this unfolded in a place outside the mainstream discourse.

This thesis argues that Ferguson’s regionalism is not something immediately arrived at. His practice is the result of a sustained investigation into the essential qualities of architecture. Necessitated by Perth’s isolation, his search involved extensive travel, research, and testing, initiating a local relationship with global building traditions. After a period of travelling and working across Africa and London, Ferguson carefully documented traditional architectural practices across Europe and Asia, including those in Greece, Italy, Turkey, Iran, India, and Japan. Much of his “anxiety” was in the dominance of the thin and spiritually bereft International Style of the 1950s. The architectural traditions he encountered offered a starting point for Ferguson to mitigate what he saw as a transient, lightweight movement, allowing him to make a meaningful contribution to a community through building.

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15 Ferguson, “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?” 40.
During his travels Ferguson became interested in the potentials of béton brut, which is concrete left untreated after the formwork is removed, “a concrete whose surface bore the traces of the grain of the wooden moulds, the imprint of the building process.” Offering flexibility, a constructional logic, and textural interest, concrete provided Ferguson with a medium with which to navigate the postwar condition. Significantly, it offered a way to mediate between the need for modern progress and to engage with his interest in traditional building practices. Adrian Forty has identified this dual role the material plays, noting both its modernity and its “telluric backwardness.” These two interests, traditional architecture and béton brut, provided Ferguson with the tools to undertake his search, providing both a medium and a process with which to critique the changing role of architecture in the postwar period.

Ferguson has stated that: “We were then, and still are, trying to build an Australian building.” He is clearly interested in an architecture that directly engages with place, yet his practice does not rely exclusively on forming a close relationship to the natural environment. It is a constructed and complex practice that aims to engage with the specific and changing nature of Western Australia in the postwar period. This study will examine the work of Ferguson and the context in which it is produced, providing a more comprehensive account of his work and the diversity evident in the notion of Australian regionalism.

Methodology.

This research project is an historical study of a single architect, R.J. Ferguson, and his practice, R.J. Ferguson Architects, over a fifteen-year period from 1960-1975. The research methods engage a wide range of what Andrew Leach calls the accepted “pool of evidence” which allows the full study of architecture’s “relations with artefacts, settings and historical problems.” The evidence used includes buildings, drawings, photographs, correspondence, interviews, conversations and ephemera. The research relies on primary data collection, document and literature analysis, and oral histories to gain an understanding of the work of Ferguson and its relationship to postwar Australian architecture.

To ground the examination of the case studies, the context in which Ferguson’s practice unfolds will be closely examined. Andrew Leach writes on the character of geo-political history and the need to “negotiate the balance of the general with the particular: how far can we read an

18 Ferguson interviewed by Alra.
20 Leach, *What is Architectural History?* 76
individual architect’s work as an index of his or her generation?"21 This thesis engages with this proposition, by situating the work of Ferguson within a much broader field, not only that of Western Australia, but globally, which as Goad and Willis have noted, any new history of Australian architecture must not be an “entirely localised interpretation.”22 The thesis looks at three built case studies and places them within a wider discursive field, drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse as outlined by Paul Hirst:

The practice of the construction, inclusion and exclusion of objects can be related to the rules and patterns of such formations. We can thus bridge the gap between theory in architecture and spatial constructs, not merely by treating constructs as examples of a theory, but by examining how discourses enter into construction and how, in consequence, buildings or planned environments become statements… We can supersede the problem of the ‘gap’ between intellectual influences on architects and the practice of construction.23

The ability to bridge this gap is relevant to this thesis as it allows the readings of the buildings with, and separate to, the written or discussed intentions of the architect. Ferguson wrote often on his work and travels, but these “declared intentions” can only illuminate a project to a certain degree. By examining the buildings as part of a much broader field, the thesis aligns with Hirst’s formulation that, “Constructed objects can be considered as components of a discursive formation.”24 The thesis thus explores these built and written works within the context from which they are produced, including the pedagogical, social and economic atmosphere that characterised Perth and Western Australia in the postwar period.

**Primary Sources.**

The ability to read a building outside its author’s intentions is important for this thesis. However, in the first instance, this study relies heavily on the archives and interviews conducted with R.J. Ferguson. His work has been rarely published outside of a few key projects and so access to the office files and other archives became important sources. Information pertaining to his time at PTC and to the early years of practice with Brand, Ferguson & Solarzki are difficult to find, and his personal archives are incomplete. Ferguson regularly culls older material, particularly drawings and negatives, so drawing archives were not always available. The office, however, keeps a large selection of brochures, photographs, presentation drawings, job file

21 Leach, *What is Architectural History?* 60.
books and reports which were invaluable to this study. Ferguson participated in a series of recorded long form interviews with the author, along with regularly maintained contact, including emails, phone calls and informal conversations between 2015-2017. These proved invaluable in constructing the early narrative of his career. Ferguson also made available to the author a full set of his self-published photography books which were indispensable, allowing insight into his travels and interests.

Other informal interviews and conversations were conducted with key people involved in both Ferguson’s life and Western Australian architecture generally. Peter Bruechle (b. 1932), an engineer who worked with Ferguson and with whom he shared an office for many years was formally interviewed. Simon Holthouse, Ferguson’s second employee, and later associate took part in a semi-formal phone interview, as did Anthony Brand, Ferguson’s first business partner, class-mate and architect of the Hale School Campus. Duncan Richards, noted architectural historian specialising in Western Australian history, was also interviewed via email, over a period of many months, in the form of structured questions and casual discussions. Whilst valuable for his historiographical insights of the period, Richards also studied architecture at PTC at the same time as Ferguson, and worked together in the office of Hawkins and Sands in the late 1950s. Having his considerable personal experience was invaluable. Robert Hanlin, a previous Hawkins & Sands employee, architect of the Mosman Park Deaf School, who assisted Ferguson in constructing test panels for the UWA Law School, took part in a semi-structured phone interview. Peter Deakins, who worked with Ferguson at Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, and later accompanied him on his overland trip from 1958-59 was approached via email, answering a series of informal questions. Brief discussions were had with Graeme Langley, Ferguson’s project architect for the WAIF. Katrina Chisholm, heritage consultant and former employee at Ferguson’s office for many years, provided invaluable assistance with research help and access to databases. Graham Hutton, grandson of Charles Peter Bransgrove, Ferguson’s employer in Tanzania was also contacted, and an attempt to locate Ferguson’s work in the Bransgrove office was made. This proved to be unsuccessful, but remains a task for a later project. The personal communication and interviews conducted were invaluable for this thesis, and provided many key insights into his work and the Perth architectural scene during the period of study.

Despite the lack of a formal archive at Ferguson Architects, the drawing archives of the case study buildings proved useful. The University of Western Australia archives were employed extensively, along with the university’s photographic archive. Archives at Hale School yielded

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25 A detailed list of interviews and other communication undertaken during the thesis can be found in the bibliography.
key drawings and photographs but little in the way of correspondence. The archives at Murdoch University were useful for their committee records and newspaper clippings but little in the way of drawing records were found. The drawings that were found allowed for a detailed examination of the buildings, the materials and construction methods used. They provided a clear picture of what was built, and any changes were made to the designs during and after construction.

The State Library of Western Australia (SLWA) was consulted for its extensive holdings of issues of *The West Australian* newspaper, *Aedicule* magazine, oral histories, and reports. The SLWA holds the only publicly available interview of Ferguson as part of their Oral history collection, carried out by Curtin University student Robyn Alra in the late 1980s.26 The State Records Office of Western Australia (SRO WA) provided useful material on the government school work and Rottnest Island projects undertaken by Ferguson. The Australian Institute of Architects Western Australia (AIA WA) provided access to their extensive holdings of *The Architect WA*, as did the National Library of Australia, which held issues otherwise unavailable. Archives of Ferguson’s contemporaries were also examined and provided valuable insights. The Antoni Solarski (1920-1975) archive, held at the SLWA, was useful to ascertain further early projects of Brand, Ferguson & Solarski. The archive of Peter Parkinson (1925-2014), notable architectural commentator, also held at the SLWA, was examined for useful leads and helped in understanding the critical atmosphere of Perth’s architectural scene.

An important resource was local journal, *The Architect WA*. The official journal of the AIA WA, it remains the key document of the WA architectural community from 1939 onwards and provided an enormous amount of material and context. Ferguson wrote often for the journal, and it is the main source for his published projects and contemporary criticism of his work. The journal was invaluable in providing details of the discourse environment in Perth in the 1950s and 1960s, and this will be discussed in detail throughout the thesis.

**Case Study Approach.**

This thesis follows a case study approach as defined by Yin: “A case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context.”27 The research focusses on three major campus projects, Hale School Memorial Hall (1961), The University of Western Australia (1963-72) and Murdoch University (1975). It also examines a key essay written by Ferguson in

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26 R.J. Ferguson, interviewed by Robyn Alra, no date. Oral History collection, State Library of Western Australia. This interview is part of a series completed for a history unit at Curtin University under the supervision of Duncan Richards in the late 1980s.

1963 that discusses an early formation of his ideology, “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?”

Together, these projects are considered canonical within Ferguson’s practice and provide a clear unfolding of the formative years of his “search.”

The built projects examined in this thesis are all extant and in generally very good condition. This has allowed them to be recorded, documented and compared with other data recovered, including photographs, drawings and interviews. This approach also allows for a further understanding of the architectural process, accepting that a range of factors will influence the final built outcome, and the changes that occur between drawing board and construction site.

Whilst none of Ferguson’s buildings are currently heritage-listed, because the work is largely institutional they have fortunately fared better than many other buildings from the same period. UWA, in particular, has tight controls over development on its Crawley campus, and the buildings are in excellent condition. This allowed for much useful information to be gathered and observed from field work trips, undertaken between 2015-2017. Numerous site visits were taken to all three of the case study sites, as well as other extant works by Ferguson around Perth. These site visits were documented by extensive photography.

The works chosen demonstrate different stages of Ferguson’s career. All are educational campus projects, and respond to specific contextual environments. The Hale School Memorial Hall was his first major work, completed as project architect for another practice. The three works on the UWA campus were his first jobs as a sole practitioner, and demonstrate his ability to engage with a significant existing heritage campus. Finally, Murdoch University provided Ferguson with the opportunity to design a complete campus, on an open greenfield site. The majority of Ferguson’s practice to date has been institutional campus design, both educational and other, and these case studies represent the diversity of his early campus work. Central to Ferguson’s ideology is the relationship between a building and its community, and these relations are condensed in a campus context, allowing for important aspects of his ideology to be tested and illustrated.

**Scope of the Thesis.**

The thesis is arranged chronologically and covers Ferguson’s time studying architecture at PTC, his extensive overseas travel and early working career, before focussing on his practice between 1960 and 1975. As such, the scope of the thesis is geographically limited to Western Australia, and to those buildings completed by Ferguson, acting as lead or design architect from 196 to 1975. This fifteen-year period was one of incredible activity for Ferguson. A job book for R.J.

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28 Ferguson, “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?,” 40.
Ferguson Architects lists over 100 projects from its commencement in 1964 to 1970, covering a range of work including houses, units, schools, and public infrastructure. This thesis does not intend to provide a taxonomical account of Ferguson’s career. Rather, this thesis specifically investigates three built works and his 1963 essay “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?” in order to examine the precise nature of his search for understanding.

**Limitations.**

There have been several limitations on this thesis, with the most significant being the absence of drawing archives. While drawing records of all buildings were found, these were in a number of locations and mostly construction documents, which made tracking design changes, development and alternate schemes almost impossible. Ferguson has a comprehensive archive, but one that he reduces regularly, and most of the drawings from this period of study have been destroyed. Photographs of the projects were also sourced from Ferguson and various archives, but there is a limited amount of photo documentation, particularly of the Hale School Memorial Hall. Ferguson’s record of his own travel photography is comprehensive, but photography of his own projects is limited. Publicity brochures produced by the firm became the most useful source. Due to the reduction of Ferguson’s main archive, tracking down projects completed in the early 1960s was made difficult, and a wider survey of work from this period was not possible.

Another limitation was the loss of many key protagonists related to the case study projects. Almost all of the people involved in the planning, and procurement of Hale, UWA and Murdoch have passed away, and there was little insight to be gained institutionally beyond the committee meetings minutes into the commissioning of these projects. Many of Ferguson’s Western Australian contemporaries have also died, including his early business partner Antoni Solarski.

However these limitations did not adversely affect the research. Through alternate sources including dispersed archives, newspaper journal articles, combined with access to Gus Ferguson and many of his associates, a robust picture was able to be developed.

**Current Literature.**

The work of R. J. Ferguson has been well recognised amongst the Perth architectural community and the public, attracting a series of awards and accolades throughout his career. His first major recognition came in 1956 when he was awarded the inaugural Morawetz travel prize, allowing him to travel the world after graduation. In 1960 he entered the competition for the new Perth City Hall with PTC colleagues Anthony Brand and Bill Weedon and was awarded third place. His first major project, the Hale School Memorial Hall, was awarded the Building
of the Year 1962 by *Architecture and Arts* magazine, and later awarded the RIBA Bronze Medal for WA Architecture in 1961. The UWA Law School was awarded the RIBA Bronze Medal in 1969, and recently the 2010 AIA WA Enduring Architecture Prize. The practice has won the Clay Brick Award multiple times, and received numerous citations from the AIA WA. Ferguson has also been awarded the 1991 Architects Board Award, the 1998 Murdoch University Senate Award, and he was awarded an honorary doctorate by UWA in 2000. However, apart from the early RIBA awards, there has been little recognition of his work at a national level.

The only academic analysis of the practice to date has been an undergraduate thesis written by Glen Robinson in 1985, and an undergraduate report by D.G Grigg, both carried out at UWA. Robinson’s report provides valuable information in its chronology of works and selection of interviews carried out between the author and Ferguson. Grigg’s report is, at this stage, unfortunately lost. Ferguson’s work has been covered in a series of articles published in *The Architect WA*, which reflect on his practice. The most significant of these is an article published in 1983 written by the practice Donaldson Smith Architects, entitled “Gus Ferguson.” Although brief, the article provides the most succinct and insightful appraisal of his work to date. Simon Anderson’s article on Ferguson’s work at Rottnest Island is another recent critique that provides a nuanced and discerning account of his practice.

Ferguson’s early projects were often published in contemporary architectural journals. The Victorian journal *Cross-Section* called the Hale School Memorial Hall “courageous”, and regularly published Ferguson’s work, along with *Architecture and Arts*, and *Architecture in Australia*. His work was frequently covered in *The Architect WA*, which also detailed aspects of his student life, early travel reports, and photographic essays. Ferguson was repeatedly featured in the architecture columns of the *West Australian* and *The Sunday Times* newspapers.

Ferguson himself wrote widely, particularly in the early years of his career. He wrote several articles for *The Architect WA*, mostly documenting recent travels, along with heritage studies of Western Australian towns, and was a regular columnist in the *West Australian* newspaper, under

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32 *Cross-Section*, 123 (January 1963).
34 Examples in *The West Australian* newspaper include: “River House,” August 12, 1961; “House has Putting Green on Veranda,” January 20, 1962, 12.
a pseudonym. He has also self-published seven books of his photographs taken during his extensive overseas travels.

While there has been little scholarly attention of his work, it features in most national survey texts. Robin Boyd mentions the UWA Law School in his 1967 article “The State of Australian Architecture”, as representative of the “Western Sunrise”, and J.M. Freeland includes an image of the Hale School Memorial Hall as the opening plate in his final chapter of *Architecture in Australia*. His housing work at Rottnest Island is featured in Howard Tanner’s *Australian Housing in the Seventies*. In Jennifer Taylor’s *Australian Architecture since 1960*, his work is split across three chapters, the “Rational and the Robust”, “Living and Partly Living” and “Attuned to the Land”. Taylor’s book features the largest coverage of his work to date, including the University of Western Australia, Murdoch University, Hale School Memorial Hall, Rottnest Island, The Oyster Beds Restaurant in Fremantle and the West Australian Institute of Technology. More recently his work has appeared in Philip Goad’s *New Directions in Australian Architecture*, along with an entry written by Simon Anderson in the *Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*. The Hale School Memorial Hall and the UWA Law School are both included in the forthcoming book, *MODERN: Australian Modernism in Architecture, Landscape and Design*, outlining 100 key modern buildings in Australia.

Ferguson’s practice is one of only a few that have been used to represent Western Australia at a national level. This is demonstrated by its appearance in Apperly, Irving and Reynolds’ *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture*, where it is given the stylistic label “Late Twentieth Century Perth Regional”, shared with contemporaries Julius Elischer, Peter Overman and John Flower. In Freeland’s *Architecture in Australia*, Ferguson’s Hale School Hall is one of two postwar projects featured from WA, and in *Australian Architecture since 1960*, Ferguson is one of four practices chosen to represent the state. Through acting as a representative of Western Australia, his work has come to exemplify the regional character of the state. His buildings have been variously described as “regional”, “romantic”, and “relaxed”, and these generalisations have consequently come to define his work, despite that lack of scholarship to

38 Taylor, *Australian Architecture since 1960*.
39 Goad, *New Directions in Australian Architecture*, 16.
43 Other practices include Forbes and Fitzhardinge, Cameron Chisholm and Nicol, and Peter Overman.
examine the ideological motivations underpinning these descriptions. While it could not be said that his work has been ignored in the broader discourse, it has been severely undervalued. Without critical appraisal, the ideological foundation of his work has been misconstrued. This thesis takes preliminary steps towards providing a more nuanced account that challenges those generalised assumptions.

**Thesis Structure and Key Questions.**

This thesis poses the following question: what is the nature of R.J. Ferguson’s postwar architectural practice? The aim of this thesis is to better understand the regional character of R.J. Ferguson’s work, and ask how this can reflect and contribute to a centralised discourse. Through this investigation, the research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the diverse nature of postwar Australian architecture, particularly from the regions. The research also looks to investigate the manner in which ideas and overseas experience can be “brought home”, including material experience, construction methods, and formal responses. Through this, the thesis will also provide the groundwork for further studies into the regional character of Western Australia in the postwar period.

The thesis begins with an introduction to the three dominant themes that are central to Ferguson’s practice: concrete, regionalism, and travel. This sets the context and framework for the study, along with key biographical details. The first case study is detailed in Chapter 3, examining The Hale School Memorial Hall, Ferguson’s first major project, completed as project architect under Anthony Brand and Marshall Clifton in 1961. Chapter 4 looks at the essay “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?”, written in 1963 and published in *The Architect WA*. The chapter uses this piece to not only explore aspects of Ferguson’s ideology, but to ground the theories of Ferguson in the context of Western Australian architecture, which had a flourishing and active local discourse in this period. The work at UWA is described in Chapter 5, Ferguson’s first major commission after forming his own practice in 1964, and the chapter examines the first three buildings he completed on that campus, The Law School, The Sports Centre and The Guild Building. Chapter 6 comprises the final case study, Murdoch University, which was Ferguson’s opportunity to design an entire university campus from the very beginning, and as such provides a compelling insight into his mature design practice. The concluding chapter draws together the work of Ferguson and articulates its importance in furthering an understanding of regional architectural traditions and conditions in Australia in the postwar period. It details a range of Ferguson’s work that was being carried out concurrently with Murdoch University, and suggests further scholarship to be pursued.
Chapter 2. Setting the Scene – Before the Search.

This chapter examines three elements that significantly contribute to Ferguson’s practice; regionalism, travel and concrete, situated in the cultural and economic landscape of Western Australia. It introduces Ferguson, and establishes the context which led him to commence a search for architectural understanding.

Ronald Jack Ferguson, known as Gus, was born on November 26, 1931 in Kalgoorlie, a town 600km east of Perth and the centre of Western Australia’s gold rush in the 1890s, to Dorothea Bella Ventice and John Ferguson, a manual training teacher and champion footballer with the local Kalgoorlie Kangas. In 1938, John was sent to Perth to play elite football and the family moved to South Fremantle while Gus attended primary school. He continued his education at the Alma Street Primary School, later transferring to Richmond Primary when the family moved to East Fremantle. Ferguson began high school at Fremantle Boys School, before moving to Perth Modern, the prestigious, selective school, where he sat his entrance exams, and was awarded a scholarship to study architecture at Perth Technical College (PTC) in 1949.

![Figure 1: R.J. Ferguson.](image)


Ferguson recalls having no ambition to enter the architecture profession, his only experience previously being that, due to his father’s teaching, there was always a drawing board and pencils at home with which he used to experiment. Ferguson began at PTC in 1949 and after his second year he started part time work with the architect Reginald Summerhayes (1897-1965), designing service stations and educational buildings. He soon dropped out of his course to work for Summerhayes full time, but returned to PTC two years later. In the final years of college, Ferguson became involved with architect Eric Leach, the studio leader running the night course esquisse, who invited Ferguson to join him at the practice he shared with well-known architect Marshall Clifton, who was then travelling around Europe. When Clifton returned from his
travels, the partnership split, leaving Leach and Ferguson to run the office together for a brief period. Due to his employment break, Ferguson took seven years to complete the usual five-year course, graduating in 1955 with an Associateship in Architecture. His final year thesis was on “The House”, which was an intensive investigation into “the way people live and what they need to live properly.”

In 1956 Ferguson was awarded the inaugural Morawetz travel prize of 800 pounds, which provided a modest sum for travelling, enabling him to embark on three-year tour of the world. Before leaving, Ferguson remained for a period in Perth to work for Hawkins and Sands, a progressive modern practice in Perth filled with recent émigrés from Europe, including Antoni Solarski from the Polish School in Liverpool and Peter Parkinson, a graduate of the Architectural Association (AA). With enough money saved, and the proceeds of the prize, Ferguson travelled to Africa, before living in London for 18 months, and finally travelling across Europe and Asia.

Upon his return to Perth, Ferguson lectured part time at PTC, and worked again with Hawkins and Sands, before entering into practice with Anthony Brand in 1960 as Brand and Ferguson. In 1961, Brand and Ferguson approached Antoni Solarski to join them, and the practice of Brand, Ferguson and Solarski (BFS) was created, running for three short but productive years before disbanding in 1964. Best known for their private residential work, BFS also completed a large number of primary schools for the government. In 1964 Ferguson commenced a private solo practice which continues to operate today.

**Ferguson and Regionalism.**

Ferguson’s work has readily attracted the regionalist tag, and has often been used to represent Western Australian architecture in national publications. In *Australian Architecture Since 1960*, Jennifer Taylor notes that his work demonstrates a “response to regional conditions”, but doesn’t precisely elaborate how, beyond the use of the verandah, and its low-key contextual responses. Irving and Apperley attribute his work as “Late Twentieth-Century Perth Regional”, while Ian Molyneux notes his use of the “vernacular verandah”, clearly situating his work as part of a local “romantic” school. But despite the repeated classification of his work as an example of Western Australian regionalism, the motivations and ideologies behind the work and what leads to this classification, have not been interrogated.

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44 Personal Communication with R.J. Ferguson, September 2017.
The idea of regionalism, a “discourse in architecture that focuses on design in terms of particularity and locale” that in some way resists the mainstream discourse, has persisted for centuries. Alan Colquhoun has shown its evidence in critical discourse since the eighteenth century, closely linked to the rise of the centralised nation-state and its continuation into the twentieth century. Despite the apparent monolith of the early modern movement, regional attitudes were clearly evident in various strains of modernism, in what Sarah Goldhagen calls “situated modernism” – “practiced by architects keen to redress ideas of dislocation, and a ‘disorientation of self.’” These critiques of a singular modernity gathered steam in the late 1940s and 1950s, seen in the writing of critics like Lewis Mumford and his characterisation of the so-called “Bay Region Style”, and movements like the “New Humanism”, “New Empiricism” and even “New Regionalism” named by Sigfried Giedion in 1954, which promoted “a respect for individuality and a desire to satisfy the emotional material needs of each area.” Paul Rudolph writing in 1957 in *Perspecta* further added to the dissent, noting “Regionalism is one way toward that richness in architecture which other movements have enjoyed and which is so lacking today.” By the late 1950s, there was an identifiable concern over architecture’s relation to place which fed into a widespread questioning over the future of modern architecture.

These concerns were echoed in Australia, which was experiencing a period of enormous cultural growth in the late 1950s following the end of wartime rationing and recession. Seen across literature, art and politics, there was a renewed interest in ideas of national identity, largely centred on shifting international relationships. Architects in Western Australia, particularly students, participated in this discourse, and increasingly became interested and aware of the

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54 See the work of Patrick White, Sidney Nolan, the construction of the ‘cultural cringe’ and Robin Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness* (1960) for examples that characterise this period of interrogation.
need to acknowledge place. Ferguson’s 1963 article “Has Australia Achieved an Australian Idiom?” demonstrates parallel concerns with Giedion and Rudolph. He writes:

A structure which meets the clients pocket, satisfies the direct physical function and is of sound construction can be a very fine building but on top this must have emotional content to be architecture... It is this shaping for climate and enjoyment which will subconsciously tell an Australian story.

The global regional discourse that emerged in the immediate postwar period, from which Ferguson’s article arises, has been categorised by Lefaivre and Tzonis as the “third phase” of regionalism, “free of the nationalist, racist connotations of conservative regionalism, as a critical movement.”Kenneth Frampton later categorised this as critical regionalism: a formulation that aims to “mediate the impact of universal civilisation with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place.” But Frampton’s theory, which tended towards the phenomenological and the general, was later widely criticized for what Mark Crinson describes as “overly generalised ideas of the nation, and of ‘becoming modern’” and what Paul Walker calls a theory of the specific, or “a single universal argument.” Crinson and Walker have shown the deficiencies in Frampton’s critical regionalism through its universalising nature, its lack of political and economic engagement, and – particularly relevant for Ferguson – the difficulties in applying it to a post-colonial setting, located far from the “centre.”

With this in mind, viewing Ferguson’s work through an idea of regionalism promoted by Paul Walker, using the writing of Alan Colquhoun, is rather more appropriate. Walker states that differences between places are most clearly explained “through their different institutional and political contexts, their different social and cultural histories, their different fictional landscapes.” Walker uses a quote from Colquhoun to elaborate:

This regionalism exists as part of the unconscious ideologies underlying current practice and is connected with the actual political economic situation whose

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55 This is best seen in a range of articles published in The Architect WA, and is explored in detail in Chapter 4.
56 Ferguson, “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?”, 40.
modalities are only indirectly related to any supposedly indigenous culture. It is the result of a complex interaction between modern international capitalism and various national traditions ingrained in institutions and attitudes.63

It is this idea of regionalism, one that acknowledges a global culture, and which doesn’t rely on a locally “authentic” expression, that best fits Ferguson’s practice. While he engages with climate and topography, it is the continual relationship with the cultural condition of Perth that most distinctly colours his regional practice. Ferguson’s regionalism is not predicated on an excavation of an autochthonous tradition, but rather on a constantly evolving relationship with global architectural culture, dictated by his location.

Framing regionalism in this way is useful for a marginal, predominantly urban practice like Ferguson’s, to go beyond the easy identification of the “vernacular verandah” and climate mediating strategies. In Australia, the regionalism tag has many issues, and is historically framed as one which deals directly with the landscape and not the city.64 Winsome Callister has described the qualities typically associated with Australian notions of regionalism as, “changing lifestyle; a response to site and bush environment; the creation of an Australian image through reference to the vernacular; and the use of post and beam architecture and natural materials of stained timber and clinker brick.”65 The work of architects like Glenn Murcutt, Richard Leplastrier, or Ken Woolley can be seen to represent this dominant idea of Australian regionalism, creating architecture “which successfully consolidates the romanticism of the idea of our harmonious existence in an Australian arcadia.”66 Often involving the “sentimental image of the Farmhouse”,67 or a “nuts and berries” approach,68 this traditional notion of regionalism leaves little room for work that operates outside this sphere, in which the largely institutional work of Ferguson, and other comparable practices, like Dickson and Platten in South Australia, or James Birrell in Queensland, exists.

Thus, this thesis examines the work of Ferguson through this lens of Walker and Colquhoun’s regionalism; as a practice that operates within a particular local context, within its “fictional landscape”, but is firmly part of a much larger, global structure.

67 McDougall, “Glenn Murcutt’s Houses,” 34.
Putting masonry to the photographs: Western Australia and the Grand Tour.\textsuperscript{69}

Perth, the capital of Western Australia, is one of the most isolated capital cities in the world, with its closest neighbour Adelaide over 2000km away. This character of isolation has remained central to the city’s cultural production, which, as Charlie Fox writes, “Isolation was and is the key.”\textsuperscript{70} This distance has long coloured the perception of its inhabitants and its observers, but it is important to note that this distance was only a one-way relationship. It has been clearly shown that the isolation of Perth did not hamper the introduction of new ideas or its participation in a global discourse.\textsuperscript{71} Residents were frequent travellers. Journals and books were quickly imported and disseminated. Emigré architects brought with them the latest European ideas, but little flowed the other way. This peripheral condition, which is not unique to Perth, is known to produce an introverted and parochial culture, critical of the centre.\textsuperscript{72} A result of this peripheral character meant that for young West Australians travel was important, and for recent architect graduates, the “Grand Tour” was a rite of passage. Ian Molyneux notes, “The practice of overseas travel upon attaining academic qualification was widespread among young architects…they learned a great deal about different life styles and their perceived place in the world.”\textsuperscript{73} Students most often went to London, but many others went to Africa, Japan, America and Europe. These factors led to a flourishing regional discourse, which was driven by an awareness and interest in contributing to a global architectural culture. The awarding of a travel scholarship in 1956 allowed Ferguson to follow in this tradition, embarking on a three year “Grand Tour.” The ability to experience architecture and the cultures that had produced it first hand was transformative, and the path that Ferguson followed is important to describe. This journey figures heavily in his personal narrative, and his interest in architectural traditions were first stimulated on this inaugural trip, and which continues to bear influence on his practice to this day.\textsuperscript{74}

During his studies Ferguson was an avid reader of journals, and kept cuttings of important projects, articles and influential quotes bound into a series of books. However, he didn’t express

\textsuperscript{69} This phrase comes from Ferguson, describing his intentions on his first trip overseas – “to put masonry to the photographs” he was taught in college.

\textsuperscript{70} Charlie Fox, “The View from the West,” in Australia’s History: Themes and Debates, Martyn Lyons and Penny Russell, eds. (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005), 85.


\textsuperscript{72} Charlie Fox notes that Perth relates strongly to the concept of Canadian ‘western alienation’, the tension between the centre and the peripheral cities. See Fox, “The View from the West,” 82.

\textsuperscript{73} Molyneux, “Building in Western Australia 1940-1979,” 137.

\textsuperscript{74} It is important to acknowledge the importance of travel on other regional practices. Winsome Callister has clearly identified the importance this had on Adelaide and Brisbane, and the resulting diverse nature of their culture, see Winsome Callister, ‘Anchoring Identity: The architecture of Chancellor and Patrick, 1950-1970,’ PhD, Monash University, 2008.
a particularly keen interest in history early on. The course at PTC was notoriously technologically focussed, with historical studies often seen as a dry, uninspiring part of the course. The history course at that stage was taught by lecturer Bill Robertson, which Ferguson recalls involved:

showing us black and white pictures of the Parthenon, and I thought, Jesus… We had to write papers about what we thought about it - to me it was just a black and white building, what could you think about it?

As part of his final year of studies, Ferguson entered the competition for the Morawetz travel prize, a new scholarship established by Paul Morawetz, a Czech émigré who was the managing director of Tip Top Paints. The prize, which was at the time the largest architectural scholarship in the country, provided 800 pounds to a final year student at PTC. Morawetz said of the initiative “There is no chair of architecture at the University of Western Australia and the scholarship should provide a new stimulus for studies in this particular field.” The prize was to be the annual dividend of Morawetz’s 10,000 pounds worth of shares in Tip-Top Paints, awarded yearly. The award was open to all graduates from PTC up to the year prior, and was not assessed exclusively on coursework, or design, but rather selected “on the basis of his or her ability in design, individual prospects of benefit from overseas travel and general interests in other fields.” The winner was to travel overseas for at least six months, and not more than 18 months, and deliver either a written report or a semester of teaching at the college on their return. As part of the competition, entrants were interviewed by the judging panel, outlining their reasons for travel and the subject of their report, which Ferguson stated was “to find the beginnings of architecture.” Ferguson later recalled, “I just wanted to go see something different and learn about different cultures more than anything.” Ferguson was awarded the inaugural Morawetz prize in 1956, the year after graduating, but delayed leaving for his travels choosing to remain in Perth to save money and gain valuable experience with the progressive architects Hawkins and Sands. He worked in the office for a year before preparing to travel in February 1957. Ferguson married his wife, Clare, in Fremantle, had a one night honeymoon on Rottnest Island, before leaving for Africa the next day. Setting out on the passenger ship Moreton Bay, Ferguson and his wife sailed for Cape Town with four others, including fellow

75 Molyneux, “Building in Western Australia 1940-1979,” 140.
76 R.J. Ferguson, interviewed by Andrew Murray, December 2015.
77 “Migrant endows a big scholarship,” Good Neighbour, August 1, 1955, 2.
80 Taylor, Australian Architecture Since 1960, 178.
81 Ferguson interview by Murray, December 2015.
PTC graduates Brian Jackson and Eugene (Gene) Mapp. The group arrived in Cape Town, where they bought a car, driving throughout Southern Africa before ending up in Salisbury, Rhodesia, now Harare, Zimbabwe.

Africa was experiencing a copper boom, which promised easy employment for the recent graduates. Ferguson found work with the local architectural practice Ross Mackenzie, van Heerden & Hartford, working on a large hotel design, which he was required to re-document due to errors with the first scheme. He stayed in Salisbury for a period, before leaving for Dar es Salaam, in Tanganyika, now Tanzania, because he missed the coast, and found the International Style architecture that dominated the growing city of Salisbury, uninteresting.\(^8^4\) In Dar es Salaam, Ferguson found work with local architect Charles Bransgrove and Associates. Bransgrove was from Surrey, England, and had studied architecture at the Regent Street Polytechnic before working in London for Herbert William Matthews. Postwar pressure made work difficult in London and in 1947 Bransgrove moved to then Tanganyika as architect for the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme, which was intended to increase world nut oil supply.\(^8^5\) In 1948 the scheme folded, and as part of his compensation Bransgrove was provided with land in Dar es Salaam. He went on to be a significant architect in Tanzania, featuring in the 1960 special Commonwealth issue of *Architectural Review*, and later in the J.M. Richard’s edited volume *New Building in the Commonwealth* (1961). Ferguson spent almost a year there, working mostly on cotton ginneries and low cost housing schemes, for which Bransgrove had previously developed a louvered concrete block system (Fig. 2). The system screened the sun but allowed breezes to pass through. The blocks were supplied as part of a DIY housing scheme, which allowed families to build their own houses, once they raised 2000 shillings. Ferguson recalls the work of Bransgrove vividly:

> His colour scheme was black and white, and his buildings just shivered. In the bush or the city, they just shivered. He had this beautiful red ochre colour; just a spot put here and there would break up this black and white scheme. It was just brilliant.

> When I came home all our signboards were the same red.\(^8^6\)

\(^8^4\) R.J. Ferguson, Personal communication with Andrew Murray, July 2017.


\(^8^6\) Ferguson interviewed by Murray, December 2015.
After twelve months Ferguson’s travel allowance from the prize had been exhausted, and he was required to leave the country. After spending a short period travelling around Africa, during which he was refused entry and denied entry visas to Khartoum in the Sudan, Ferguson flew to Athens. There he bought a Fiat 600, paid for by selling sketches on the streets of Dar es Salaam. He then drove to London, where he found immediate employment with Chamberlin, Powell and Bon (CPB) working on the Barbican redevelopment scheme.

Living and working in London was an exciting prospect for a young architect, and Ferguson took full advantage of his situation, travelling widely both locally and abroad, visiting new projects and immersing himself in the city. He saw the landmark exhibition on Le Corbusier staged at the Building Centre in 1959, which, filled with models of significant projects, impressed him. After 18 months in London, in June 1959 Ferguson and two members of the CPB office, Peter Deakins and Michael Neylan, undertook a seven month tour of Europe and

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88 He arranged this by asking fellow PTC graduate and friend Ross Chisholm who was working at CPB at the time where he could find a job, and was offered one at CPB on the spot.
Asia. Visiting most of Le Corbusier’s work in Europe, including the Unite D’Habitation in Marseille, Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp, Maison du Bresil in Paris, and La Tourette near Lyon, the group continued on to experience Le Corbusier’s work in the new capital of the Punjab State in India, Chandigarh, which was still under construction. This would not have been an easy journey or on an established route at the time, indicating Ferguson’s keen interest in Le Corbusier in this period. Along the way they visited a series of béton brut houses in Switzerland, which had a lasting impact on Ferguson. The group spent two months in Europe and five months travelling through Asia, much of it following the trail of Islamic architecture, after Ferguson was struck by its power during a visit to Kilwa Kisiwani, off the coast of Tanzania. This led the group to Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, ending in Sri Lanka.

The drive from London to Sri Lanka was immensely influential for Ferguson and he obsessively photographed his journey, taking over 1300 photos on the seven-month trip. Ferguson continued to travel, but the unusual itinerary of this major first trip provides an insight to the individual nature of his search. Travel became central to Ferguson’s practice, allowing first-hand experience of a wide variety of building traditions all captured on film. These photographs provide a keen insight into what is important to him and what architectural qualities capture his attention, and for this, they occupy a central position in this thesis. They will be discussed in detail as the thesis progresses, but a reading of these photos identifies two guiding interests. One is an interest in vernacular, or traditional architecture; the second is an interest in space, the spaces between buildings, and the way in which buildings are located next to each other (Fig. 3).

90 Also on the trip was Ferguson’s wife Clare, Perth architect Eugene Mapp, and an interior designer from Melbourne, Liz Vercoe from Bates, Smart & McCutcheon.
91 Ferguson, Architectural Images, no page numbers.
92 Ferguson often sketched and drew as he travelled. Peter Bruechle, the engineer for most of Ferguson’s work, recalls a later trip to Mykonos they took together doing measured drawings of the Paraportiani church. Peter Bruechle, interviewed by Andrew Murray, October 2016.
Figure 3: Afghanistan Tea Stall. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson.
Source: Ferguson Architects.

Figure 4: Le Corbusier, Chapelle Notre Dame du Haut, 1950-1955. Photographer: R.J Ferguson.
Source: Ferguson Architects.
Despite visiting the ‘greats’ of the modern movement on this tour, it was vernacular architecture that truly interested Ferguson. Of the enormous number of photos he took along the way, only a handful were of modern buildings (Fig. 4). Vernacular architecture is a term that is difficult to define, but an outline from Paul Oliver provides a useful starting point:

[T]he dwellings and all other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources, they are customarily owner- or community-built, utilizing traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of living of the cultures that produce them.\(^93\)

The regional discourse of the 1950s and 60s led many architects to investigate vernacular architecture, which Felicity Scott suggests was due in part for its qualities which were seen as offering “resistance to that increasingly totalized modern condition.”\(^94\) It was during this first trip that Ferguson was widely exposed to these traditions, and the possibility for it to inform his own work were quickly seized upon, documenting it through photography, notes and drawings.

Ferguson’s documentation of vernacular traditions was thorough. He published a series of articles during the 1960s illustrated with his photographs and measured drawings (Fig. 5).\(^95\) These articles were a mix of historical research and critical observations, emphasising those spatial and formal qualities he admired. Upon his return in 1961, with Duncan Richards, he also delivered a series of lectures at PTC on the traditional architecture of Africa, Italy, Greece and Turkey.\(^96\) Documenting vernacular architectural in a public forum was highly unusual in Australia during this period, and begins to indicate the different ideological base of his work. This interest has continued, and since the 1990s Ferguson has self-published a series of photo books with images taken from these formative trips.

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95 See the bibliography for full details, but included articles on Persia, Greece and Dubrovnik.
The way that Ferguson captures and frames these buildings provides further insight into his practice. The images record intimate building details, often filled with people or objects, capturing what Ferguson calls “texture.” This describes the spaces between buildings, occupied by people, movement, sculpture and food stalls, activity that gives a building life. The photographs taken by a contemporary like British architect James Stirling, demonstrate an interest in cataloguing and documenting vernacular architecture for their formal qualities – as found objects. In contrast, Ferguson’s photographs reveals an interest not so much in formalism, but more in the recording of use and habitation - it was what happened around the buildings that mattered, more so than the buildings themselves (Fig. 6).

The awarding of the Morawetz travel prize to Ferguson in 1956 enabled him to travel extensively throughout Africa, Asia and Europe, and exposed him to a wide variety of architectural practices. From physical encounters with béton brut in the work of Le Corbusier, to the way architecture was used as a backdrop for everyday activities, the buildings and cultures that he experienced would go on to fundamentally shape his architectural practice.

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Comprehensively documented through photographs, drawings and notes, Ferguson’s “search” was literally carried out through his travels, seeking out qualities that would inform his own attempts to create “architecture.”

Figure 6: Street scene in Greece, typical of the “texture” in his photographs. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson. Source: Ferguson Architects.
A Concrete Tradition.

While an interest in the vernacular and travel went on to significantly influence Ferguson’s practice, the tectonic realities of architecture were equally important. Off-form concrete was the medium in which Ferguson conducted his architectural search, and the continual experimentation and refinement of the concrete process has come to define his practice. His first experience with the material was with the louvered concrete blocks used in Tanzania, and became widely exposed to it while working on the Barbican and visiting most of Le Corbusier’s later projects. Adrian Forty has described concrete as a material that is both traditional and modern,99 and this dialectic provided a compelling option for architects negotiating the postwar “anxiety” across the globe. In this manner, Ferguson’s interest in concrete aligns with the early observations of James Stirling, which Mark Crinson has stated, upon seeing Le Corbusier’s Maisons Jaoul, “left him with a sense that architectural development need no longer be tied to technological advance.”100 Concrete provided Ferguson with the ability to continue the modern project, yet directly engage with tectonic traditions of the discipline. He notes: “The magic of off-form concrete is that the walls of a building become the structure as well as the finish and the liquid qualities of the material permit endless sculptural opportunities.”101 The constructional logic and ability to directly shape the concrete was immediately appealing. It allowed him the freedom to explore a range of formal strategies while recalling the solidity of materials used in traditional architecture.

Ferguson’s pioneering use of concrete in Western Australia was to be instrumental in what can be described as a regional tradition. Ian Molyneux has previously identified this tradition, suggesting that it was the use of concrete, particularly off-form concrete, that is the most visible and significant contribution that Western Australia has made to contemporary Australian architecture.102 Whilst it is clear that concrete played a significant role in postwar Australian architecture, exemplified by the work of John Andrews, James Birrell and Daryl Jackson, to date, the Western Australian contribution has not been explored.103 This chapter looks more broadly at the specific local circumstances which enabled Ferguson to produce such experimental concrete buildings and allowed him to translate an interest developed overseas into built reality. This background is essential for understanding the role that concrete played in his

99 Forty, Concrete and Culture, 15.
100 Crinson, Stirling and Gowan, 175.
103 The significance of concrete in postwar Australia has been explored in various publications, including: Taylor, Australian Architecture since 1960; Goad, “Bringing it All Home.”
practice, and the regional connotations inherent in the use of concrete in postwar Western Australia.

The 1960s saw the steady emergence of off-form concrete in Australia, seen in key examples like the Highways Department Offices in Adelaide (1964), the JD Story Administration Building at The University of Queensland (1965), Menzies College at La Trobe University (1968), and the considerable output of the NSW Government Architects Branch led by E.H. Farmer from 1964 onwards. Jennifer Taylor’s *Australian Architecture since 1960* provides the broadest survey of these postwar concrete buildings in Australia to date, devoting a chapter to those buildings she dubs “Rational and Robust”, projects which exploit the rich possibilities and sculptural qualities of the material. Yet Taylor largely relegates the use of expressive concrete to the 1970s, describing its use in the 1960s as a “commonly used… but its prosaic treatment in general commercial and industrial buildings…was quite distinct from the heroic plastic use that had characterised Japanese, European and American architecture in the decade prior.”\(^{104}\) While the 1970s certainly saw the widespread use of off-form concrete around Australia, as the examples listed above show, there was a range of “heroic” concrete buildings completed throughout the 1960s that Taylor doesn’t account for.

The only Western Australian example Taylor features is the Hale School Memorial Hall, noting that it was “a strangely isolated example” not joined by a work of similar formalist pretensions until 1969 in Adelaide.\(^{105}\) However, as will be shown briefly here, the expressive use of off-form concrete proliferated in Western Australia from 1961 onwards, arguably earlier, and more often, than other Australian states. The use of concrete was predominantly within the civic realm paralleling the expressive use of brick and rough-sawn timber in domestic architecture.\(^{106}\) A wide range of experiments were carried out in Western Australia in the 1960s, including the use of off-form concrete, pre-cast panels, bush hammered concrete, concrete block, as well as a variety of different aggregates and colours from grey, white, and yellow. There are many reasons for the rapid adoption of concrete as a material in the state, and a task far beyond this introduction and thesis, but some of the motivations behind the rise in popularity can be briefly outlined.

The completion of the Hale School Memorial Hall in 1961 had an immediate impact on the local profession, and the influence it imparted on the following decade of concrete experiments should not be understated. However, the hall was completed at a time when Western Australia was primed to embrace this material for a number of reasons, including: The influx of émigré

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\(^{105}\) Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960*, 80. The 1969 building was the Social Sciences Building at Flinders University, by Cheesman Doley Neighbour and Raffen.

\(^{106}\) Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960*, 79
European architects, direct knowledge and experience brought home by travelling students, an emerging concrete industry, the support of local journals, and climate. The influence of émigrés on Perth’s culture was significant, accepting the highest proportion of migrants of all the Australian states. A large influx of émigré architects from Europe arrived in Perth during the 1950s, bringing with them a broad range of knowledge and skills. Peter Parkinson and Jeffrey Howlett, came from the AA, while Toni Solarksi, Kazimierz Sierakowski and Tadeusz Andrzejaczeck, were all graduates from the Polish University College in London and Liverpool, a school heavily influenced by Le Corbusier. Iwan Iwanoff arrived from Bulgaria, Robert Schlafrig (Sheldon) from Vienna, Julius Elischer from Budapest and Erich Shilbury, an engineer from Berlin, had also recently arrived. Local architects were also returning from overseas stints. Desmond Sands and the head of the Public Works Department (PWD) Gordon Finn had both recently returned from working with Joseph Emberton in London, having visited significant modern buildings along the way. There was also a recently returned contingent of well-travelled students, including Ross Chisholm and John White, who had worked at CPB, and engineer Peter Bruechle returning after working with the renowned Felix Samuely in London. Whilst this situation was not unusual in Australia – travel was common for all graduates, and all states were receiving émigrés – within in a relatively small and tight-knit architectural community, there was clearly a willing and receptive audience for what was to precipitate.

By 1960 there was already a well-established local concrete industry, and testing of the material was already occurring. The use of precast panels or frames, and experiments with domes, folded plate and hyperbolic paraboloid structures were common, and precast concrete panels were being used to construct houses regularly through the WA State Housing Commission in the early 1950s. There was clearly a motivated workforce and a growing industry familiar with reinforced concrete, so the transition to using off-form concrete was not seen as a big step. The engineer for the Hale School Memorial Hall, Peter Bruechle recalls:

The structure didn’t bother me. I could design the structure in reinforced concrete, that wasn’t the real problem, it was the finish… Fergy [Ferguson] made test panels, and he used sawn boards, and deliberately got them sawn so they had a pattern on them. It was all a bit experimental.

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110 Peter Bruechle, interviewed by Andrew Murray, October 2016.
111 ‘University Has Its Own Housing Scheme’ The West Australian, February 3, 1951, 5.
112 Bruechle interviewed by Murray, October 2016.
The technical proficiency and high quality finish of the concrete work at Hale School is testament to this established and engaged industry. Early interest can be seen in the founding of a local course in concrete practice, instigated in 1955, to improve “the lamentably low standard of concrete construction in W.A.”, which architects and builders eagerly attended.\textsuperscript{113} The course was so popular that a second was implemented to cope with demand. The “low standards” were improved, and a second national office of the Cement and Concrete Association of Australia (CCAA) opened in Perth in 1962.\textsuperscript{114} The CCAA later organised the first off-form concrete conference in Australia, held in Perth in October 1964, “The Off-Form Concrete Surface Finishes Symposium.”\textsuperscript{115} Large civic projects of the time, including the enormous, but only partially built 1961 scheme for the Police Headquarters, were already envisioned using a reinforced concrete frame.\textsuperscript{116} In 1964 hardware retailer Bunnings was advertising timbers for use in off-form concrete formwork, announcing “Timber gives concrete new look” (Fig. 7).\textsuperscript{117} Further evidence for the support of concrete use came from the local journals. \textit{The Architect WA}

\textsuperscript{113} “Syllabus of Lecture,” \textit{The Architect WA} 3 (March 1955): 12.
\textsuperscript{115} Speakers included C.F. Morrish, engineer, and R.W. Roberts on the cost of finishes, along with site visits including to the Deaf and Dumb school in Mosman Park. See \textit{Constructional Review} 37, no. 12 (December 1964): 28.
often published articles on the science of concrete, reporting on symposiums held in Sydney, technical information on waterproofing, the use of timber formwork for surface finish, as well as a lengthy article by Nervi from the 6th Congress of the International Union of Architects (UIA) on reinforced concrete in September 1961.118 The local weekly construction newsletter *Building and Construction* ran a special on concrete and its application across four issues in June 1962.119

Figure 8: The Mosman Park Deaf and Dumb School, Hawkins and Sands Architects. Photographer: Harry Sowden.


119 *Building and Construction*, June (1962). (No issue numbers)
As the concrete industry quickly developed, architects began to harness the properties of the material—not only making use of its sculptural qualities, but seizing on its ability to handle harsh climates. From an early stage the local architectural community was climate focussed and the Commonwealth Experimental Building Station Notes on the Science of Building were a constant fixture in most architects’ libraries. This meant that the ability of concrete to insulate users from the harsh Western Australian sun was soon realised. Desmond Sands, then President of the RAIA WA, espoused the benefits, noting that the use of concrete is often necessitated in locations near the ocean which are affected by severe salt deterioration, and detailing the amount of costly maintenance which could be avoided by the use of concrete. Sands also noted the way that white off-form concrete complemented the blue skies, white sands and green hills near the ocean, as seen in the recently completed Deaf and Dumb School in Mosman Park, just metres back from the beach (Fig. 8). This demonstrates that concrete was in part embraced for its appropriate climatic and functional properties as well as for its aesthetic appeal.

Despite a well-established concrete industry, it was not until the late 1960s, following the sustained explorations mentioned above, that concrete could be considered emblematic of the state. Whilst concrete was a highly visible part of the Western Australian construction industry from the early 1950s, it competed with a strong masonry tradition that had persisted since the 19th century, in part due to the high quality of brick production in the city. Building upon great historic civic works in brick designed by notable architects George Temple Poole and Hillson Beasley, many of the important government buildings of the 1950s were also executed in brick (Fig. 9). These included the Agnes Walsh Hospital (1955) and the Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital (1958) designed by the PWD headed by Gordon Finn, as well as many government schools like Governor Stirling Senior High School (1956). By the end of the 1960s masonry was surpassed by concrete in the civic realm, despite its dominance in the residential market.

120 Buildings completed in the 1960s show this rapid uptake of the material by the profession, and the ability of the construction industry to accommodate it. A brief list of expressive off-form concrete buildings which followed the Hale School Memorial Hall included: The Celtic Club (Silver and Goldberg, 1962), the Mosman Park Deaf School (Hawkins and Sands, 1964), Cottesloe Boardwalk (Hawkins and Sands, 1965), Geraldton Holy Cross Cathedral (McDonald & Whitaker, 1964), St Mary’s Anglican School for Girls (Margaret Feilman, 1965), Kings Park office buildings (Krantz and Sheldon, 1966), Marine Research Laboratory (CCN, 1968), the WAIT Campus (Vin Davies and WA PWD 1964-70), CBH Office (Geoffrey Summerhayes, 1969) and Forbes and Fitzhardinge’s Freemasons Hall (1967), ANZ Bank (1966-67), and City Beach Change Rooms (1970).


123 “Our Cover Picture,” 28.

Unlike brick, concrete did not hold any particular cultural significance to the state; it was a modern, introduced material. But its enthusiastic embrace during the 1960s demonstrates the easy fit concrete achieved in Western Australia. This was further helped by engineers like Lew Harding, Peter Bruechle, Norm Gilchrist and Eric Schilbury, who were either experienced, or interested in the possibilities of the material. J Morton’s editorial in *The Architect WA* illustrates this enthusiasm:

Hale School Hall used a form of construction which was not only totally untried in W.A but also uncommon elsewhere. This off form concrete was handled with complete assurance and demonstrated that we do not have to put up with third hand ideas for our outstanding buildings.\(^{125}\)

This general embrace, and a can-do attitude espoused by engineers like Bruechle, towards this relatively new, labour intensive material corresponds to a deep-rooted functional construction history in WA. Molyneux has noted this tradition, stating, “A belief in the principles of rational analysis of requirements and technological options has since remained the dominant ideological

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basis of architectural study in Western Australia.”126 A culture of practical building knowledge was ingrained in WA, historically driven by a lack of materials, money, and skill.127 This culture was continued by the first Lecturer-in-Charge at PTC, Bill Robertson. Robertson had attended meetings of Modern Architectural Research (MARS) Group in Sydney, had an interest in postwar industrialization, and formulated the first architecture course at PTC. Duncan Richards elaborates on this functional character:

[T]he course was far too practical in nature, trade based training rather than education. The full-time staff had all undertaken articles, mostly in pre-war Perth, and consequently displayed the practical strengths and the more significant intellectual weaknesses of this form of architectural training. They were prosaically practical with limited design skills and virtually no theoretical or cultural understanding.128

Adrian Forty suggests that more so than other materials, concrete facilitates the ability to experiment, allowing the architect to be their “own alchemist”.129 For young Western Australian architects like Ferguson, concrete was clearly a material that offered exciting new formal opportunities. It possessed a satisfyingly practical, tectonic quality that aligned with the local traditions, but also allowed for self-expression.

Ferguson’s personal search is directly informed by his geographical location. As this chapter has demonstrated, the regional practice of Ferguson was strongly defined by an interest in architectural culture, and shaped by the economic situation in Western Australia in the postwar years. Driven by isolation, boom-time conditions, and enabled by a motivated local concrete industry, Ferguson’s architecture, and his use of concrete, was a clear reflection of Western Australian design culture in the postwar years.

126 Molyneux, “Building in Western Australia 1940-1979,” 140.
129 Forty, Concrete and Culture, 40. Forty suggests the flexible and forgiving nature of the material, combined with the ability to experiment with additives and aggregates enables this ‘alchemy.’


The Hale School Memorial Hall, completed in 1961, was the first major project completed by Ferguson, acting as lead designer for the practice, Marshall Clifton and Anthony Brand (Fig. 10). Designed within months of his return from the overland trip, the Hall is arguably the first building in Australia to use béton brut as a design generator, and demonstrates an enthusiasm for the material and its aesthetic possibilities. For Ferguson, the Hale School Hall was the first major opportunity he was given to put into practice almost a decade of education, and it demonstrates the nascent development of his search for architectural meaning. The building shows Ferguson’s burgeoning interest in traditional, vernacular architecture practice, particularly that from Iran and Greece, alongside a critical interest in the work of Le Corbusier. Seemingly radically different from his later works, the Hall is often discussed outside the

130 Jennifer Taylor notes it as ‘the first of the “beton brut” concrete buildings’, but there were many examples prior, particularly industrial, that used it. See Taylor, Australian Architecture Since 1960, 78.
trajectory of Ferguson’s career, which this account will redress. The Hall and its success played a key role in the development of his practice, making the decisive first steps on a path to personal architectural understanding.

This chapter also examines Ferguson’s first attempt at synthesising a range of external sources into a personal vocabulary. These sources are important to identify, as not only do they continue to inform Ferguson’s work in later decades, but they are also necessary to properly explore the dialectic between global and local sources, which is an inevitable part of a postwar Antipodean regionalism. The chapter highlights the importance of the memorial program, the use of sculpture, and Ferguson’s first experiments with concrete.

**Arriving Home.**

Ferguson arrived home from his extensive three-year overland trip in January 1960, travelling from Colombo aboard the passenger ship *Orontes*. Immediately taking up a teaching position at PTC, he ran a series of studio classes whilst also doing a brief stint with his old employer Hawkins and Sands. During this time, he teamed up with William (Bill) Weedon and Anthony (Tony) Brand, fellow PTC graduates, to produce an entry for the new Perth Town Hall competition (1960) (Fig. 11). The trio worked on this project at night in the office Anthony Brand shared with Marshall Clifton in the old De Bernales mansion on Mounts Bay Road. The trio was awarded third prize nationally in September receiving 2000 pounds, and the jury, comprising Professor Brian Lewis, A.E. Clare, Leslie M. Perrott jnr., and Harry Seidler, commented:

Submission no. 54 shows a simple, monumental scheme, expressing the two basic elements clearly, and possesses a very attractive feature in the form of an extensive court extending under the tower block. The plan, however, does not provide ready access to the public space, and the amount of circulation area provided, is excessive.132

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131 R.J. Ferguson, Personal Communication with Andrew Murray, November 2015.
During the competition, Ferguson registered as an architect in June 1960\textsuperscript{133} and in the same month he went into practice with Anthony Brand, as Brand and Ferguson Architects. The practice quickly took off, immediately placing calls for tenders in the \textit{Building and Construction} journal for residences in suburban Floreat Park and Dalkeith.\textsuperscript{134}

Anthony Brand was a former prefect and sports captain at Hale School, before graduating in 1948 to begin studies at PTC. \textsuperscript{135} In 1954 he teamed up with Ferguson and Weedon, entering a competition for a new boarding house at Hale School, foreshadowing Ferguson’s and Brand’s later involvement with the school. The trio won but the project did not proceed. Brand graduated from PTC in 1955, and immediately left for Melbourne, where he spent the next year working for Bates, Smart and McCutcheon. In 1957 he returned to Perth and after a brief period working for local practice Forbes and Fitzhardinge, he was awarded the commission for the relocated Hale School campus in Wembley Downs. This commission allowed him to open his own practice, Anthony Brand Architect, in 1958.\textsuperscript{136} Brand initially ran his solo practice out of a room shared in the De Bernales mansion with Marshall Clifton, before they both moved

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{134} \textit{Building and Construction}, June 3, 1960. n.p.
\item \textsuperscript{136} “Professional Notes,” \textit{The Architect WA} 3 (September 1958): 13.
\end{itemize}
separately to the recently completed London House at 214 St Georges Terrace, Perth. It was there that Brand and Ferguson commenced their practice.

**Hale School and the Memorial Hall.**

An elite private boys’ school, Hale School was founded in 1858 by Bishop Mathew Blagden Hale, the first Anglican Bishop of Perth, and is the oldest secondary school in Western Australia. Originally the Perth Church of England Collegiate School, it was located in an elegant Richard Roach Jewell designed brick building on St Georges Terrace, in the Perth CBD. The school moved several times before settling at its current suburban site in Wembley Downs in 1961.

Upon the school’s centenary, it was decided to move to a greenfield site at Wembley Downs, a recently established garden suburb ten kilometres from the Perth CBD. The new school plan was drawn up by Marshall Clifton and Anthony Brand, as architects in association, with assistance from the then current director of the PWD, A.E. Clare, and officially opened on 6th March 1961, on the traditional “Old Boys Day”, by the Governor Sir Charles Gairdner.137 The school was designed around a large central courtyard, with a series of two storey brick classrooms, surrounding the central Memorial Hall, which was to function as the school’s central gathering space. Brand received the Hale commission partly because he was a graduate of the school, and then Vice President of the Old Boys’ Association, as well as the earlier competition win for the boarding house which had demonstrated his architectural ability. Brand was required to work with Marshall Clifton, a well-established architect in Perth and a friend of the Hale School Board, as a more senior architect was needed to satisfy the board members and to supervise the young architect.138

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138 Anthony Brand, Personal communication with Andrew Murray, October, 2016.
Whilst not ready in time for the opening of the new campus, the Memorial Hall was well under construction, and the persistent sounds of concrete vibrators were a constant fixture of the opening school terms. A hall had been first proposed in 1951, when an appeal was made by the Old Haleians Association to raise money for the erection of a memorial to the boys of the school who had died in the two world wars. The appeal hoped to raise 50,000 pounds for the building, which was already envisioned as the centrepiece of the school’s new Wembley Downs campus. An article from the Western Mail in 1951, featuring an early plan for the new campus in a Beaux-Arts style, established the importance of the building within the scheme from the early stages noting, ‘The memorial envisaged comprises a central hall, with subsidiary buildings, to form a nucleus around which the new school will be built.’ (Fig. 12. The hall is the rectangle, situated to the left of the swimming pool.) The hall was to be a key physical

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140 “Hale School Memorial,” The West Australian, August 21, 1951, 9.
141 “Bishop Hale’s School,” The Western Mail, November 1, 1951, 16.
element in the new campus design and to represent the emotional weight of sacrifice made through war. The fundraising campaign stalled however and there was little mention of the hall’s construction or fundraising efforts in the following years.\textsuperscript{142} The emphasis was shifted to the general construction and design of the Wembley Downs campus and the hall was placed on hold. In 1959, with the new campus design finalised and documented, the hall campaign was re-started, and a promotional pamphlet was produced, asking for donations to complete the building, now requiring 75,000 pounds.\textsuperscript{143} The booklet set out the importance of the hall within the new campus:

The Memorial Hall, which will dominate the buildings and the landscape, will be of great value to the School. From the boys’ point of view it is the centre, the central meeting place; and, as such, it sets the tone and engenders a sense of corporate life.\textsuperscript{144}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{HaleSchoolSiteSketch.png}
\caption{Hale School Site Sketch. Marshall Clifton and Anthony Brand, Architects in Association. The Hall is located on the upper right hand side of the image. Source: \textit{The Architect WA 3} (March 1960).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{142} For example, the school’s annual magazine, \textit{Cygnet}, does not mention the issue throughout the 1950s.
\textsuperscript{143} Hale Old Boys Memorial Fund, \textit{Hale School War Memorial Assembly Hall Building Appeal} (Wembley: n.p, 1959).
\textsuperscript{144} Hale Old Boys Memorial, \textit{Hale School War Memorial}, 4.
An article published in 1960 in *The Architect WA*, shows a rendering of the school and gives a good indication of the design intentions (Fig. 13). Clustered in the south-western corner of a large site covered in extensive playing fields was a range of low-slung rectangular buildings, centred on a large quadrangle. Divided into two halves, the north of the quadrangle comprised the classroom blocks, 2-3 storey barrack-style buildings in brown brick and tile, situated on the slope of the hill, giving the effect of a single storey building facing onto the quadrangle. To the south was the administration and boarding house. Apart from a small circular arts classroom, the focus of the campus was established in the centre of the quadrangle along the east/west axis, with the Memorial Hall to the west and the administration block to the east, executed in deliberately different architectural styles and at a scale that clearly dominated the campus. Both buildings were to be flat roofed, out of step with the domestic-style gabled roofs which characterized the rest of the campus buildings. Compared with other local high schools constructed during this time, particularly government schools, Hale was much more domestic in its language, as opposed to the long, finger planned buildings, mostly completed by the PWD seen in secondary schools such as Armadale (1953) and Melville High schools (1960).145 The campus followed this sketch closely; the major change being the diminished role of the administration building thus making the Memorial Hall the sole focus of the campus.

![Figure 14: Early Hale School Memorial Hall Sketch. Anthony Brand. 1959.](image)

*Source: Hale School War Memorial Assembly Hall Building Appeal booklet.*

145 For examples of government schools, see: Anderson and Nordeck, G.W. Finn, 1995.
As part of the early planning of campus, Anthony Brand had completed a scheme for the Memorial Hall, which was used as part of the promotional push to secure funds for the hall’s construction (Fig. 14). However it is clear that this design was only intended to be preliminary. Site drawings from September 1959 show only a dashed footprint outline of the hall on the site plan. The promotional pamphlet published by the Hale School Old Boys Fund in late 1959 provides a clear illustration of this draft scheme. The sketch shows a restrained modern building: a two-storey rectangular volume encased in slender, rhythmically placed columns, punctuated by flat concrete panels, with a central projecting balcony. The hall was raised on a plinth of five stairs that project beyond the building envelope, stretching out into the public space, in a clearly classical pose. Internally the same repetitive pattern appears on the walls of the hall, with the addition of a floating timber acoustic ceiling. The scheme depicts a large central auditorium space, with seating for 862 students on the ground floor, and a further 200 above in balcony seats. It was planned on a 5:4, or golden ratio to maximise acoustic performance, and this was repeated in the final scheme. It also included a music room, and music block, as well as the Old Boys’ meeting space. Brand’s Memorial Hall makes a contextual response, echoing the brown brick infill panels and concrete frames of the nearby classrooms, but in a manner that distinguishes it from the barrack-style blocks. The pamphlet makes the importance of context clear:

The construction of concrete framing and brick panels will be reflected on the opposite side of the quadrangle with the Administration block and will harmonise with the surrounding brick and tile buildings.

With Brand busy facilitating the construction of the campus, he approached Ferguson to assist with the documentation of the hall. Ferguson was eager to become involved and quickly put forth a plan to change the direction of the design. He inherited the plan and formal envelope of the building, but suggested switching from concrete frame and brick panels, to an entirely off-form concrete structure. Using the weight and dramatic appearance of the concrete was proposed as a way to more directly reflect the idea of a memorial and the horrors of war. The new proposal was put to the Old Boys Board, and with the support of Marshall Clifton and Anthony Brand, it was accepted, on the proviso that some brick panels were re-instated, to make the building a more comfortable fit with the rest of the predominantly brick campus.

146 Anthony Brand, Personal communication with Andrew Murray, October, 2016.
147 Hale Old Boys Memorial, Hale School War Memorial, 4.
149 Anthony Brand, Personal communication with Andrew Murray, October, 2016.
Construction drawings for the Memorial Hall were completed by November 1960, and work on site began shortly after. Completed near the end of 1961, the building was officially opened on February 4, 1962.\textsuperscript{150} The building dominates the small campus, and stands at a generous two storeys, the parapet rising to almost nine metres (Fig. 15). Built around a 4.57 metre (15 ft) square grid, the building is almost entirely constructed from a light grey reinforced off-form concrete, capped with a steel trussed roof.\textsuperscript{151} The grey off-form concrete is offset with cream brick infill panels on the ground floor, and metal window frames and timber doors and joinery. Extending the classical theme seen in the earlier Brand scheme, the hall is set out like a pseudoperipteral temple, with a free standing hexastyle portico and eleven engaged columns running down the sides, the entire building raised up on a stepped platform. The portico on the main façade is broken up by a central staircase and balcony to the first floor, which projects out considerably past the line of columns, terminating in a concrete upstand decorated with a sculptural concrete panel frieze. To the rear of the building on the southern side, the music block projects out and transforms into a retaining wall that stretches south, with the same sculptural concrete relief panels impressed upon them. The soffit of the portico is lined with closely


\textsuperscript{151} “War Memorial Hall, Hale School Perth,” \textit{Architecture and Arts} 1963, 28.
spaced jarrah timber battens, and throughout there are specially designed cast-bronze light fittings designed by Ferguson. The first floor of the front façade contains two meeting rooms in each corner, each with varying window treatments, which Cross-Section later described as “forcing of a dramatic fenestration pattern that bears only a whimsical relationship to internal use.” To the southern side is a strip window with an irregular array of thick vertical shade elements, like a miniature brise soleil, and to the north is large double height window with a small balcony projecting. The engineer for the building was Peter Bruechle, coordinating the structure for the experimental building process. Rough sawn 15 x 5cm jarrah boards were used for the formwork, in different thicknesses to vary the surface effect. The boards were oriented to articulate the various elements, the direction changes dictated by the pour patterns.

The Hale School Hall had a significant impact on the local profession, particularly after it was awarded the RIBA Bronze Medal for 1959-1961 and the Architecture and Arts Australian building of the year in 1962, the journal calling it “one of Australia’s most significant buildings.” Cross-Section described it as “courageous” suggesting “this architecture, may serve as a touchstone of taste and temperament for many years to come.” The infamous local architectural commentator, Caliban, pseudonym of architect Peter Parkinson, noted shortly after its completion, “Hale School Hall is a sophisticated exercise in surface texture and abstract balance, and as such is a building with which to be extremely pleased.” While the profession generally admired it, it was a shock to the school and the general public. An opinion piece in The Architect WA, notes, “The Hale School Hall used a form of construction which was not only totally untried in WA, but also uncommon elsewhere…and it was only the medal which saved the building from being rendered and the architects from being sued.” The dramatic appearance of the Hale School Memorial Hall was well received by the profession locally and nationally, however beyond this initial enthusiasm there has been almost no critical appraisal of it, particularly in relation to Ferguson’s later work.

153 Cross-Section 123 (January 1963).
156 Cross-Section 123 (January 1963).
Figure 16: Hale School Memorial Hall ground floor plan. North is to the top of the page.
Source: Architecture and Arts, January 1963.

Building a Monument: Finding Meaning in Memory.

The grounds and buildings of the school were well planned and blend in nicely. But there is one construction which is not built in the normal style of the other Hale buildings. This is, of course, the Old Boys’ Memorial Hall. The distinct change in style was no accident. The Old Boys wanted an outstanding feature of the school to remind the boys of their ties with the school and hopefully draw them back each year.¹⁵⁹

The Memorial Hall was constructed not only to reflect the sacrifices made by old Haleians in the war, but also as the main meeting area and gathering space for the students. This was not an unusual proposal, and the construction of living, or “useful memorials”, in the form on swimming pools, hospitals and community centres gained currency in the postwar period across Australia, as explored in Hannah Lewi and David Nichols’, Community: Building Modern Australia. Lewi and Nichols note that memorial halls proliferated, often favoured over static memorials that were viewed as unproductive and increasingly irrelevant.¹⁶⁰ These

¹⁶⁰ Hannah Lewi and David Nichols, eds., Community: Building Modern Australia (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 206.
commemorative buildings were often aligned with children and education, as a “gesture towards the future and youth.” The trend for “useful” ways to remember was part of an international discussion on monumentality and memorials in the postwar years. Joseph Hudnut wrote about the living memorial in the article, “The Monument Does Not Remember” and later Bernard Barber noted a shift in the United States from the “symbolic and esthetic” towards a trend for “utilitarian functions” in memorials since World War I. Gregor Paulsson also wrote on the need for a different approach to monumentality, one that bridged the previous dialectic of buildings being either purely functional or monumental. Despite its private nature, the Hale School Memorial Hall is clearly part of this broader movement to change the way in which memorials to war were constructed.

The majority of “useful memorials” expressed little of the symbolism normally associated with the idea of a memorial, and often the only concession to their position as memorials was in the names affixed to the buildings. They were often plain, modest buildings, where the act of memorial, or commemoration was only expressed through their use, and their facilitation of a space for gathering. The Hale School Hall however trod the line between a traditional and “useful memorial”, and its requirement for the architecture to directly indicate its memorial function is unusual. When Ferguson accepted the commission, he noted the fact that it needed to be “dramatic” in its approach, which is reflected in its overt symbolism, heroic form and striking concrete exterior.

Ferguson had developed an interest in architecture’s ability to be emotive and expressive, which can be seen in the photographs he took during his major overseas trip. These were qualities he pursued in the first projects completed upon his return. A monumental character – expressed through more than just scale – is evident in unbuilt projects like the Brand and Ferguson’s Octagonal Church project (1960) (Fig. 17), and the Ferguson, Brand and Weedon competition entry for the Perth Town Hall. The Hale School Memorial Hall presented the first real opportunity to bring these ideas to fruition, and the memorial program provided the perfect stage for this interest to be explored. Architecture’s ability to communicate with users was to become of central importance in Ferguson’s practice, and the commission for a memorial, one that required explicit emotional evocation, provided an opportunity to test the capacity for architecture to have an emotional impact. Much of the emotive power of the Hall was conveyed

161 Lewi and Nichols, Community, 212.
164 Lewi and Nichols, Community, 207.
165 Ferguson interviewed by Alra.
166 “Octagonal Church,” The West Australian, June 4, 1960, 18.
through the béton brut concrete, and the classical language, a strategy echoed in postwar church building practices in America, where architects turned to a “historicizing vocabulary” to test the emotive properties of architecture.\textsuperscript{167}

![OCTAGONAL CHURCH](image)

Figure 17: Methodist Church, Waroona. Brand and Ferguson, 1960.

When the Hale School Hall was first published, the dramatic appearance and monumental character was often remarked upon. The journal \textit{Art and Australia} noted that the Hall was to function not only as a school building, but to also have “an appropriate monumental character.”\textsuperscript{168} The article quoted the jury who awarded it the RIBA Bronze Medal for 1959-61 as saying, “the hall is important as the first building in Western Australia to be conceived as a design in reinforced concrete leaving the material to express it strength, power and character without adornment.”\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Cross-Section} noted that the use of concrete resulted in “a robust, masculine and well-proportioned design which has symbolic significance as well as a very practical purpose.”\textsuperscript{170} As conveyed in both reviews, the use of concrete played a significant role in expressing the building’s symbolic weight, and its use in this role was previously unseen in Australia.

\textsuperscript{169} Mansfield, “Architecture in Australia,” 108.
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Cross-Section} 123 (January 1963).
The use of concrete to express the horrors of war however is not unusual and its use has become synonymous with memorial building. Adrian Forty has written extensively on this phenomenon noting that, “Concrete has become the default material for memorials.”¹⁷¹ Forty interrogates this default use of the material, suggesting its popularity may be “that it offers the appearance of dense mass and indestructability, as if an excess of these properties would be enough to guarantee the prolongation of human memory.”¹⁷² He later suggests that it is also the iconography of concrete which has contributed to its prominent use, which is “fluid and mutable, made by the circumstances of history… its iconography operates through paradoxes and contradictions.”¹⁷³ The “fluid and mutable” iconography of concrete is a useful concept for explaining the central role that the material occupied in postwar memorials, as it allows for complexity and multiple readings according to both context and the viewer.¹⁷⁴

The raw expression of the concrete permits multiple readings from visitors, and the rough surfaces, blank panels and impressive scale demand an emotional connection with the building. “Empty box” memorials like the Fosse Ardeatine in Rome (1949), which Ferguson visited and photographed in 1958, engaged with these properties and used the expression of concrete itself as the conduit for meaning, where the drama is conveyed through an oppressive scale and a lack of identifiable symbols.¹⁷⁵ The Hale School Memorial Hall employs a similar approach, and is ostensibly an “empty box”, aside from a series of sculptural elements within the hall that further emphasise the drama of the building. A series of abstract sculptural panels, based on ‘bomb blasts’, which Ferguson cast in fibreglass and plaster were affixed to the front of the hall, the interior, and the rear retaining walls.¹⁷⁶ Ferguson recalls working on them:

> Every Saturday morning, with a blazing hangover I used to go out to this mob that gave me all this plaster to work with, under a little tin shed. I got my brains cooked because it was so hot. The best part of using them is, we had this big retaining wall going out there, and we used these in reverse, pushed them into the concrete.¹⁷⁷

Sculpture is often used in memorial settings, but as previously discussed; “useful” memorial buildings rarely contained sculptural elements, or any reference to the memorial function beyond the nameplate. American artist Ernest Fiene queried the use of sculpture in memorial buildings, asking: “The emotional value of a work of art beyond its practical function is perhaps

¹⁷¹ Forty, Concrete and Culture, 197.
¹⁷² Forty, Concrete and Culture, 221.
¹⁷³ Adrian Forty, “Concrete and Memory,” in Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City, Mark Crinson, ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 94.
¹⁷⁴ Forty, “Concrete and Memory,” 94.
¹⁷⁵ Forty, “Concrete and Memory,” 90.
¹⁷⁶ Ferguson interviewed by Murray, December 2015.
¹⁷⁷ Ferguson interviewed by Murray, December 2015.
its most important attribute. Technically the work should last as long as the building. Will it retain its emotional significance as long? Fiene suggested a solution to this was to avoid “abstruse symbolism and should invite public participation.” Ferguson’s sculptural panels follow this position, echoing the fluid iconography of concrete, engaging with the emotional weight of the war, but remaining abstract enough to allow multiple readings and interpretations.

The earlier Brand scheme for the hall depicts no sculptural elements, and their inclusion was an initiative of Ferguson’s. The appearance of the abstract, sculptural panels are interesting for a number of reasons. They show the architect beginning to explore the physical limits of the material. The malleable nature of concrete is examined - the ability to carve, impress, mould and shape the surface – facilitating a level of individual expression difficult in other materials. But more importantly the incorporation of sculpture directly onto the building is a clear attempt to translate the traditional architectural qualities he experienced on his travels into his own work. Ferguson extensively photographed symbols, motifs and carvings on his journey, particularly those he encountered in Iran and Greece (Fig. 19). The “bomb blasts” at Hale School are the

Figure 18: The Hale School Memorial Hall, Wembley Downs, 1961. 
Source: *Cross-Section* Archive, University of Melbourne.

179 Fiene, “Figurative Arts,” 604.
first examples in a series of abstract, decorative elements that would become a regular feature in Ferguson’s work as he developed an architectural language that attempted to transcend the purely pragmatic. The Hale School Memorial Hall functions as both a traditional monument, in its use of concrete, abstract sculpture and blank expression, but also a “useful memorial” providing a gathering space for the new Hale school campus. It proved to be the ideal testing ground for Ferguson’s developing architectural ideas: a community building that necessitated a dramatic and symbolic response.

Figure 19: Carvings in Iran. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson.
Source: Ferguson Archives.

**Dealing with Europe: Concrete, Modernism and Le Corbusier.**

I was raw around the edges when I came back and full of beans, having seen just about everything that was great. I guess I absorbed more than I could handle, and I pushed it all out into the Hale School.¹⁸⁰

Whilst the commitment to create a building that reflected sacrifice made in war is central to the Memorial Hall’s conception, it also demonstrates the first major attempt by Ferguson to synthesise his search for architectural traditions and meaning into architectural form. A direct

¹⁸⁰ Ferguson interviewed by Alra.
critique of the International Style, Ferguson’s use of primitive classical language, rough concrete, and sculpture, displays a nascent interest in translating the enduring properties of traditional architecture experienced overseas to a local context. His interest in traditional architecture was already wide ranging, but the clearest influence on the hall is not the vernacular, but rather contemporary European modernism, and the unavoidable presence of Le Corbusier. The main façade, with its giant order portico and sculptural frieze makes the classical allusion clear, an allusion common in the postwar rebuilding of Australia, particularly in civic projects. Notable projects like the National Library of Australia (1961-64), use overt classical motifs as a way to project both gravitas, tradition and solidity. However, the use of classicism at the Hale School Hall, whilst expressing these properties, is “primitive” rather than refined, pointing to an ideological base more aligned with Le Corbusier. Much of this “primitive” character is provided by the concrete finish, which as Adrian Forty has suggested, has “a quality that for some has provided means of reconnecting with architecture’s supposedly primitive origins in mud.”

The concrete work at Hale is technically accomplished but the finish is rough; the mix oozes between the formwork boards, and the surface is pockmarked and craggy, a character much-prized by Le Corbusier in his later work, who enjoyed the “widespread imperfections (malfaçons)” of his concrete buildings. Linking the surface of béton brut with the human condition, Le Corbusier noted that “Faults are human, they are ourselves, our daily lives.” A photo taken by Ferguson of the completed hall shows this rough character, and it was evidently a quality he liked in the material (Fig. 20). The image shows the stairwell, illuminated by a thin shaft of light that reveals the variegations in shadow and texture along the wall surface, allowing the off-form concrete to appear more like roughly hewn stone. Yet within this primitive appearance, also lies the modernity of concrete, which made it so appealing to architects as a way to deal with postwar anxiety. Adrian Forty has described this as concrete’s “double history”: its capacity to make “technically sophisticated developments” yet remain crude and relatively easy to work with. Le Corbusier was keenly aware of the dual role of concrete, which Reyner Banham describes in his practice as “exploiting its crudities...to produce an architectural surface of rugged grandeur that seems to echo the well-weathered Doric columns of temples in Magna Graecia.”

181 Forty, Concrete and Culture, 33.
184 Forty, Concrete and Culture, 32-33.
The primitive classicism of the Memorial Hall allows it to be situated within a broad global discursive shift towards an architectural practice that explored the vernacular and the traditional which gathered steam in the late 1950s. Led by Le Corbusier, and later seen in the *art brut* of the British Independent Group and Jean Dubuffet, or in James Stirling’s photography of ordinary London buildings and the Liverpool Docks, this interest was largely in reaction to the “totalising condition” of modern architecture, and the vernacular traditions offered convincing alternatives or “resistance.”

In a critique of Le Corbusier’s Ronchamp chapel, James Stirling acutely writes:

> There seems to be no doubt that Le Corbusier’s incredible powers of observations are lessening the necessity for invention… If folk architecture is to re-vitalise the movement, it will be first necessary to determine what it is that is modern in modern architecture.

Ferguson would have been exposed to many progressive architectural ideas before his overland trip, working at the leading modern practice of Hawkins & Sands with recent émigrés like Peter Parkinson and Antoni Solarski. But it was his overland expedition from 1957-59 that proved

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transformative. Ferguson not only visited examples of traditional architecture, but a range of progressive, contemporary architecture, much of it produced from the ferment centred on discussions had by Team 10, Alison and Peter Smithson, and others which Mark Crinson and Claire Zimmerman frame as a British “Neo-avant-garde”. London in the late 1950s was the centre of this discourse, and Ferguson’s experience working at CPB would have put him in direct contact with this movement. Working there for 18 months, from January 1958 until June 1959, mostly on the 1959 Barbican redevelopment scheme, Ferguson became immersed in the office culture. He worked closely with Joe Chamberlin, producing working drawings of the towers and constructing models. Detailing this project would have familiarised him with the detailing of concrete on a large scale, but it was the business and architectural culture that affected Ferguson the most. Indeed he credits his time there as important for his new-found confidence with architecture: “I lost all of my fear of big jobs.” CPB did not impart much formal influence on Ferguson but the working environment did. Central to working at CPB was the vibrant office culture, providing direct exposure to contemporary practice and architectural discourse. The office was lined with articles from contemporary magazines, and exhibitions of photographs taken by the partners after travelling would take place regularly, all organised and set up by the staff. Ferguson became immersed in the local scene, driving to visit buildings on weekends, and as he says of the period, “half the time you didn’t know who you were working for, because the other offices treated you like staff, one of theirs.”

Ferguson was clearly aware of the modern architectural scene in Europe during this time, visiting the latest buildings, often on trips with other assistants in the CPB office. On the journey back to Australia, with Michael Neylan and Peter Deakins from CPB along with others, the group visited the main buildings of Le Corbusier, and many other significant projects. Ferguson particularly recalls visiting a series of off-form concrete houses in Switzerland which made a lasting impression. Although the particular buildings are forgotten, Ferguson was aware of Atelier 5, and the buildings visited were almost certainly theirs. Disillusioned with International Style architecture, the contemporary work that Ferguson sought out exhibited the qualities that he admired in traditional buildings. It provided a clear alternative model for continuing the modern project, but still engaging with historical, and more enduring formal strategies.

188 Mark Crinson and Claire Zimmerman, “Introduction: Neo-avant-garde and Postmodern in Britain and Beyond,” in Neo-Avant-Garde and Postmodern: Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond, Mark Crison and Claire Zimmerman, eds. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Centre for British Art; London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2010), 11.
189 Ferguson interviewed by Murray, December 2015.
190 Ferguson interviewed by Murray, December 2015.
As seen in his handling of concrete and his interest in the vernacular, Le Corbusier had an obvious influence on Ferguson, and his presence in lectures, books and journals was almost unavoidable at PTC. Le Corbusier demonstrated the ability to conflate contemporary and historical models, and as William Curtis notes, one of the central messages in *Vers Un Architecture* was that in order to “resolve the problem of modern architecture” one must return to the “primal signposts of the classical.” However Le Corbusier used the principles of classicism rather than direct reference, to engage with the modern “problem”. The Hale School hall, with its temple front, sculptural frieze, rigidly orthogonal, atop a stepped base, provides a much more direct interpretation of classicism than that found in Le Corbusier’s work, and it is in this direct interpretation that more convincing sources of inspiration can be found.

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191 Andrew Murray, “Brian Klopper: Two Houses in Fremantle,” *The Weather Ring* 4 (2011): 33. Klopper, who attended PTC the year after Ferguson graduated, described the school being so Corbusian ‘it was like going to a seminary.’

Although there is a clear debt to Le Corbusier evident in the Memorial Hall, the design aligns closely with the work of practices that can be described as “late Corbusian.”193 These practices, like Atelier 5, Lyons Israel & Ellis, Kenzo Tange, Fumihiko Maki and Andre Wogenscky, pursued an agenda that critiqued Le Corbusier’s architecture, rationalising his work for different contexts. Less sculptural and idiosyncratic, they are often classically inflected, orthogonally composed, with an overwhelming use of board-marked concrete.194 The handling of the concrete at Hale is strikingly similar to the work of Atelier 5, particularly the Alder House in Flamatt, Switzerland (1958) which Ferguson likely visited.195 The massing echoes buildings by Lyons Israel Ellis, particularly the Oldbury Wells School for Girls, Shropshire UK (1959-60) or André Wogenscky, and his domestic work of the late 1950s.196 Ferguson was well-read and had access to the latest journals at CPB, and many of these buildings were in close proximity to him in London. While it is unclear how familiar Ferguson was with these practitioners, the parallels in process are telling. One critique shared by Ferguson and other “late Corbusian” architects, was the lack of care and the “crude” nature of Le Corbusier’s concrete work.197 In contrast to this crudity, the fine grain texture and carefully detailed board-marked surfaces of Hale are designed to enhance the users’ experience, and acknowledge human scale. Ferguson’s concrete patterns are a direct reflection of his experience visiting Le Corbusier’s buildings, in their lack of texture and positive consideration for human interaction. He recounts:

My problems with Corb’s Chandigarh buildings being over-scaled and intimidating especially at human ground level. Much of his work is brutal by intent stripped off ply sheets. The Swiss Pavilion at the Cite Universitaire, Paris has intimidating form but being stripped off timber boards produced a texture compatible with human scale.198

Overwhelmingly the Hale School Memorial Hall corresponds to that version of Le Corbusier found in the work of Atelier, Tange or Maki. Carried out far from the discursive centre and adapted for local conditions and for local construction practices.


194 These descriptors are used to describe the recent work of Lyons Israel Ellis. “The work of Lyons, Israel & Ellis,” Architectural Design 29 (January 1959): 22.

195 Ferguson says he drove through Switzerland looking at “big off form concrete houses”, which are more than likely to be Atelier 5. Ferguson interviewed by Murray, December 2015.

196 Wogenscky was a long-time partner of Le Corbusier and worked in the office from 1936-1956.

197 This critique is exemplified in both Mark Crinson and Amanda Reeser Lawrence’s reading of Stirling and Gowan’s Ham Common, which ‘corrects’ the concrete work at the Maisons Jaoul. See Crinson, Stirling and Gowan, 145; Amanda Reeser Lawrence, James Stirling: Revisionary Modernist (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 46.

198 R.J. Ferguson, Personal communication with Andrew Murray, September, 2017.
Rationalising from a Distance.

Acknowledging the process of rationalisation and critique is important as not only does it situate Ferguson as immediately contemporary with the most current global practice, but it also demonstrates the first-hand experience of this practice evident at the hall. Rather than learning through books or journal articles, the design of the Hale School hall demonstrates the effect of Ferguson’s direct contact with these buildings, learning from first principles, as drawings were not available. Indeed, the work of Atelier 5 was first properly published in an English journal in 1959, after Ferguson had left to travel home.\textsuperscript{199} The novel construction method of the hall, untested in Australia, indicates the direct translation of constructional techniques learnt, or experienced overseas, and Ferguson constructed numerous test panels with the builders in order to get the mix, colour and finish correct, before construction commenced.\textsuperscript{200}

Ferguson also used another project, the Fremantle South Terrace Primary School, as a kind of testing ground for the Hall. Brand and Ferguson were commissioned by the PWD in 1960 to construct the new school, which allowed Ferguson to test the properties of concrete. A modest two-storey state primary school, the soffit of the first-floor balcony provided the opportunity to experiment with the material. Indicating Ferguson’s interest in textural possibilities produced by the formwork, the jarrah boards were sawn in different thicknesses and arranged to emphasise the surface texture (Fig. 22).

Figure 22: Fremantle South Terrace Primary School, Alma Street, Fremantle. Brand and Ferguson, 1961. Source: Author.

\textsuperscript{199} There were occasional references and pictures, but no full-length article and drawings were published until the November 1959 issue of Architectural Design.
\textsuperscript{200} Bruechle interviewed by Murray, October 2016.
Designed within months of returning from his overland trip, the deeply textured concrete and the bold formal composition were alien concepts locally, and demonstrate a rapid translation of ideas, uncommon in Australia and New Zealand.\(^{201}\) The work of New Zealand architect Miles Warren is a case in point. In the same time period, Warren had a very similar experience overseas, and similar travel itinerary to Ferguson, yet there was a significant delay between his trip and the built-work that reflected this.\(^{202}\) As Goad and Willis discuss, the international experience and knowledge of architects like Ferguson, was not unusual, however the ability to express this knowledge was often tempered by local conditions, stymied by the lack of cultural education, incompatible climates and different construction skills.\(^{203}\) The Hale School Memorial Hall is exceptional in this case, as it appears to have slipped through the planning process, without the intervention of clients, facilitated by a ready and enthusiastic labour force who were willing to experiment with a new material. The outrage and legal action threatened at the completion of the hall demonstrates the conservative nature of the clients and senior members of the profession. Ferguson recalls:

> I was put on the mat in front of the president at the institute, and was told that didn’t I know concrete was a structural material, and it needed an applied finished like render or paint or tiles… I didn’t know that because I had seen off-form concrete buildings in Europe, but not as much as in the Hale school.\(^{204}\)

The Memorial Hall was a progressive building, and demonstrates a remarkably rapid transfer of ideas from Europe to Australia, unlike any other civic building from this period. The appearance of off-form concrete, which Jennifer Taylor describes as “strangely isolated”, is significant and along with the use of traditional architectural motifs, situates the project firmly within contemporary discussions taking place in Europe and London – particularly those revolving around British “Neo-avant-gardes” like Team Ten and the Smithson’s.

**Conclusion.**

Ferguson’s search for architectural meaning shares an affinity in the work of those young “late Corbusian” practices that provided strategies to reconcile modernity and an increasing interest in place, history and expression. Encouraged by the need to present a building of monumental

\(^{201}\) For further elaboration on the translation of overseas experience, see: Goad, “Bringing It All Home,” 189-192.


\(^{203}\) Willis and Goad, “A Bigger Picture,” 14.

\(^{204}\) Ferguson interviewed by Alra.
and dramatic presence, the Hale School Memorial Hall allowed Ferguson an opportunity to experiment with outwardly expressed meaning, and temporality, in a building that was to be central to the Hale School community. This follows what Sigfried Giedion asserts in “A Search for a New Monumentality” when he notes the monumental character of a building allows for “satisfying the ordinary man’s aspirations towards some visible expression of his collective consciousness.”

It is easy to reduce the formal outcome of the hall and its use of European models as little more than youthful enthusiasm. However, as this account has shown, the result is much more complex than this. The hall draws on a variety of traditional sources including the classical language of Greece, as well as the decorative, and carved surfaces of Iranian architecture. But it is the use of contemporary European models that is most striking. The crude forms of contemporary European architecture provided Ferguson with a model for continuing the modern project, whilst engaging with a satisfying and more enduring architectural tradition. Concrete played a central role in facilitating this, allowing easy manipulation of the surfaces to allow individual expression, and providing a solidity of materials beyond the thin nature of the International Style. The identification of these sources in the work is important to note, as it indicates that Ferguson was already beginning to translate his experiences overseas into his own architectural expression, providing insight into those qualities which he admired and chose to highlight. The Hale School Memorial Hall provides clear indications of the interests that Ferguson will go onto pursue throughout his career: an exploration of traditions; the ability of architecture to communicate in the tectonic sense; and the mutability of off-form concrete.

Concrete, which allowed both an expression of monumentality, modernity, and tradition, became the medium that Ferguson used to work through his search for meaning and understanding. The rough but technically accomplished nature of the concrete work evident at the hall is testament to both Ferguson’s skill and initiative, and the abilities and enthusiasm of the local construction industry. The “bringing home” of an unusual construction technique, and the commitment to its application shows the importance of tectonic and constructional logic in Ferguson’s work. Ferguson’s engagement with overseas models was not purely formal or ideological: it was predicated on a deep interest in construction technique and its ability to express meaning. For Ferguson, the search for meaning was not just theoretical, it was also practical.

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205 Sigfried Giedion, “In Search of a New Monumentality,” *Architectural Review*, 104, (September 1948), 118.
Figure 23: The Hale School Memorial Hall, Wembley Downs, 1961.
Source: Cross-Section Archive, University of Melbourne.

In 1963, following the completion of the Hale School Memorial Hall, Ferguson was invited by *The Architect WA*, to provide a response to the recently published book *The Australian Ugliness* by Melbourne architect and critic Robin Boyd (1960). Ferguson, along with fellow PTC graduates Bill Weedon and John White, were invited to respond to the following quote by Boyd, the editors posing the question “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?”:

> The National character is as cut up and mixed up as can be. Yet undoubtedly a distinctive quality does exist and is to some extent recognized by visitors immediately when they arrive. Naturally, then, the visitor is inclined to look expectantly for more evidence or confirmation of it in the streets and homes and in all the popular arts and crafts. He is often disappointed, not because there is no Australian character in building and display and product design but because it is so confused and subtle that all but the historian or an intense student are likely to lose patience in the search.²⁰⁶

The response that Ferguson offered to the Boyd quote is revealing, clearly illustrating important aspects of his architectural position, and allowing a rare insight into the motivations behind his search. Although Ferguson published often and contributed regularly to *The Architect WA*, he rarely discussed his own work. His response to this quote established an early critical stance, and demonstrated that Ferguson was an active participant in discursive debates, and that his search for meaning was not accidental. It was a carefully considered, textually-bound position, which is continually reflected in his work. The Hale School Memorial Hall demonstrated that Ferguson’s interest in contemporary architecture engaged both modern and traditional sensibilities, but did not appear overly concerned with place. The piece that Ferguson wrote progressed this interest, and he drew important links between traditional architectural practice, and the construction of local identity. Traditional models were used at the Hale School Memorial Hall mostly as a reaction to the lightweight, seemingly temporary nature of the International Style, but, as this article demonstrates, following the Hall’s completion Ferguson’s interest in the vernacular developed and its ability to inform a regional identity was more openly explored.

This chapter explores Ferguson’s article in depth, and provides some background to the active and independent nature of discourse in Western Australia. The unique discursive environment found in Perth that prompted Ferguson to write such an article is central to understanding his regionalism, as it is this active, independent environment, one that encouraged public discussion

that would have provided him with both a reason and a platform to articulate his ideologies. This chapter examines this discursive atmosphere - one that was aware of its position, actively critical and self-reflexive - and the contributing role it played as Ferguson’s interest in the vernacular and as identity became increasingly central to his practice.

**An Australian Idiom?**

What constituted an appropriate Australian architectural character was widely debated during the 1960s. The character of this debate was demonstrated in a 1962 article by Sydney architect and critic Milo Dunphy, “Growth of Australian Architecture,” which documents the emergence of what came to be known as the “Sydney School.” Dunphy identified a group of architects whose work “shows careful relation to the gardens and land form” and are “subversive…they deliberately undermine the smug preconceptions of the dreary bulk of Australian housing.” Despite the fraught nature of this term, demonstrated in later critiques by Stanislaus Fung and Winsome Callister, the “Sydney School” highlights a strain of Australian architecture that interrogated the idea of an International-Style Modernism. This interrogation was a part of, as Callister describes, a “widespread regionalism occurring at roughly the same time in Melbourne and Sydney, and other parts of Australia.” The “Sydney School,” while codified later by critics, was initially developed through individual building efforts, rather than a sustained and organised “school.” That this “school” was developed through building rather than writing is shown in both Fung and Callister’s critiques which argue that the “school” is characterised more by its lack of cohesion than anything else. Major players like Ken Woolley, Arthur Baldwinson, Ian McKay, and Neville Gruzman in Sydney, and Chancellor and Patrick in Victoria, rarely wrote about their work. This is not to say that there weren’t forums for discussion or that ideas weren’t debated by practitioners; the Sydney Architectural Society played an especially important role. Likewise the Contemporary Architects Group from Adelaide were vocal contributors to public discourse, and often penned articles in the local

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207 For a good introduction to these debates see Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960.*
210 For examples of these critiques see: Stanislaus Fung, “The ‘Sydney School’?” in *Shifting Views: Selected essays on the Architectural History of Australia and New Zealand,* ed. Andrew Leach et al (St Lucia: UQP, 2008), 32-47; Callister, “Dealing with the Sydney School.”
papers, *The News* and *the Advertiser*. But largely, these regional movements were developed ad-hoc and without a central forum for discourse.

Perhaps prompted by the lack of inclusion in the dominant national critiques, Western Australian architects were relatively unusual in the country in that they wrote actively and often about architecture and their ideologies. Architects writing about architectural matters was not unusual - a reading of *Architecture, Architecture in Australia*, or *Cross-Section* from this period demonstrates this. But with the creation of the local RAIA chapter journal *The Architect WA* in 1939, the small city was provided with a condensed forum for architectural critique, written exclusively by architects, and one that was sustained over a long period of time. *The Architect WA* has long served as a site for open and active discourse for the local community. Geoffrey London has noted the nature of the magazine, which particularly in the 1950s focussed heavily on the promotion of modern architecture, and maintained a strong focus on local and international work, largely avoiding national debates. London suggests that this in part adds to the isolation of WA from the rest of Australia, and a reading of the journal further demonstrates a generally apathetic view to the work being produced in the eastern states. *The Architect WA* was unique in Australia as a publication, and fostered a tradition of discussion and critique amongst members. Particularly noteworthy was long running columnist “Caliban” who would offer scathing critiques of the industry every issue. In conjunction with *The Architect WA*, the local newspapers, *The West Australian* and the *Sunday Times*, provided additional architectural coverage, with features often spanning several pages. Beginning in April 1954, *The West Australian* published a section called “Architecture and Real Estate”, authored initially by Keith Murray, and *The Sunday Times* started their “Homes” Section also in 1954, written by Jane Scott. Duncan Richards noted that within these columns: “It becomes possible to discern the collective intentions of the group of architects in their promotion of the principles of modern architecture, an intention…actively supported and promoted by the journalists.” A later publication, *Aedicule*, was initiated by students in 1961 and ran articles on New Brutalism and the Modulor, amongst scathing critiques of local practice.

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213 For example, see: Contemporary Architects Group, “Has Australia a National Architecture?” *News*, September 28, 1954, 31; “Appreciation of Good Architecture,” *The Advertiser*, March 28, 1953, 8. (Both articles were apparently written by Brian Claridge)


215 Other states lacked this platform, Victoria had the newsletter *RAIA Bulletin*, and *Architect (Victoria)* which began in 1967, providing a critical outlet for Victorians. *Cross-Section*, which began in 1952 although critical, was largely a newsletter for the industry, not providing editorial or opinion pieces. Tasmania had a comparable outlet *Tasmanian Architect*, which ran from 1957-1968.

216 ‘Caliban’ was the pseudonym of Peter Parkinson, a recent émigré from the AA in London.


218 *Aedicule* was started by the Architectural Students’ Association of WA, and ran for 2 issues in 1961.
While no “school” can be seen to have emanated from *The Architect WA* or the other forums, there was an identifiable ideological position shared among many of the profession that developed across these pages. Almost from the beginning these discussions were critical, climate-focussed, and stressed the importance of engaging with the local context. Geoffrey London has shown this critique was particularly evident in the early writing of Eric Leach, Ferguson’s first employer upon graduation. Leach dismissed the awarding of the Sir John Sulman Medal in 1951 to the Rose Seidler house as “a shock to architects who have struggled for so long with the problem of designing against the Australian climatic conditions,” and later critiqued Frederick Romberg “for his lack of consideration of climatic factors but also for his profligacy.”

Barbs were often aimed at the eastern states and published in the journal. In 1957 L Bates, a student winner of the W.H. Robertson travel prize reported in *The Architect WA* on a trip to Melbourne, “The areas of Beaumaris and Frankston… contain refreshing examples of modern housing. These areas are also particularly delightful as residents strive to retain the natural trees and shrubs and harmonise with the bushland setting.” However he also describes the new MLC building as “most disappointing.” Bob Lyon, a student from PTC, wrote in 1956 of his admiration for the “refreshing” and “impressive” work being produced in Melbourne. In a later 1957 report he wrote enthusiastically of visiting the new ICI building, but of other curtain walled structure he notes, “Unfortunately, many of the new buildings fall into the mundane category.”

Bob Lyon, a student from PTC, wrote in 1956 of his admiration for the “refreshing” and “impressive” work being produced in Melbourne. In a later 1957 report he wrote enthusiastically of visiting the new ICI building, but of other curtain walled structure he notes, “Unfortunately, many of the new buildings fall into the mundane category.” But Melbourne wasn’t the only place critiqued. Perth received its fair share as well. Brian Klopper wrote in local student magazine *Aedicule* of the “lack of logic” in Perth:

> Designs forced to attain a “glossy” end…high maintenance materials used in country of high labour costs, painted render and brickwork, excessive exposed timber… perhaps in South America, Japan, where labour costs are nothing, but here in S.W.A. [Sunny Western Australia]?

Interest in local practice and history was also evident. Ross Chisholm, on return from experience working in London for CPB wrote an article titled, “Perth in Retrospect” noting: “If only we bothered to use what already has been built as a lesson, then I am sure we would be able to boast far greater achievements...” In 1957 Vin Davies described his design approach, noting it “purposely avoids the spectacular, but rather endeavours to express an Australian

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vernacular in terms of orthodox building practice.” In 1960 students Robin Kornweibel and D. Wilson presented findings of their third year research project, a survey of historic buildings in the wheatbelt town Toodyay, describing “a few of the original domestic and civic architectural achievements remain today, and give a true and stimulating indication of the vernacular architecture that evolved…an architecture that has a strong affinity to the ground from which it is derived.” Ferguson himself wrote an article examining the historic building group on Rottnest Island, stating “Buildings have been shaped for obviously different purposes, but no one building in the group attempts to stand proud.” John Oldham, architect and landscape architect, was also writing at this time about the importance of the Australian garden, and published in The Architect WA. In an article on domestic landscaping he concluded, “In order to use the local materials to create beautiful gardens, it is necessary for us to develop a new ‘Australian’ vision.” Bill Weedon, Ferguson’s schoolmate and PTC colleague, responded to the same idiom question as Ferguson, showing that regionalism and architectural identity were clearly important issues amongst the profession:

Out of what sort of conditions have long-established countries or regions produced their own architectural idioms – those details, forms and unmistakable proportions? There must be some generating influence of fact, not fancy, some challenge of climate or materials, topography, systems of social organisations etc., no matter how dimly exposed these conditions appear.

It is clear from these select examples that local architects, particularly students and recent graduates, had an awareness and interest in a local architectural tradition, even if through the critique of others. While not always explicitly stated, this interest in place - separate from climate – became increasingly apparent in the literature, particularly through the documentation of historic buildings. Whether this interest transformed into a regionalist discourse is beyond the scope of this thesis, but there were clearly demonstrable results from this intellectual ferment, even if they were difficult to articulate. Robin Boyd tentatively noted the emergence of a Western Australian style in the 1967 article “State of Australian Architecture”: “It almost led one to believe that another regional style was in the making. If so it was still too young to be counted on.” What this demonstrates, along with the ground swell of student writing, critiques and responses in both The Architect WA, The West Australian, Sunday Times, and

Aedicule is that the architectural output from Western Australia during this time was indelibly linked to a visible, discursive culture.

Ferguson was a regular contributor to The Architect WA, publishing travel photos and stories, critiques of projects and opinion pieces, additionally ghost writing for Frank Platell’s architectural column in The West Australian. Of all his contributions, it is Ferguson’s “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?” essay which provides the most revealing insight to his practice during this period. Ferguson clearly identified his issues with contemporary practice, and articulated answers, strongly rooted in historical precedent and traditional architectural practice. The article is illuminating. It shows his developing interest in vernacular architecture, in local and regionally reflective practice, and demonstrating an interest in a profound architectural tradition that is rooted in a place and its people, and directly communicates with both place and people. It demonstrates a position that has clearly developed from his work at Hale School.

Ferguson’s reply to the question “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?” came in the form of a single page, seven-hundred word essay, that essentially constituted an architectural ideology (See appendix 1). The response is not illustrated, and apart from mentions of Mies van der Rohe and Michelangelo, no built examples or architects are given. The essay is arranged into three sections, with the basic premise that Australia has not developed a local idiom because it has become swept up in the fashion of the International Style, forgetting the fundamental principles of architecture. Ferguson first attempted to define architecture. He then documented the current problems and finally, offered a solution to these problems. He introduced the essay with another question, asking: “Why has Australia not achieved an Architectural idiom?”, immediately providing a damning response:

We, the ‘Architects’ have not been erecting Architecture, but buildings. A structure which can carry the title Architecture will, of necessity, have something to say about Australia.

With this exchange, Ferguson articulated the kernel of the proposition of his search: the creation of architecture is bound to the demonstration and reflection of place and identity. It must be grounded within and directly engage the user group, an aspect apparently lost in contemporary practice, which Ferguson here refers to as “the enjoyment of man.”

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232 R.J. Ferguson, Personal Communication with Andrew Murray, September, 2017. Ferguson wrote the columns for Frank Platell, most memorably aiming a series of critiques at the new Rottnest development.

233 Ferguson, “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?”, 40.
The difference between Architecture and Building? A structure which meets the clients pocket, satisfies the direct physical function and is of sound construction can be a very fine building but on top this must have emotional content to be architecture. The emotional content does not refer to folded roofs, twisted gravity defying structures, too much glass nor an over usage of slick materials. It does refer to proportion, scale, the shaping of buildings according to climate (Not just orientation and sun screening) and particularly, it refers to the enjoyment of man. It is this shaping for climate and enjoyment which will subconsciously tell an Australian story.

Ferguson’s derision of contemporary architectural trends has clear parallels with those earlier regionalist critiques by Paul Rudolph and Sigfried Giedion, suggesting the focus of architecture be people and place, rather than style. The “enjoyment of man” has a Heideggerian tone and establishes that for Ferguson, a local architecture is more than simply designing for climate:

Mies uses steel and glass with the same admirable skill as Michelangelo used marble and the result is closer to pure sculpture than Architecture should go. The solid third enclosing dimension, which one finds so enjoyable in Spanish courtyard and Italian colonnade architecture, is missing. Air conditioning can, for a price, correct Architectural errors, in lack of shaping for climatic comfort, physiologically but not psychologically.

Ferguson then took aim at the profession, denouncing architectural practice as being commodified and driven by market economics, responding to fashion and taste, rather than “shaped” by time, tradition and an intimate connection to place.

Too much of the waste matter is getting past the drawing board. Our planners adequately solve the machine functions of the building, that is, it will be the right cost and will work, but there a hard line is drawn and the grafting on of materials, facades and roofs take the place of pure Architectural shaping – solids and spaces working consistently together to shelter and define man and the functions of man.

While much of the article deals with what Ferguson identifies as the current problems with the profession, he provides some insight into the formal qualities of architecture he admires. He writes:
Analyse the gems of Architecture and one finds a sophisticated poverty in the number of materials. A one predominant material has been used at its sculptural best.  

The idea of a “sophisticated poverty” will become central to his architectural practice in the following years, directly reflected in his almost total use of concrete. Ferguson concludes with a provocative call-to-arms:

Maximum profit returning floor space for the minimum cost is the flag under which we fight, but Architecture must go beyond the necessary and the economic…To remedy this, we, the Architects, must prove that Architecture is a necessity. Someone has said that “it is not enough for a building to be something or do something, it must also say something.”

For Ferguson, the reduction of architecture as a tool for commercial interests is indicative of the precarious position he saw the discipline heading towards. His endeavours to make architecture a “necessity” can already be seen in the Hale School Memorial Hall in the solidarity and emotional weight of the concrete, strong community emphasis, and the clear attempts to “say something” through the use of sculpture and classical motifs. But there are also notable elements which Ferguson highlights in the text that are missing at the Hall, particularly the shaping for climate and the “enjoyment of man” which will manifest in later projects through the provision of outdoor communal gathering space. Ferguson here is clearly formulating his architectural position, informed by his recent travels, wide readings and the active local discourse. The text is written at a key moment in Ferguson’s career, at a time between the construction of two buildings that illustrate his shifting ideology. Rather than viewing the shift from the Hale School hall to his next major project, the UWA Law School, as an epistemological break, Ferguson’s essay demonstrates that the elements which precipitated this change were percolating for many years before. While this text should not be considered as the summation of Ferguson’s entire architectural position, it provides a crucial insight into the development of his architectural practice, and the way he transformed his overseas experience and lessons into an ideological position.

**Conclusion.**

As Callister and others have carefully articulated, the concept of the “Sydney School”, which has come to occupy a centralised image of regionalism in Australia, belies the complexity and
variety present in Australian regional architecture. This chapter extends this discussion not by showing that there was a comparable regionalism in WA, but by highlighting a key aspect, and difference, in WA regional practice is that ideas were incubated and disseminated through writing and doing, rather than just doing. Perhaps due to the fact that there was no “local Robin Boyd,” the discussion of architecture in Western Australia became a responsibility shared by the profession. For Ferguson, this meant that a search for meaning and understanding was played out within a discursive environment acutely aware of its own output, an environment that was interested in, and encouraged the furthering of, its own built identity. This environment would have surely had an impact on Ferguson’s interest in the vernacular. While much of Ferguson’s architectural exploration is undertaken through the direct act of building, his 1963 essay shows that it was also shaped by a conscious and deliberate inquiry which continued to preoccupy him for decades to come.

The period between the Hale School Memorial Hall and UWA Law School commission was a time of self-reflection for Ferguson, as he moved from his joint practice of Brand, Ferguson & Solarski to establishing his own solo practice in 1963. The piece that he wrote for The Architect WA clearly demonstrated that this was a period of considered personal questioning, as he articulated the parameters of his architectural interests. While the ideologies expounded in the essay are not always immediately evident in Ferguson’s work, it provides an important insight into the beginnings of what will become a cohesive and recognisable regional idiom. Ferguson was part of a small group of Perth architects that included John White, Bill Weedon, Eric Leach, Frederick McCardell, Eric Moyle and Peter Parkinson, all of whom actively wrote, practised and critiqued architecture during this period in a public forum. Ferguson’s success was his ability to transfer these critiques into a viable architectural practice, significantly, operating in the civic sphere. While the discussion of an Australian idiom was largely played out in residential practice, the “Sydney School” in particular, Ferguson took the debate to the highly visible stage of the public realm.

237 For example, in the September 1961 issue of The Architect WA, John White, Peter Parkinson, Antoni Solarski and Bill Weedon were all invited to respond to the question, “Do You Think Architecture Today is Designed for ‘Fitness of Purpose?’” The Architect WA 4 (September 1961): 40-42.
In 1963 Ferguson was awarded the commission for a new Law School to be built at the University of Western Australia, the oldest university in the state (Fig. 24). This was to be the first purpose-built law school in the country, a major project that allowed Ferguson to begin his own practice following the termination of the Brand, Ferguson & Solarski partnership. The UWA Law School, completed in 1967, is Ferguson’s most recognised project and one of the most significant buildings completed in postwar Perth. The Law School was enormously successful, and it cemented a relationship between Ferguson and UWA that spanned over five decades, including a period as campus architect.

Not only did the Law School instigate one of the most important relationships of Ferguson’s career, it also represented a significant development in his architectural ideology. As seen in the “Idiom” essay, in the period following the completion of the Hale School Memorial Hall, Ferguson was clearly reflecting upon and developing his interest in the vernacular and the ability for it to inform his own regional practice. The UWA campus proved to be the ideal testing ground for this philosophy.
With the completion of the Law School, Ferguson produced an architectural vocabulary for the campus that was contextual, robust, repeatable and personal. But as this chapter will show, it was still strongly aligned with the “late Corbusian” school evident at Hale. It is rather through the development of the two subsequent buildings on campus, the Sports Centre (1970) and Guild Building (1972), that Ferguson’s ability to synthesise lessons from the vernacular becomes clear. Together, this architectural ensemble demonstrates how Ferguson’s interest in the possibilities of the vernacular radically developed from the Hale School Memorial Hall – which enabled a critique of the International Style - to directly informing his own regional tradition. This chapter examines the first three buildings Ferguson completed for the campus and the dramatic direction-change his search takes, moving from Le Corbusier and the classical tradition, to the architecture of the Mediterranean - encompassing everything from the Greek islands, Renaissance palazzi and the work of the Italian Neorealists.

The UWA Commission.

The university was bursting at the seams, and behind the pale sandstone colonnades and Spanish tiles of its Australian-Moorish nucleus an ugly clump of temporary buildings sprouted. But on the green lawn of Whitfield Court, fringed by poplars, young bodies decoratively drowsed in the sun. (Randolph Stow, The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea).²³⁸

The awarding of the Law School commission to Ferguson came at a time of uncertainty in the university, which, as Randolph Stow described in his evocative novel, by the 1950s was under increasing pressure to accommodate additional students. The University of Western Australia was established in 1911, originally operating from a small central city site. Quickly outgrowing the small timber buildings, the university moved to the present day Crawley site in the 1920s, and the new campus rapidly expanded. The first building constructed on the Crawley campus was completed in 1925, following a modified campus plan prepared by Victorian architect Harold Desbrowe-Annear.²³⁹ This was quickly followed in 1932 by the landmark Winthrop Hall and Hackett Memorial buildings designed by Melbourne architects Rodney Alsop and Conrad Sayce. These key buildings were completed in a Mediterranean style, similar to the contemporary Romanesque architecture of the UCLA Westwood Campus in California (Fig. 25).

²³⁹ Desbrowe-Annear’s plan was heavily modified by the Public Works Department, but elements remained. R.J. Ferguson, Crawley Campus: The Planning and Architecture of the University of Western Australia (Crawley: UWA Press, 1993), 10.
The Alsop and Sayce buildings established a strong campus character, defined by their cream limestone walls, terracotta roof tiles and shaded colonnades. This character was rigidly adhered to for several years, forming a central Mediterranean nucleus. In the late 1950s, this strong identity was eroded when the PWD executed a series of buildings which “lacked the imagination and distinctiveness worthy of a university campus.”

The pressing need to accommodate a growing student body allied with limited funding, led to a series of utilitarian structures executed by the PWD between 1957 and 1962, described as “functionally competent” but not “architecturally distinctive or distinctively academic.” It was during this period of rapid student growth and growing dissatisfaction in the development of the campus that Gordon Stephenson was appointed to the joint role of Consultant Architect and Professor of

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240 The undercroft of Winthrop Hall (1927) was also the first use of off-form concrete in an architectural setting in Australia, establishing an interesting contextual link for Ferguson’s later work on the campus. See: Miles Lewis, *200 Years of Concrete in Australia* (North Sydney: Concrete Institute of Australia, 1988), 103.

241 Fred Alexander, *Campus at Crawley: A Narrative and Critical Appreciation of the First Fifty Years of the University of Western Australia* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1963), 611.

242 Alexander, *Campus at Crawley*, 619.
Architecture at UWA.\textsuperscript{243} Gordon Stephenson (1908-1997), originally from Liverpool, England, had previously been brought out to Perth in 1953 to develop the landmark Stephenson-Hepburn report as part of the 1955 Metropolitan Plan for Perth.\textsuperscript{244} Stephenson returned to guide the transformation of the campus, and to “win back for the developing campus some of the admiration which had been gained for it by the noble buildings for which Wilkinson, Alsop and Sayce had been responsible more than three decades earlier.”\textsuperscript{245}

There has long been an interest in the architecture of the Mediterranean in Australian architecture, and it was often held up as an appropriate local model, given the similarities in climate and landscape.\textsuperscript{246} Professor of Architecture at the University of Sydney Leslie Wilkinson keenly observed these similarities when he visited the campus in the 1920s to assist in the preparation of a new master plan, remarking that the campus had “a climate and setting which may be best described as Mediterranean.”\textsuperscript{247} Wilkinson later judged the 1927 architectural competition for the Hackett Memorial Buildings, and it has been suggested that this enthusiasm for the Mediterranean led him to select the Alsop and Sayce entry, with its obvious Romanesque campanile and detailing, as the winner.\textsuperscript{248} The architect of the Hackett Memorial Buildings, Rodney Alsop was clearly aware of these links, declaring:

‘Renaissance’ is the only definite term that can be given to the style of the Hackett Buildings – and the Renaissance began in Italy . . . it was found necessary to return to the fountain head, and develop directly from the early Renaissance of the sunny climate of Italy, where mass and form count more than the applied detail.\textsuperscript{249}

The Hackett Memorial Buildings set the tone for the campus, and their Mediterranean spirit was repeated in subsequent buildings on campus, later becoming widely adopted across Western Australia as an “ideal type” for the local conditions.\textsuperscript{250} Projects by Alsop, Marshall Clifton, Monsignor Hawes and Reginald Summerhayes continued to pursue Mediterranean forms throughout the 1930s, in what amounted to an established alternative tradition, a kind of local “romantic” school, with which Ferguson’s work certainly shares an affinity.\textsuperscript{251}

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{243} Gordon Stephenson, \textit{On a Human Scale: A Life in City Design} (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992), 182. \\
\textsuperscript{244} Stephenson, \textit{On a Human Scale}, 134. \\
\textsuperscript{245} Alexander, \textit{Campus at Crawley}, 618. \\
\textsuperscript{246} Freeland notes particularly the appearance of ‘Spanish Mission’ in the early 20th Century, through Wilkinson, and Monsignor Hawes. Freeland, \textit{Architecture in Australia}, 233. \\
\textsuperscript{247} Chapman, Barbara, and Duncan Richards, \textit{Marshall Clifton: Architect and Artist} (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1989), 40. \\
\textsuperscript{248} Alexander, \textit{Campus at Crawley}, 597. \\
\textsuperscript{249} Ferguson, \textit{Crawley Campus}, 25. \\
\textsuperscript{250} Molyneux, \textit{Looking Around Perth}, 55. \\
\textsuperscript{251} Molyneux, ”Building in Western Australia 1940-1979,” 141.\end{flushleft}
Stephenson’s Involvement.

Stephenson inherited a university campus in the midst of an identity crisis, dealing with an increasingly wayward campus development needing to regain the dignity that had been established in the 1930s. Upon his permanent appointment in 1960, Stephenson began drafting what was to become the 1962 campus plan, the first major campus plan upgrade since 1927, setting out basic planning principles including the use of quiet, inner courtyards and the pedestrianisation of the campus. However the most visible and enduring legacy of this plan was the return to what is known as the “Alsop Spirit.” This decision was made in conjunction with the Buildings Committee and that body suggested that new buildings needed a distinct university character. The new buildings were to respond directly to the material and formal structure established by the 1930s buildings on campus designed by Alsop and Sayce, being characterised by a low key, Mediterranean feel, with local Cottesloe limestone walls and Cordova roof tiles. The first four buildings constructed after the implementation of this 1962 plan, referred to as the first “Post Stephenson” buildings, are the Reid Library; the Arts Building; the Economic and Commerce Building; and the Law School, all interpreting the new “Alsop Spirit” in a variety of ways.

The architects of these first four buildings were required to design the structure in association with Gordon Stephenson, due to a new commissioning policy adopted by the university, in which an architect in private practice would be partnered with the consultant architect to work in concert, preparing an agreed sketch design to present to the Buildings Committee. Once this was accepted, the private architect became wholly responsible for the documentation and supervision of the work. This method of procurement ensured the strong visual language of the campus was re-established and adhered to the “Alsop Spirit.” Stephenson outlined the unusual relationship of the partnership in a letter presented to the Building Committee in 1963, noting that the most important role for the campus architect is to act in association with the private

252 The campus was thought to exist in two halves: the one below the ‘Munns Line’ being mixed in character, or as George Seddon describes it: “choice plums in an indifferent pudding.” Gillian Lilleyman, and George Seddon, eds. A Landscape for Learning: A History of the Grounds of the University of Western Australia (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2006): 96.
253 These principles can be seen in the Law School, evident for example in the plan form and the incorporation of a long bench seat on the Western side. Gordon Stephenson, Planning for the University of Western Australia 1914-70: A Review of Past Plans and Future Prospects (Nedlands: Langham Press, 1986), 50.
255 Stephenson, Planning for the University, 12.
256 Stephenson, Planning for the University, 12
257 Stephenson, Planning for the University, 12
practice to ensure designs are “consistent”, relative to existing fabric and “in harmony with other buildings.” In this relationship the private practice assumed executive responsibility for preparing working drawings, specifications and the use of specialist sub-contractors. Stephenson stated: “We join forces in order to achieve the best possible design solution for the many demands made by the University.”

The interpretation of the “Alsop Spirit” was addressed in different ways in each of the four “Post-Stephenson” buildings. The Arts building (Marshall Clifton, 1963) used the same materials as the Alsop buildings, but in a rigid Mediterranean pose; the Reid Library (Cameron Chisholm and Nicol, 1964) used a sandy aggregate concrete panel with terracotta roof within a classically modern frame, whilst the Economics and Commerce building (Roger Johnson, 1966) used limestone panels within a concrete frame and tiled mansard roof. The Law School (Ferguson, 1967) used a cream coloured off-form concrete and a Cordova tiled roof, engaging with the spirit of the Alsop buildings not just in sympathetic materials, but through using a range of historical sources and strategies to establish a dialogue between it and the existing campus.

**Ferguson Appointed.**

In March 1963 Brand, Ferguson & Solarski were appointed as architects for the new UWA Law Building, with the Committee having allocated funds to cover the initial sketch planning. The commission was awarded to the firm by Stephenson, who was impressed by Ferguson’s work on the Hale School Memorial Hall. In 1963 Stephenson convened the jury of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) WA Bronze Medal award, for the most meritorious building constructed in Western Australia for the years 1959-61, and promoted the Hale School Memorial Hall as the winner. Stephenson recalled it being “simple, bold, well studied in detail and used reinforced concrete in an unusual way…it was the most original and modern building the jury saw, yet in the architectural main-stream.” The hall clearly made a lasting impression on Stephenson, as shortly afterwards he approached Ferguson, then at 31 years of age, a relatively young and inexperienced practitioner, to undertake a major new campus building. Ferguson at the time was still a partner in the practice, Brand, Ferguson & Solarski,
formed during the Hale School Hall construction, but shortly after the Law School commission was received, the partnership was disbanded. Following a downturn in the economy, the practice struggled to find work, and the partners separated. Antoni Solarski went out on his own, and the commission for the Law School was large enough to allow Ferguson to also commence his own private practice. Anthony Brand had been approached by the biggest local practice, Forbes and Fitzhardinge, to become a partner, which he accepted, and so the partnership was soon dissolved.264

Figure 26: Concrete tests panels constructed by Ferguson and Rob Hanlin to select the colour mix for the Law School.
Source: Robert Hanlin private papers.

In 1964, sketch plans for the Law School were completed, but the project encountered several delays, and there was much debate over the design, construction method, and materials.265 Work on site began in November 1965, but construction proved difficult with the concrete mix and

264 Anthony Brand, Personal Communication with Andrew Murray, October, 2016.
265 For example, in order to approve the use of off-form concrete, the Buildings Committee inspected the recent Deaf and Dumb school, then under construction in Mosman Park. This building, designed by Hawkins and Sands, is a small, Corbusian block finished in stark white béton brut concrete. Members found this concrete finish was a ‘considerable improvement on the grey concrete used at the Hale School Hall,’ and so was approved. UWA Building Committee Notes, June 8, 1964 (UWA Archive Cons 411).
colouration a constant source of frustration for all involved. Ferguson wanted a cream coloured concrete to blend with the university surrounds, and with the help of fellow architect Robert Hanlin, erected a series of test panels in range of colour mixes (Fig. 26). The concrete test panels were erected and approved, but once construction began on the Law School, it was noticed that the mix colour changed across the building, requiring demolition and rebuilding of six rooms on the first floor, causing significant delays in the schedule. The Law School was officially opened by the Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, Sir Garfield Barwick, on the 28th September, 1967. Awarded the RIBA Bronze Medal in 1969, the building was an immediate success and ensured Ferguson’s relationship with the university would continue.

Figure 27: UWA Law School, Ground Floor Plan, 1967.
Source: Ferguson Architects.

As constructed, the Law School is a three-storey rectangular building designed around a central courtyard, ringed by a cloistered walkway which provides access to all the classrooms and offices (Fig. 27). To the south of the courtyard is the Law Library; to the north are student

266 The colour was made with a mix of Danish white cement and yellow ‘brickies’ sand.
267 Robert Hanlin, Personal communication with Andrew Murray, September 5, 2017.
268 University of Western Australia, Buildings Committee notes, June 30, 1966 (UWA Archive Cons 411).
work-rooms and a lecture theatre. To the east and west are a series of offices, tutorial rooms and toilets. The building entry is through a decorative gate, able to be locked after hours, which opens directly onto the central courtyard. The facades of the building vary: the projecting balconies on the east being relieved by the stairwell; the over-scaled seating alcove on the west; the blank north wall of the lecture theatre and a detached concrete frame *brise-soleil* which stretches across the south façade. The building is finished in a golden off-form concrete, with an open framed jarrah roof, Cordova tiles, brick tiled floors, timber-framed windows and cast-in copper downpipes. Unlike the Hale School Memorial Hall, the Law School clearly responds to the climate. There is no air-conditioning, instead a range of sun shades and protective eaves keep the walls cool. The roof is ventilated via ridge-vents and the mass of the concrete acts as an insulator. The verandah spaces allow for cross-breezes to classrooms, flowing through to the central courtyard, and there is a range of shaded outdoor spaces for students to occupy.

![Figure 28: UWA Law School. Sketch Model, 1964. Source: Ferguson Architects.](image)

While the constructed building shows a marked difference in approach to the earlier Hale School Memorial Hall, the sketch model presented to the UWA buildings committee in May 1964 illustrates the close relationship between them (Fig. 28). Echoes of the hall are clearly
visible with an expressed orthogonal post and beam frame, enlivened by a series of concrete panels. The overall modelling and proportions are similar, and the scheme continues to show that a critical interest in Corbusier remains. This initial sketch model is remarkably similar to the final building; the obvious difference is in the expression of the roof. Initially proposed as a Cordova terracotta tiled roof concealed behind a large parapet, the completed building saw the parapet removed, and the hipped-roof and projecting eaves expressed. An examination of the reasons for the roof being changed between the sketch model and the final building reveals much about Ferguson’s practice, and the manner in which he transfers lessons from the vernacular to his own work.

**Looking to the Mediterranean.**

The sketch plans of the Law School were accepted and submitted to the Australian Universities Commission (AUC) for approval and funding allocation in June of 1964, during which time Ferguson went on a three-month study tour of the Mediterranean, including the Cycladic Islands in Greece. This expedition affirmed his long-held interest in the vernacular, particularly that from the Mediterranean, and allowed Ferguson to further immerse himself in the architectural traditions and culture there. So affecting was this experience that during this trip Ferguson redesigned the Law School, apparently whilst lying on the beach in Mykonos. He removed the concrete parapet documented in the first scheme, replacing it with a pitched, tiled roof supported by a series of angled timber brackets, immediately telephoning Stephenson from Greece to inform the AUC of the proposed change. By removing the parapet and exposing the tiled roof behind, the appearance of the building was radically altered. This move not only strengthened links with the existing Alsop and Sayce buildings, but also aligned it with the traditional architecture of the Mediterranean, where simply expressed pitched tiled roofs are in abundance. By essentially exchanging roof forms, Ferguson demonstrated the fine line that can exist between contemporary and vernacular traditions, a tension similarly explored by Ettore Sottsass Sr. in his 1936-7 villino project (Fig. 29). Ferguson noted this quality when discussing the project, describing the first scheme for the Law School as “stiff” and that he “eased it off” in the revised design, when the only real change was the roof form. Favouring the more traditional roof design signifies a shift in Ferguson’s approach to architecture, embracing a more casual expression rather than the heroic nature of the Hale School work. But

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273 Ferguson interviewed by Murray, December 2015.
more importantly it demonstrated how the application of traditional techniques could be employed to engage and express local character. Drawing heavily on examples encountered on his recent travels, the hipped-roof responded contextually and climatically, shielding the walls from the sun, and the driving rain. The revision of the roof at UWA however, demonstrated that Ferguson’s critical engagement with tradition was not developing reactively, but as a constructive way to engage with the local.

Figure 29: Ettore Sottsass Sr., Villino Project. Turin, 1936-37.
Source: Sabatino, Pride in Modesty, 150.

The expression of the hipped-roof helps to draw out other latent Mediterranean qualities already present in the initial design. In the sketch model it is clear, particularly through the inclusion of a courtyard with the roof draining into the centre like a Roman domus, that the hipped-roof revision simply completed the effect, and that lessons from his previous explorations were already in place. The revision of the parapeted roof to the expressed tile roof makes the connection to the Mediterranean clear. But how did this interest in the Mediterranean develop? Why does it manifest so clearly at UWA?
Not simply an extension of a local “romantic” school or a contextual response to the campus, the Law School represents Ferguson’s long held interest in Mediterranean culture. This interest, particularly in Italy and the Neorealist school, was shared among a small group of postwar Australian architects including Robert Dickson, James Birrell, and G.W. Finn.274 The formal resolution of the Law School is the result of Ferguson’s sustained interest in the Mediterranean. As demonstrated in previous chapters, Ferguson was struck by the traditional architecture of the Mediterranean, a region that he first visited on his travels across Europe in 1958-9, and where

274 For example, Robert Dickson went to Italy, and worked for Mangiarotti and Morassutti; James Birrell went to visit Gio Ponti in Milan; GW Finn visited the INA-Casa development in 1957. See: Anderson and Nordeck, G.W.Finn, 1995; Robert Dickson, Addicted to Architecture (Kent Town, South Australian: Wakefield Press, 2010); and Macarthur and Wilson, Birrell, 1997.
he was first seduced by what he described as the “sophisticated poverty” of the architecture. Although having previously read and studied this architecture, it was the physical experience of travelling there that had the most profound effect on Ferguson – a transformation that was unexpected. Speaking of visiting the Parthenon in Athens for the first time, Ferguson remarked upon the difference between seeing it in textbooks and experiencing it: “To me it was just a black and white building…Until I went there and leant against those pillars, and I just fell apart.” Between 1958 and 1959 he extensively travelled across Italy, Athens, and the Greek Islands including Mt Athos and Hydra, later returning to Greece in 1964 and Dubrovnik in 1969 and 1972. Duncan Richards recalls a particularly enthusiastic presentation on the architecture of Mount Athos given by Ferguson upon his return from his first trip in 1960, where Richards describes him speaking about “in almost reverential terms.” The well-crafted rationalism of the Mediterranean vernacular encapsulated much of what Ferguson set out to discover and offered a compelling alternative to the lightweight and fashionable architecture of the International Style. It provided clear lessons for crafting an architecture that was solid, rational, locally responsive, and engaged the community.

His second journey to Greece in 1964 reaffirmed his previous experiences. The effect this trip had on Ferguson should not be underestimated, and he recalls spending time cruising the Aegean, “on steamers and fishing boats absorbing, like some insatiable sponges, the power of white and the overwhelming beauty of a perfected indigenous architecture.” This has parallels with Le Corbusier’s remarks at CIAM 4 whilst travelling the Mediterranean aboard the S.S. Patris, noting the “strong, strict, precise, intense, and sensual” nature of the Greek spirit. Upon his return Ferguson published a series of articles in The Architect WA that documented his experiences through photographs, travel sketches and observations. Building on his discussion in the “idiom” essay, these articles and accompanying images clearly lay out his admiration for the traditional building culture of the Mediterranean. He notes the “simple purity” of the indigenous buildings, the “continuity of form and space” unified by limewash, and the buildings “moulded out of sheer necessity.” He also included a detailed sketch plan of a plaza surrounding three chapels, with illustrated views. For Ferguson, the architecture of the Cycladic islands “represents correct instinctive solutions to the problems of environment, climate and materials.” It is clear in his photographs and measured drawings, that Ferguson was

275 This term is taken from: Ferguson, “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?”, 40.
276 Ferguson interviewed by Murray, December 2015.
277 Duncan Richards recalls a presentation Ferguson gave of his travel slides, making note of Athos particularly. Duncan Richards, Personal Communication with Andrew Murray, March 14, 2017.
278 Ferguson, Three Journeys, no page numbers.
281 Ferguson, “Cycladic Islands,” 29.
developing his interest in the mechanics behind this architecture, bringing lessons, rather than details alone, back to his practice.

But these visits to the Mediterranean were not Ferguson’s first experience of the architectural traditions of the area. There is a pervasive Mediterranean culture in Western Australia, and he would have been exposed to its influences early-on through his work experience with Summerhayes and Clifton. Ferguson was a well-read student. He kept up to date with the latest journals and books, acquiring *Italy Builds* by G. E. Kidder Smith following his return in 1960, and later Myron Goldfinger’s *Villages in the Sun*. This awareness would have been further bolstered by his relationship with Toni Solarsi. Solarsi was a well-known admirer of neo-vernacular/ realist Italian architecture, and the work of Ludovico Quaroni at La Martella, and Gino Valle are cited as particularly influential on his West Australian practice. Other architects, like Gordon Finn, who was involved in planning the Hale School campus, had travelled extensively through Italy and Europe in the late 1930s, and this knowledge would have almost certainly been discussed in professional circles. For Ferguson, the architecture of the Mediterranean, from the Classical to the latest neo-vernacular projects would have been a familiar sight from the mid-1950s, even if its impact would not be fully-realised until he experienced it firsthand.

**Learning from Tradition.**

Given the enthusiasm that Ferguson expressed for the architectural traditions of the Mediterranean, and the strong visual context of the UWA campus, the implementation of a Mediterranean language makes sense. But how did Ferguson transfer an interest in the Mediterranean to the UWA context? The Law School strongly evidences Ferguson’s study of two key aspects of the Mediterranean tradition – the “sophisticated poverty of the one material”, and “the vitality of the village” – the drama and assemblage of the urban forms.

Ferguson was struck by the power of the one material in the Mediterranean, describing the “brilliant white lime wash leaving the play of light, shade and shadow to reveal the purity of the forms.” The mutability of off-form concrete provided the ideal medium to translate this

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283 R.J. Ferguson, Personal Communication with Andrew Murray, September 2017.
experience of the Mediterranean into the Western Australian context. The sculpted singularity of concrete and the thick, rough cast surface provided a neat analogue for the rough lime-washed stone work; the cragged surface capturing the light, and casting deep, ever changing shadows on its surface. The harsh local sun casts sharp and penetrating shadows, which the crude finish of the concrete exploits. Photographs taken by Ferguson of the Law School used in publicity brochures capture this play of light and shade and the deeply textured nature of the walls, echoing those he took of the roughcast walls throughout the Mediterranean. Harnessed for its dramatic qualities at Hale School, the concrete work at the Law School provides a gentle, textural quality, enhanced by the golden colour of the mix.

Figure 31: UWA Law School, 1967. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson. Source: Ferguson Architects.

The use of simple massing, rough, cream concrete, and the pitched Cordova tiled roof, recall a range of Mediterranean models, including traditional Italian farmhouses and palazzi. But, in the manner of the Italian Neorealist movement, it is the spatial experience and atmosphere of the Law School, in combination with the materiality which effectively conjures a sense of the Mediterranean. Kidder Smith describes this attribute in traditional Italian architecture, noting “it has an enormous vitality, it is full of spontaneous delights, joyous imagination, superb uses of color, bewitching whimseys.”288 Maristella Casciato writing of Italian Neorealism expands upon

this, “It was realistic architecture because it followed local culture, emphasizing aspects of local colour and respecting local spatial characteristics, but never lapsing into imitation.” This vitality is rendered through a series of intimate spaces which are formed around the Law School. The inclusion of generous semi-private courtyards, bench seating, stairwells, guarded passageways and colonnades, recall the complex layering in Mediterranean villages, found in both Italian new-towns and in the Greek islands (Fig. 32). Ferguson admired the dynamic nature of these villages, writing of his experience in the Cycladic Islands:

The narrow streets are designed for pedestrians and donkeys and move between the houses, free from the restrictions of geometry, widening where there is a lot of traffic, and narrowing between solid courtyard walls, exploding now and then into a small piazza. Bakeries, bootmakers and food shops fuse naturally into the sculptural element.

Figure 32: Hydra, Greece. View of the Port from Tombazis Palace, 1964. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson. Source: Ferguson Architects.


290 Ferguson, “Cycladic Islands,” 31.
While the planning of the Law School is orthogonal, the spatial experience recalls the dynamic, and adaptable nature of the Mediterranean village. The open cloisters that ring the courtyard provide constant movement, and on the upper levels occasionally act as Juliet balconies, allowing users to observe those down below (Fig. 33). The corridors variously terminate in open spaces, allowing casual meetings and encounters. There is a range of steps, platforms, stairwells and a fountain all adding drama to the space (Fig. 34). The stairwells are dark and unlit, with arched openings framing views onto the courtyard, providing a sharp contrast from light to shade. These dynamic, atmospheric qualities recall the extensive photos that Ferguson took on his travels, focussing on the activities that surrounded the buildings, and the spaces formed in the negative between them. Ferguson again writes, “The vitality of the village is in the honesty of construction, the power of form, the fluidity of space and the absence of architectural gymnastics.”\textsuperscript{291} Through its focus on simple massing, solid expression and a range of carefully crafted public spaces, there is a directness in the Law School that clearly reflects the Mediterranean interest in the assemblage, rather than the singular object. Michelangelo Sabatino

\textsuperscript{291} Ferguson, “Cycladic Islands,” 31
described this quality in particular strains of Italian architecture as a “pride in modesty.” Ferguson was struck by this quality, noting in his description of the Greek Islands, “No one building competes with another for identity. The individual units are subordinate to the totality of the whole.”

Figure 34: UWA Law School, central courtyard before the fountain was installed, 1967. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson.

Sabatino tracks the use of the phrase ‘modest,’ which he suggests was first used by Giuseppe Pagano to describe exemplary traditional Italian architecture, that ‘eschewed visual drama in favour of simplicity.’ See: Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty*, 12.


Communicating through building.

In the modest expression of the Law School, the load-bearing walls and simple pitched roof convey a clear construction logic. However, alongside this rational approach, Ferguson employed the use of complex symbols, sculptures and inscriptions in the Law School, and in later buildings at UWA, that demonstrates a desire for his architecture to express more than the simply rational and tectonic.

The use of symbols and decoration is a common element in vernacular architecture, often as a way to express culture and communicate with the people. Ferguson had previously explored the use of symbols in the “bomb blast” panels cast at Hale School Memorial Hall, but unlike the specific “memorial” function of the symbols at Hale, the of symbols, motifs and inscriptions in the UWA projects have no immediate function. Their application appears more universal and mysterious, bridging the gap between the physical and the phenomenological world. The ability for symbols to bridge this gap has been observed by Paul Oliver in many vernacular traditions, and he notes “many motifs are expressions of universal symbols that emanate from shared human experience of natural phenomena.” Of particular interest is the appearance in the Law School of the six pointed “flower of life” symbol, which is cast directly into the concrete at several points throughout the building. A geometric pattern, this symbol has persisted across a range of cultures for centuries. Ferguson first saw this symbol carved into the steps of a building on the Greek Islands, and later had a brass template cut, which he inserted into the formwork (Fig. 35). The symbol is usually concealed, as a way of lending an element of extra meaning and play to the buildings. Ferguson says:

I always try and put it in where someone won’t see it. It’s just fun things. It just makes you stop and wonder. You might wander around and ask, what is that bloody thing? It’s just mystical.

295 Oliver, *Vernacular Architecture*, 499.
296 Oliver, *Vernacular Architecture*, 531
297 Ferguson imprinted the star of life on every off-form concrete building until recently when they started to go missing from building sites. They were also carved into commissioned furniture from the University.
298 Ferguson interviewed by Murray, December 2015.
This motif reoccurs throughout Ferguson’s work, appearing not only cast into concrete, but also in custom-made drain covers and vents. Additional to this symbol, he included a series of hand carved, cast brass plugs with the faces of Greek gods, including Zeus, covering the conduit junction box openings of the Law School, along with the word “LAW” cast into the concrete at the entrances (Fig. 36). Later buildings on campus extended the use of these mythic symbols: The Guild Building included a reproduction of the Venus of Willendorf, carved by Ferguson, and cast into a column which is almost impossible to view. There are also experimental concrete construction processes, seen in the projecting stairwells in the Law School with sculptural bases formed by inserting horizontally-sliced tree trunks into the formwork, leaving clear timber ring marks, and the cloister ceilings often have geometric patterns imprinted into them.\footnote{Simon Holthouse recalls the geometric patterns cast into the soffits were inspired by the geometry of Persian architecture. Simon Holthouse, Personal Communication with Andrew Murray, March 2017.} Other idiosyncratic details abound such as a “martini glass” fountain at the Law School and the Grecian “meander” brickwork paving pattern. The geometrically-dense decorative iron gates
that fortify the Law School conjure illusions of Renaissance palazzi, the decorative portals of cathedrals and the geometry of Islamic architecture.

![Rescued bronze conduit cover from the Law School, depicting Zeus. Carved by R.J. Ferguson, 1967. Source: Author.](image)

The importance that Ferguson places on adding mystery and fun to a building, shown here through the inclusion of various symbols and markings, illustrates an attempt by Ferguson to provide the “emotional content” of architecture, allowing for “the enjoyment of man.”300 The use of symbols and motifs at UWA are more abstract, more mythical than those at the Hall. The move from abstract expressionist sculpture, recalling “bomb blasts” to the sacred geometry of the six-pointed star, indicates a development in Ferguson’s interest in architecture that transcends structure, moving closer to what Louis Kahn describes as “the immeasurable.”301 With these gestures, Ferguson is leaving his mark on the buildings, and particularly the repetition of the six-pointed star across projects has resulted in it becoming almost his signature. Yet the anonymous nature of the mark and its mysterious qualities leaves room for a

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300 Ferguson, “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?”, 40.
community, in this case UWA, to directly engage with it and to interpret as their own. A new student HUB building designed by national practice Hassell Architects in 2017 demonstrates this, and has used the six-pointed star to generate the façade pattern that wraps around the entire building.302

Towards a Personal Language: The Sports Centre (1970) and the Student Guild Building (1972).

Buildings are our environment, and what drives me bloody nuts is the space between buildings doesn’t get attended to. Around town, everybody is trying to outdo each other, instead of working together. – R.J. Ferguson.303

The modest expression and robust nature of the Law School acknowledged the Mediterranean history of the campus, but provided a progressive and modern articulation of the “Alsop Spirit” and shortly became synonymous with the “new” UWA. Ferguson had conceived an architectural vocabulary that was remarkably mature and complete and this was recognised by both the University and Gordon Stephenson. Following the success of the Law School, Ferguson was awarded the commission for two major buildings in quick succession. The Sports Centre (1970) and the Guild Building (1972) continued the developing language of the Law School and many details were shared between them. In the Law School, the lessons learnt from the Mediterranean vernacular, whilst taken first-hand, were still filtered through a modern interest in the vernacular passed through Le Corbusier. The two campus buildings which followed indicated a more confident and independent synthesis of the vernacular, demonstrating Ferguson’s ability to extrapolate independently from the source materials. Through a series of developments, and perversely aided by a series of economic and material restraints, Ferguson refined the language of the Law School, and in the process formulated an architectural response that more closely aligned with the vernacular traditions he so admired on his travels.

303 Ferguson interviewed by Murray, December 2015.
The Sports Centre was commissioned in 1966 during the construction phase of the Law School, and awarded to Ferguson and Marshall Clifton, working in association (Fig. 37). The Sports Centre was to be a simple building, and had a modest budget to match. The difficult construction of the Law School - several walls having been demolished due to faults just before the Sports Centre was commissioned – meant the university were nervous about the use of off-form concrete, warning in the brief to the architects: “in view of the difficulties associated with the erection of buildings in off-form concrete it was agreed that this overall type of structure not be undertaken.”

The building was instead constructed from cream coloured concrete blocks within an off-form concrete frame structure, in a simple “shed” like composition and capped with a hipped tiled roof. Comprising two rectangular double-storey volumes linked by a small glazed foyer; the Sports Centre’s north façade was dominated by a tiled colonnade running the entire length of the building, providing a generous shaded space for students to gather (Fig. 38). The limited budget and basic program enforced a basic construction method, as

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304 UWA Building Committee meeting minutes, April 28, 1966 (UWA Archives file OG 3164 vol. 1)
305 UWA Sports Centre Building Committee meeting minutes July 15, 1968 (UWA Archive file OG 3164 vol. 1)
seen in the simple pitched roof that extends to shade the walls. Effectively a well-detailed shed, the Sports Centre expanded upon Ferguson’s interest in assemblage. The form of the individual building is less important than the contribution it makes to the campus. This is evident in the generous public spaces, contextually considered proportions and the deference to its significant neighbours, the Hackett Memorial building group.


The Student Guild Building, completed in 1972, mediated between the Law School and the Sports Centre, returning to a language that was similar to the Law School - with a comprehensive use of off-form concrete, colonnaded spaces and an internal courtyard, but with the spatial arrangement and construction logic of the Sports Centre (Fig. 39). A collection of three buildings, the Student Guild is centred on an open courtyard and comprises a three-storey administrative wing to the west, a low kitchen block to the south and a main central dining area to the north, facing across the Oak Lawn to the Law School. The most notable development in the Guild was the use of external colonnaded spaces and verandah spaces which are extensions of the roof form, and these dominate the composition.

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An article in *Vestes* from this time advocates the use of “barn’ type structures for sports centres in universities for flexibility and utility which also explains the form of this centre. A.W. Willee, “Sports Facilities in New Universities,” *Vestes*, 8, no.4 (1965): 267.
Through the process of refinement across the three buildings, Ferguson’s interest in the Mediterranean, and its ability to inform the construction of his own regional practice was consolidated. The vitality and “totality” of Mediterranean villages were applied to the three projects, and together, they form a consistent and cohesive group with a language which came to define the new UWA campus. When read as a group, it becomes obvious that Ferguson is less interested in the individual buildings than the environment they create. Interest in individual buildings is instead created through a series of carefully crafted and recognisable details shared across the three projects. The importance of small, but considered details as a foil to a large building group was observed by Ferguson on the Cycladic Islands: “Timber, an imported luxury, is used in fine detail such as balustrades to stairs or balconies and as shutters oiled or painted to contrast with the large simple mass of the building.”307 This is reflected in the care that Ferguson places on the fine timber handrails, custom light-fittings and carefully detailed copper rainwater pipes, set off against the solidity of the concrete.

Conclusion.

The UWA commission provided Ferguson with the opportunity to put into practice the lessons and formal strategies observed both during his travels and extensive study of the architecture of the Mediterranean. The Law School is a remarkably accomplished and mature building. It is also a singular building full of idiosyncratic details and personal touches, which as the structural engineer Peter Bruechle notes, “was the one he spent his soul on.” The incorporation of mythical symbols, hand crafted details and experimental construction techniques meant the Law School was labour intensive, but it provided a clear direction for the new campus identity. It was however, in the two subsequent buildings, the Sports Centre and the Student Guild, where Ferguson’s own architectural interest and expression are clarified. Formally distancing themselves from contemporary European modernism, they demonstrated a distinctive and replicable language for the rebuilding campus. The shared details and the consistency in formal expression developed across the three buildings is similar to what Christopher Alexander described as a “pattern language”:

[A] finite system of rules which a person can use to generate an infinite variety of different building – all members of a family – and that the use of language will allow the people of a village of a town to generate exactly that balance of uniformity and variety which brings a place to life.

This idea of a pattern language is echoed in Ferguson’s description of the architecture of the Cycladic Islands: “The buildings have been moulded out of sheer necessity of a simple living pattern and within the limits of the economic structural possibilities of the one material.”

Ferguson’s interest in vernacular models from the Mediterranean shows a sympathetic approach to the work of Italian Neorealist architecture from a decade prior. Ernesto Rogers notes this approach in *Italy Builds*:

Modern Architecture in Italy, as elsewhere, is essentially a return to tradition – the tradition of the spirit against the false tradition of dogma. Therefore, what thus might be said of the essence of past architecture may also be translated into the terms of contemporary architecture.

310 Ferguson, “Cycladic Islands”, 31.
Rogers and a host of postwar Italian architects looked to the vernacular tradition not only for formal inspiration, but as a “repository for uncorrupted moral values,” producing a distinctly Italian architecture culture.\textsuperscript{312} But as Sabatino points out, the use of Mediterranean vernacular models had implications far beyond national boundaries, engendered particularly by the work of Bernard Rudofsky which provided an “operative manifesto” for rethinking modernism.\textsuperscript{313} It is precisely these “operative” lessons that Ferguson seeks out, and uses to produce his own distinctly Western Australian building. The unassuming forms, offset by generous civic gestures sympathetic to a Western Australian outdoor lifestyle like shaded colonnades, seating and fountains, are indicative of Ferguson’s belief in the potential for traditional architectural strategies to combat the emptiness of the International Style. Ferguson’s focus on the campus as a totality, and his insertion of a series of carefully proportioned, civic minded buildings within the existing fabric, made significant progress towards drawing the fractured campus back together.

The first three buildings that Ferguson completed for the UWA campus exhibit a “pride in modesty” seemingly at odds with the dramatic expression of the Hale School Memorial Hall. However, as evidenced in his “Idiom” essay, the two projects are both manifestations of the same architectural intent. The formal expression had changed, but the interest in the “sophisticated poverty” of the one material, the use of vernacular models, and the importance of engaging and connecting with the community remained.

\textsuperscript{312} Sabatino, \textit{Pride in Modesty}, 209.
\textsuperscript{313} Sabatino, \textit{Pride in Modesty}, 197.
Figure 40: UWA Law School, wrought iron gate detail. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson.
Source: Ferguson Architects.

In his next major project, Murdoch University, a second university for Western Australia, Ferguson’s interest in the possibilities of the vernacular and the importance of community continued. Through his exploration of the vernacular architecture of the Mediterranean at UWA, Ferguson had established a robust and recognisable architectural language, which served to define and strengthen the developing campus. Refined across the three projects, the architectural language was transformed into a translatable, and repeatable formal structure that has come to characterise much of Ferguson’s work. Donaldson Smith have noted that Ferguson’s work is characterised by “a single-minded consistency”, and the three buildings at UWA convincingly displayed this. Murdoch University exhibits a remarkably consistent use of details, proportions and materiality developed through earlier work both at Hale and at UWA but the pool of sources that Ferguson draws on becomes increasingly diverse.

The application of traditional lessons and the synthesis of formal strategies in Ferguson’s work reaches its apogee at Murdoch, which can be seen in the extraordinary modesty of the buildings’ formal language. Previously explored interests, particularly the emphasis on the assemblage rather than the individual structures, are further developed and the individual campus buildings are rendered almost anonymous, subservient to the campus as a whole. This chapter explores the next major phase of Ferguson’s search, which sees him turn inwards, to the colonial architecture of remote Western Australia and outward to Japan. It will follow the progression of his work and the increasing role that the roof comes to play in his architecture, and the way in which this informs the construction of his own regional language.

A Second University.

The need for a second university in Western Australia had been tabled as early as the late 1950s, while UWA was still in a transition period with student numbers steadily growing. But the discussions did not progress. By the mid-1960s this situation had changed, and a minerals boom meant that Western Australia underwent rapid economic growth, dramatically increasing demand for university education. As Geoffrey Bolton suggests, despite the increase in student numbers across the state, this was not enough to warrant the creation of a new university, rather the catalyst for a new university became the need for a veterinary school in

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316 Geoffrey Bolton, It Had Better be a Good One: The First Ten Years of Murdoch University (Subiaco: Murdoch University, 1985), 8.
light of WA’s agricultural expansion.\textsuperscript{317} The 1967 Jackson Report on Tertiary Education initially advocated that the second university be an annexe of UWA,\textsuperscript{318} but the decision to reject this idea in favour of an autonomous university was discussed in a series of UWA senate meetings during 1968 and 1969. By the end of 1969 the UWA senate advised the government that this was to be the case.\textsuperscript{319} A site committee was quickly established and this led to the allocation by the end of 1967 of a 565 acre parcel of land for the new university, which had been part of a larger area known as the Somerville Pine Plantation.\textsuperscript{320}

Figure 41: Murdoch University, 1974.
Source: Murdoch University Archives.

\textsuperscript{317} Bolton, \textit{It Had Better be a Good One}, 10
\textsuperscript{318} Western Australian Tertiary Education Commission, \textit{Tertiary Education in Western Australia: Report of the Committee Appointed by the Premier of Western Australia Under the Chairmanship of Sir Lawrence Jackson, Perth, September 1967} (Nedlands: UWA Press for the Government of Western Australia, 1967), 23.
\textsuperscript{320} Bolton, \textit{It Had Better be a Good One}, 12.
Once the site was selected, Professor Gordon Stephenson and the current town planning commissioner John Lloyd were tasked in May 1968 with creating a report for the potential development of this large section of the plantation.\footnote{R.J Ferguson and Gordon Stephenson, \textit{Physical Planning Report: Murdoch University 1973} (Perth: Murdoch University Planning Board, 1973), ix.} The Stephenson-Lloyd plan took the form of a large quadrangle of 478 hectares bounded by major arterial roads, including the Kwinana and Roe Freeways, articulating provision for a university, hospital and public reserve.\footnote{Bolton, \textit{It Had Better be a Good One}, 13} Following this initial report, the Murdoch University Planning Board was formed in July 1970 and headed by Professor Noel Bayliss. It was established to liaise with the Australian Universities Commission (AUC) and The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) to formulate plans for the new university.\footnote{Bolton, \textit{It Had Better be a Good One}, 17}

The Somerville site was formally transferred to Murdoch University in 1972 under the Reserves (University Lands) Act of 1972,\footnote{Murdoch University Planning Board, \textit{Murdoch University}, 17} and after a period of negotiations and AUC cutbacks, the university was assigned $8.641 million dollars for the development of the campus. This allowed the university to commence planning the site and buildings, under the direction of Gordon Stephenson.\footnote{Murdoch University Planning Board Site Committee Meeting Minutes, December 4, 1970. Murdoch University Archives.} Stephenson had recently retired from his post as Consultant Architect and Professor of Architecture at the University of Western Australia, in order to devote his time to this new university project.\footnote{Murdoch University Planning Board Site Committee Meeting Minutes, December 4, 1970. Murdoch University Archives.} To carry out the new project, Stephenson approached Ferguson, and the two entered into a partnership, forming R.J. Ferguson and Gordon Stephenson Architects, specifically to undertake the work at Murdoch University. This arrangement was initiated by Stephenson, who insisted to the Planning Board that the building contract be significant enough to justify his leaving UWA, and for Ferguson to expand his practice.\footnote{Murdoch University Planning Board Site Committee Meeting Minutes, December 4, 1970. Murdoch University Archives.} The board agreed, and Stephenson and Ferguson became responsible for developing the site plan and all major buildings in the 1973-75 triennia.\footnote{Murdoch University Planning Board, \textit{Murdoch University}, 17} The appointment of a single practice aligned with the Planning Board’s policy “that the outline of the site plan and the designs of the first group of buildings should be entrusted to a single firm in order that the nucleus of the university should have its own particular stamp or character.”\footnote{Murdoch University Planning Board Site Committee Meeting Minutes, December 4, 1970. Murdoch University Archives.}

Once appointed, design work soon commenced with Ferguson handling the architecture, while Gordon Stephenson and Simon Holthouse, then an associate with Ferguson, took charge of the...
planning. Ferguson presented his proposed building sequence to the committee in 1971, making special note of the need for flexibility and expansion within the building group. The buildings were planned to achieve full occupancy in the first three-year period, “following which either the building would be expanded or one disciplinary group would be relocated thus giving room for further expansion.” By the middle of 1973 ground works had begun on the campus, with the building contract for the Physical Sciences building signed and 12 hectares of the campus cleared. The university welcomed the first students in February 1975, by which time most of the first stage of building works were complete.

Figure 42: Murdoch University plan, 1974.

330 Simon Holthouse, Personal communication with Andrew Murray, March 2017.
331 Murdoch University Planning Board Site Committee Meeting Minutes, June 8, 1971. Murdoch University Archives.
The university opened with a small nucleus of four buildings, arranged in a rough ‘U’ shape around a central courtyard named the Bush Court (Fig. 42). This created a compact campus, which Stephenson described as “a university in miniature.” The Library and Lecture Theatres were located along a ridge that ran across the campus, facing north and opening directly onto the Bush Court, a large area of native trees that were preserved within the old Pine plantation. The first building completed on campus was the East Academic Building, which accommodated the School of Physical and Biological Sciences. To the west of the Bush Court was the West Academic Building, which housed the School of Human Communication, Social Enquiry and Education. The Student and Staff Amenities building was located north of the West Academic Building. The Bush Court was enclosed on three sides leaving the north side open and falling away with the natural slope of the site. A large car park was situated to the north of the site, which, in typical Stephenson fashion, clearly separated people and vehicles.

334 Ferguson and Stephenson, Physical Planning Report, 35
335 Bolton, It Had Better be a Good One, 20
Figure 43: Murdoch University, under construction 1974.
Source: Murdoch University Archives.

Establishing a University Identity.

Christine Garnaut notes in her detailed account of the campus that Murdoch University was planned against a backdrop of “growth, change, centralisation and diversification in higher education.”337 In response to this dynamic, Murdoch were keenly aware of the need to appear separate from UWA and cast itself as a progressive university, with relaxed entrance requirements along with alternative programmes and course structures.338 Key to this was structuring the university around multi-disciplinary schools rather than the usual faculties.339 This required the students to have a degree of flexibility built into their studies, meaning the first part of study would be a general education, followed by specialisation in a particular chosen school, enforcing the idea that Murdoch was to be a “different” kind of university.340

339 Murdoch University Planning Board, Murdoch University, 11.
Given Ferguson’s and Stephenson’s close links with UWA, and the original suggestion that Murdoch operate as a second UWA campus, it was logical that the need to differentiate would extend to the material identity of the campus: “no red tile roofs” were specifically requested at the outset. Early site committee discussions demonstrate that the identity and design of the campus was important, recording some members “anxiety” about public attitudes towards certain building materials.

The materials Ferguson initially put forward to the Board - concrete block, off-form concrete and asbestos roofing sheets - were contentious, but were later seen as representative of the different and progressive values which the university held. Bolton asserts that these materials can be seen as a symbol of the new university’s willingness to experiment and innovate. When commenting on the use of asbestos sheeting, the Planning Board described “the possibility that its use would be seen as a bold, imaginative move.” Not all saw these as innovative, and the local Melville City Council issued its concerns with the initial scheme, noting the colour, low height and the “prison-like” appearance of the buildings, enhanced by the use of internal courtyards and small windows. The Vice Chancellor Stephen Griew also expressed concern at the colour of the block-work and the use of off-form concrete, however the planning committee inspected the samples and were satisfied with the result, allowing Ferguson to continue, advising that “vigorous public relations would be needed to ensure public acceptance of the first buildings.” The innovative claim for the materials made by Murdoch is explained in much more prosaic terms by Ferguson:

When we kicked off Murdoch Uni, we were very conscious of the qualities of UWA and the failings of Curtin [University]. We couldn’t make it look like an annexe of UWA. It needed its own identity. We were in the fallout path from the Kwinana [oil] refineries, so we couldn’t put metal roofs on, [and] because university building have to last for 50 years at least, and it didn’t leave a lot. If we banned metal and red tiles roofs, it only left asbestos tiles. Which we like. Murdoch didn’t like it, because they built factories out of it, but it had a hint of our corrugated iron past which I enjoy.

342 Murdoch University Building and Site Committee Meeting minutes, 7 December, 1972. Murdoch University Archives.
343 Bolton, It Had Better be a Good One, 22
344 Murdoch University Building and Site Committee Meeting minutes, 11 December, 1972. Murdoch University Archives.
345 Murdoch University Senate Committee minutes, 30 August, 1973. Murdoch University Archives.
346 Murdoch University Senate Committee minutes, 13 September 1973. Murdoch University Archives.
347 Ferguson interviewed by Alra.
The first group of four buildings were all executed in a limited material palette that had been refined through consultations with the Planning Board: reinforced concrete foundations, off-form concrete frames with concrete block infill panels, or concrete block load-bearing walls, all in the same light grey colour (Fig. 44). Buildings were roofed with steel trusses and exposed jarrah beams, the low pitched roofs covered in light coloured corrugated asbestos cement sheets with ventilation ridges. The buildings were simple, rectangular volumes of two-three storeys, bordered by deep colonnades, and providing flexible planning configurations and additions. The two academic buildings either side of the bush court were furnished with large central courtyards, each with a different landscape character. While the essence of the buildings, with their simple volumes and structural clarity recalled the UWA work, the effect of the campus was strikingly different. The uniform nature of the material palette, condensed campus plan, and the non-hierarchical arrangement of buildings created a university atmosphere radically unlike the sprawling landscape of UWA.

Figure 44: Murdoch University, 1975. To the right is the East Academic Building, with the library in the centre.
Source: Murdoch University Archives.

348 Buildings and Site Committee Minutes, October 12, 1972. Murdoch University Archives. During this meeting, several key changes within the AUC were noted, including their preference for the cost effectiveness of load bearing masonry.
349 Ferguson and Stephenson, Physical Planning Report, 49.
An Economic University.

The 1973 Planning Report that Ferguson produced with Gordon Stephenson is a key document for understanding the intentions of the designers. It clearly articulates his aims and motivations for the campus architecture:

The system does not allow for the design of buildings which are as ample and expressive as the 40 year old group which splendidly symbolises the UWA. But it does allow for imaginative, functional and economical architecture which should have a distinctive University character… The design objective has been to solve each building problem and yet have all the buildings related through the development of a vernacular architecture. If there is an aesthetic base it is in the application of scientific principles.\footnote{Ferguson and Stephenson, \textit{Physical Planning Report}, 47.}

The report elaborates on themes previously explored by Ferguson. He speaks of the community aspects inherent in building traditions, relaying a story of Chartres Cathedral, noting that it was built “with the whole community taking part… when people were in contact with all the things that were made and those who made them.”\footnote{Ferguson and Stephenson, \textit{Physical Planning Report}, 43.} He continues to condemn contemporary architectural fashion, observing that “light, and sometimes exceedingly complex materials… become more important than those which were basic, heavy and comparatively crude.”\footnote{Ferguson and Stephenson, \textit{Physical Planning Report}, 43.} Highlighting the importance of climate, and durability, Ferguson suggests: “Philosophically the buildings [at Murdoch] should be utilitarian rather than pretentious and designed to fulfil their purpose as economically as possible.”\footnote{Ferguson and Stephenson, \textit{Physical Planning Report}, 43.}

This emphasis on economy directly reflects the time in which the university was formed, a period of uncertainty in both the economic and education sectors. Local industries fluctuated between crisis and boom across the four year planning period, and the level of government support remained uncertain.\footnote{Murdoch University Planning Board, \textit{Murdoch University}, 18.} This fluctuating economy directly impacted the pedagogical environment of the early 1970s, leading students to pursue education with tangible outcomes, rather than a liberal education.\footnote{Di Gardner, “The Construction of Education,” 60.} The future students of Murdoch were destined for uncertain times, with a contemporary report noting that, “the past experience of universities would not provide an appropriate blueprint for the future.”\footnote{This is taken from the 1973 Raser report, quoted in Di Gardner, “The Construction of Education,” 60.} Ferguson and Stephenson’s 1973 report reflects this instability, highlighting the uncertainty of future programmatic requirements, along...
with the rise of technical education and interdisciplinary relationships. This uncertainty, along with the proposed flexible course structure, required adaptable campus architecture quite unlike the specialised programs of the older universities. Sir Eric Ashby, then Vice-Chancellor of Queens University, Belfast foreshadowed this idea in the UK, when he suggested that future universities should “only provide shelter and some flexibility for research and teaching.”

Utilising the framed system developed for the UWA Sports Centre, the shed-like forms and the conventional construction methods used at the new university were direct responses to this uncertain environment (Fig. 45). Ferguson’s insistence on the utilitarian and economic imperatives of the campus being adhered to neatly aligned with traditional architectural practices that he had previously explored, shaped by necessity and a “poverty” of materials. Indeed, the uncertainty of Murdoch’s future, along with the need to differentiate itself from traditional institutions was a blessing for Ferguson. It provided him with an opportunity to further explore the modest, rational architectural language that he had already been pursuing, freed from the pressures of novel architectural production associated with larger budgets, or tied to traditional notions of what a university should look like. But while the economic and pedagogical situation directed much of the building program at Murdoch, Ferguson’s developing language was not simply a rational solution that just “solves each building problem.” This is clearly demonstrated in the care that Ferguson put into the concrete blockwork for the campus. In order to achieve a colour that would sufficiently blend with the bush context, Ferguson specified a concrete block colour that took three months, and six researchers to develop. A local newspaper report noted, “Sixteen ‘recipes’ involving 8000lb of material and 7000 manufactured blocks were tested before the firm and the University Senate were satisfied.”

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358 Ferguson and Stephenson, Physical Planning Report, 47.
A Change in Context – Dealing with Landscape.

The most striking difference between Murdoch University and Ferguson’s previous work is in the context. Until this time, Ferguson had dealt almost exclusively with urban environments having existing infrastructure with which to respond. However, Murdoch was a greenfield site on the outskirts of Perth with no adjacent development. The site was to be the centre of an increasingly active development area. But this was several years away from completion, which promised, aside from the intersection of two major freeways, the largest hospital in Western Australia planned to the east along with a major regional centre, hosting school, offices, and a range of public buildings to the north.  

360 The carte-blanche nature of the Murdoch project was an uncommon circumstance for Ferguson, and this fact is readily apparent in the architecture of the campus. Ferguson was aware of the significance of the site to the project, noting, “From the beginning the campus plan has been developed in its regional setting. Of equal importance, it’s structure is directly related to its immediate surroundings.”

361 Ferguson and Stephenson, Physical Planning Report, 14.
Landscape, shade, vistas and views were central to the campus plan, and it was sited to frame a distant view of the Darling Scarp from the Bush Court. Geoff Robinson has previously noted the harmonious relationship between the campus and the Australian bush, and the low slung, corrugated roofs of the campus certainly recall the spreading nature of outback farms, stations and shearing sheds typically associated with Australian regionalism. Although common in residential work, the use of these forms in a civic or educational building was unusual. This approach engendered a casual and relaxed appearance uncommon in a university campus. The landscape setting, and the low, sprawling nature of the buildings further articulated the desire for Murdoch to be a new kind of university. It looked distinctly different to contemporary Australian campuses such as Griffith or Deakin universities that projected a rigid institutional image within a greenfield setting.

The spreading roofs and the focus on expansive landscaping allowed Murdoch to at least look like it was attempting to “deliberately break with the practices of established universities”, or as the Foundation Vice-Chancellor Stephen Griew announced, there was “no excuse for a new university to make the same mistakes as the older universities which had been handicapped by tradition.” For Griew, this casual image was important. It signalled a shift in the way future universities were to operate, and relate to their communities. His hope was, “opening our campus not only to our students, but to anyone who wishes reasonably to use them.”

Towards Australia and Japan.

Ferguson’s language was further developed at Murdoch, almost operating, as Philip Drew describes it, a “living language”, which he defines as architecture in which “the essential forms may remain relatively unchanged. The constituent patterns undergo extensive modification in response to the changes in the environment.” The buildings at Murdoch University and at UWA shared many of the same details, proportions, and materiality, but Murdoch was clearly different. Ferguson’s architecture continued to become increasingly spare in its expression as his career developed, but this reduction was symptomatic of the evolving and complex processes with which Ferguson engaged. The broadening reference points evident at Murdoch

362 Bolton, It Had Better be a Good One, 20.
364 Stefan Muthesius uses the term ‘heroic’ to describe the work of the seven new UK universities. Peter Dormer and Stefan Muthesius, Concrete and Open Skies: Architecture at the University of East Anglia 1962-2000 (London: Unicorn Press, 2001), 10. Locally, Deakin and Griffith might be seen to represent the persistent ‘heroic’ formalism of Universities, focussed on compact plans with multi storey building, and expressions that commandeered the landscape.
365 Stephen Griew, quoted in: Bolton, It Had Better be a Good One, 23.
366 Bolton, It Had Better be a Good One, 23.
367 Bolton, It Had Better be a Good One, 31.
show that his language was anything but static, and instead was continually being re-evaluated, or “living.” Whilst the work at UWA looked towards the Mediterranean, his gaze during the evolution of Murdoch University broadened, particularly towards Australia and Japan.

For Ferguson, the focus upon Japan and Australia coincided with several key expeditions, one to the North-West of Australia in 1966, and another to Japan in 1968. As previous pilgrimages to the Mediterranean had done, these journeys made an enormous impact on his practice. A reading of the campus in light of these travels succinctly illustrates the way Ferguson was able to synthesise and incorporate lessons from a range of traditions, expanding the depth of his already developed personal language.

Following his return from the Mediterranean in 1964, Ferguson began to focus his attention on his home state, developing an interest in the crude Georgian architecture of the Swan River Colony. The architecture from this period shares an affinity with those traditions which captured his attention overseas. He notes this in a 1965 article describing the buildings of Rottnest Island, designed between 1860-1880, as he would those from Mediterranean: “The value of these original buildings is in their totality. They are unified into one ‘belonging’ group by the then one available material, stone.”

Later in 1966, while the UWA Law School was under construction, Simon Holthouse, a graduate architect in the Ferguson office and later planner of Murdoch University, won the Ian McDonald scholarship to study housing in the North-West of Western Australia. The scholarship enabled him to undertake a lengthy trip around the region, which initially involved the whole Ferguson office, Gus Ferguson, Simon Holthouse and Howard Fairbanks, driving up to the Pilbara in Ferguson’s Peugeot. A central focus of the study tour was the old pearling, pastoral and mining port of Cossack, and the nearby historic town of Roebourne. Ferguson and Fairbanks returned to the office after a weekend, but Holthouse spent a further six months travelling in the region.

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Holthouse recalls that this trip allowed Ferguson to follow a developing passion, that of documenting old local buildings that were disappearing. Upon Holthouse’s return a series of articles were published by Ferguson and Holthouse in *The Architect WA* which documented many of the buildings, mostly those designed by George Temple Poole in the late nineteenth century, complete with measured drawings and explanatory text (Fig. 46). The text is not as descriptive or poetic as that accompanying his previous articles on Greece or Iran, but the admiration for these local works is clear. The associated photographs were taken by Ferguson in the same style that he documented traditional architecture overseas. The emphasis is on the entourage: the scenes around the buildings, the textures, the shade and strong contrast between light and dark. There are no people in the images, but the machinery, washing lines, and oil drums are included, and the simple tectonics of the architecture is made clear. The deep, black shadows cast by the roof lines dominate the compositions; the thickly textured wall surfaces convey the unrelenting heat and the harsh sunlight. Through these photographs, it becomes clear that Ferguson is interested in the parallels between the vernacular architecture of the Mediterranean and the colonial building stock in his own state. The architectural qualities evident in these images speak to a fundamental conception of architecture, that transcends time.

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371 Holthouse, Personal communication with Murray, March 2017.
and space. It implies that architecture is a global practice, with a shared set of processes, and that in a different application of these processes, a local architecture is produced.

A trip to Japan in 1968 was to provide another formative experience for Ferguson and it reinforced many of his long-held beliefs. The Japanese experience was a revelation to Ferguson for a number of reasons, including the poor quality of the contemporary concrete work he saw there, which he described as being like tissue paper, so poor “you could see through it.” But the traditional architecture, particularly of the Classical period, impressed him. The trip was brief, arriving in Tokyo then travelling to Nikko, Nara, Kyoto and leaving from Osaka.

Ferguson visited several key buildings, including the Ryoan-ji and Golden temples, along with the Katsura Detached Palace in Kyoto. There was a range of formal and philosophical elements to traditional Japanese architecture that resonated with Ferguson, but in particular it was the discovery of their internalised discourse that affected him. The internalised nature of Japanese culture during the Classical period, the “Sakoku” policy that restricted trade and contact with foreigners resulted in a culture that was internalised and locally focussed. Donaldson Smith have previously made this link, writing:

> The powerful simplicity of Japanese architecture would have been impossible without the isolation that ensued and for Ferguson this is a key lesson. He considers the ongoing pre-occupation with overseas trends is counterproductive to developing a substantial local architecture and his own process continues in a self-imposed isolation at the Malcolm Street retreat.

The buildings at Murdoch, along with later projects at UWA exhibit many of the formal characteristics that one associates with classical Japanese architecture: the roof, the post and beam, and the panel construction, and a considered relationship to nature which Geoff Robinson has previously described. But it is the interest in the fundamental structure of Japanese society that has had the most profound effect on Ferguson’s work. Having searched for models and lessons from which to construct his own personal vernacular, the lessons of Japan provided

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372 R.J. Ferguson, Personal Communication with Andrew Murray, 2016
373 Jennifer Mitchelhill has elaborated on the relationship between Japan and Australian architecture during this period, and in particular the interest in Japan’s philosophies, taken up by practitioners like Richard Leplastrier. Jennifer Mitchelhill, “Translation and Transfer: The Role of the Traditional Japanese House in the Design of the Post-War Australian House,” MPhil diss., University of Melbourne, 2008, 42.
374 Donaldson Smith, “Gus Ferguson,” 10. The Malcolm Street retreat refers to his office at 31 Malcolm Street, Perth, that he worked in for many years.
clarity of vision for his practice, particularly evident in Ferguson’s conception of the “big mothering roof”\textsuperscript{377} persistent in the Japanese projects he visited (Fig. 47).

Figure 47: Japan, 1968. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson.
Source: Ferguson Architects.

**Finding Meaning in the Roof.**

Due to the exposed character of the Murdoch University site and a lack of natural shade, the buildings themselves were required to provide protection from the elements.\textsuperscript{378} This scenario provided an opportune testing-ground for Ferguson’s developing interest in the possibilities of the roof, and the shaded communal spaces that it can accommodate. Continuing the experiments begun at UWA, Murdoch is structured around a series of colonnades and walkways, all constructed as extensions of the main roof. The central roof extends out and culminates in a six-metre deep colonnade that spans the Bush Court on three sides. Providing the main circulation space for the university, the colonnade draws the separate faculty buildings together and provides an active social space that spills out on to the north-facing court.

The clarity of expression witnessed in both Japanese and colonial Western Australian buildings became significant for Ferguson. In both of these two cultures, much of the architectural

\textsuperscript{377} Quote from Ferguson, taken from: Robinson, “R.J. Ferguson,” 9.
\textsuperscript{378} Ferguson and Stephenson, *Physical Planning Report*, 47.
expression essentially becomes a mediation on the relationship between the roof and the framed structure below. Kenneth Frampton’s reading of Gottfried Semper’s “primitive hut”, the illustration of the essential four elements of architecture, elaborates on the profound nature of this relationship. He classifies the “hut” into two procedures: the Tectonics of the frame and the Stereotomics of the earthwork mound – the roof and the base.379 Frampton links these procedures with a cosmic association representing the sky (roof) and the earth (base).380 This dialectic he argues is validated by its profusion through vernacular cultures around the world.381 Indeed, Arthur Drexler describes the same relationship in Japanese architecture:

The skeleton frame and the dense roof which tops it are, to the Japanese form sense, decisive architectural elements, and such separate disciplines as orientation, plan, structure, and decoration, achieve their happiest effects when they facilitate this form sense.382

The relationship between the roof and the base can be clearly seen in both the Japanese architecture which Ferguson admired, and the buildings at Cossack and Roebourne, where the contrast between the corrugated iron roofs and the thick stone walls is clearly captured in Ferguson’s photographs.383 An important corollary of this relationship, is the habitable space that results between these two elements. Ferguson wrote in the 1973 Planning Report, “Between buildings there will be a constant changing scene,”384 and it is evident that the colonnaded verandah space that encircles the central Bush Court, and along the two courtyards, was to enable this (Fig. 48). Wide enough to facilitate a range of activities, along with providing shelter from the elements and access to the landscape, this space functions as an outdoor room and is given equal spatial weight to that of the classrooms. The “constant changing scene” that unfolds within the colonnaded space of the Bush Court is the apogee of Ferguson’s interest in “texture” – the activity which happens around a building and enlivens it (Fig. 49).

380 Frampton, Studies in Tectonic Culture, 7.
381 Frampton, Studies in Tectonic Culture, 6.
383 Jennifer Mitchelhill has previously articulated the strong similarities between traditional Japanese and Australian architecture particularly in the shared use of the verandah and expansive roof. Mitchelhill, “Tradition and Translation,” 105.
384 Ferguson and Stephenson, Physical Planning Report, 51
Figure 48: Murdoch University, colonnade with the Bush Court to the left, 1975.
Source: Murdoch University Archives.

Figure 49: Murdoch University, showing the colonnade.
Source: Author.
The simple nature of Japanese architecture, deeply rooted in spiritual practices, prompted the pursuit of an architecture increasingly elemental and direct in nature. Ferguson had previously engaged with the spiritual aspect of architecture through the incorporation of abstract sculpture, ancient motifs, and mythical references. However, the use of sculpture and motifs are notably absent in the work at Murdoch, aside from the now standard six pointed “flower of life” symbol. Rather, the focus on the relationship between the roof and the frame has supplanted the more literal use of symbols, offering a more complex and enduring engagement with the architecture. The central outdoor gathering space of the colonnade is in direct contact with nature, and acts as the spiritual aspect of a building, providing a space for the “enjoyment of man”. This strongly echoes Henri Lefebvre’s conception of gestural space, which describes “a space for mooring mental space to physical space.” Lefebvre illustrates this idea using the example of a medieval cloister, a space repeated in the colonnade that surrounds the Bush Court. Ferguson reflects on the spiritual capacity of the colonnade when he notes, “on every walk there will be much to be learned about nature; human nature, architecture and an unusual university.”

Figure 50: Murdoch University, courtyard, 1975.
Source: Murdoch University Archives.

385 Ferguson, “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?”, 40.
387 Ferguson and Stephenson, Physical Planning Report, 51.
Conclusion.

Murdoch was described upon opening as “more like a tornado ripping into the ivory towers of tradition”, and the architectural ensemble that Ferguson created illustrates this challenge to the traditional university structure. Australian higher education was at a crisis point in the 1970s as the sector experienced a period of uncertainty and change, with little insight into how the future would unfold. Murdoch countered these problems pedagogically through flexible course structures and relaxed entry requirements and architecturally through the modesty of the concrete forms - in contrast to the “heroic” expression of other contemporary Australian universities. The centralised plan of Murdoch, and its close relationship with nature reflects the shifting values of the university, echoing what Michael Brawne writing in the *Architectural Review* suggested: that universities should “become, in effect, the centre of the educational and cultural life of the whole community.” Murdoch itself noted:

[W]e think that intimacy in teaching is tremendously worthwhile and that the kind of campus life which should develop here has a good chance of being of higher human quality than is possible in very large institutions.

The achievement of Murdoch University is the cohesive synthesis of architectural traditions into a formal gesture that directly reflects the institutional aspirations of the university. The complexities of Ferguson’s previous works are absorbed into an ensemble that generates a profound architectural experience. Taking lessons from Japan, Australia, the Mediterranean and elsewhere, the architecture at Murdoch University is an elegant distillation of the fundamental elements of architecture, reconfigured for that particular place. The dialectic between the roof and the frame, and the symbolically charged collective gathering space that results, demonstrates that Ferguson continued moving towards a refined architectural language that placed the community at its centre.

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388 An Introduction to Murdoch University,” *Beverley Times*, October 10, 1974, 4.
Figure 51: Murdoch University, 1975. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson.

Chapter 7. The Search Continues.

At the end of what could be considered as the first phase of Ferguson’s career, after almost fifteen years of practice, Murdoch University was completed. During this period, the practice expanded – changing name from R.J. Ferguson Architects, to R.J. Ferguson and Associates Architects – and taking on larger and more complex projects. However, this change in scale did not mean that Ferguson’s search was over, and this is evident in three projects designed concurrently with Murdoch University: The Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), Art and Design, and Education buildings; The Rottnest Island redevelopment; and the St Hilda’s Anglican School for Girls campus. All demonstrate his persistent interrogation of how to make “architecture.”

Figure 52: WAIT Teacher Education building, 1975. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson.
Source: Ferguson Architects.
The Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), Art and Design, and Education buildings (1975) demonstrate an economic and rational “end point” of Ferguson’s practice, showing the most direct expression of his engagement with constructional processes present in his earlier work (Fig. 52). The existing WAIT campus had a cohesive campus identity, defined by a series of finger planned, grey off-form concrete and red brick buildings. In response to this, Ferguson constructed a series of three-storey, flat roofed, interconnected buildings, finished entirely in grey off-form concrete. They look radically different to his other work from this period, instead appearing like a return to the heroics of the Hale School Memorial Hall. But, despite the lack of a pitched roof, they are a logical extension of the work at Murdoch University, continuing an interest in the use of an adaptable building system which allows for flexibility in planning and expression. The buildings at WAIT utilise a system that aligns closely with contemporary megastructure design which Reyner Banham outlined as “the concept of a permanent and dominating frame containing subordinate and transient accommodations.”

The brief for the buildings continually changed, and in a period of pedagogical uncertainty were designed effectively as open concrete frames, able to be reconfigured for a range of programs. Drawing on his experience at Murdoch University and UWA Sports Centre, Ferguson excelled in accepting the conditional limits of the brief, and the WAIT buildings are testament to his understanding of the architectural process. The rectangular floor plans of each building were designed so that all walls and furniture could be removed, leaving only a row of columns down the centre. The building services were pushed to the edge of the building envelope, and the stair-wells were placed externally, leaving the interior entirely flexible. The now standard details from UWA and Murdoch, particularly the balustrading and column expression, are re-used and refined here, and the off-form concrete work is exceptionally crafted (Fig. 53). The use of an adaptable concrete building frame and standard detailing continued Ferguson’s interest in the “vitality of the village” which has strong echoes of the megastructures of Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, whose interest in vernacular “group form” underpinned much of his work.

Rather than focus on the individual buildings, they are simply containers for learning which reflect and extend the existing campus. The architectural qualities are found in the measured deference to the original campus buildings, the proportions and texture of the concrete frame, along with the provision of generous courtyard spaces around the buildings.

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392 Banham, *Megastructure*, 9. Maki’s idea of group-form evokes vernacular architecture that is less about the individual than the collective group of buildings.
One of Ferguson’s largest commissions at this time, the redevelopment of Rottnest Island, was also underway, a project which began in 1971 and finished in the late 1980s. Rottnest Island is approximately 19 kilometres west of Perth, and has a complex past. After settlement in 1829, the island was used a prison for Aboriginal people, which operated until the early twentieth century before redevelopment as a popular tourist resort run by the State Government. In the late 1960s existing accommodation facilities were unable to cope with rising demand, and Ferguson was engaged to redevelop the entire island infrastructure. Carried out over more than 15 years, the project involved the construction and renovation of over 150 individual cottages, along with extensive infrastructure building across the entire island. The project saw Ferguson’s interest in the Mediterranean extended, and the project strongly recalls the architecture of the Greek Islands, along with the theatre and drama of Italian hill towns. Working with typical suburban detailing and construction techniques dictated by difficult labour conditions, he redeveloped the island into an Antipodean Mediterranean paradise. A series of simple units strung out along the beach front, the buildings were enlivened by public courtyard spaces and united by the total use of ochre limewash render of the original island buildings (Fig. 54). The

island setting and large scale of development provided the ideal environment for Ferguson to translate those qualities he admired throughout his travels in the Mediterranean to his home town, including the “sophisticated poverty of the one material”; “the vitality of the village”; and the “continuity of form and space.” Ferguson picks out many of these qualities in his description of the Rottnest Island development, “Units are economical in area, finished and furnished in comfortable simplicity… the medium density of the development, encourages spontaneous social contact.”

(Fig. 55).

Figure 54: Rottnest Island cottages. 1975.
Source: Ferguson Architects.

395 Tanner, Australian Housing in the Seventies, 135.
The last major project Ferguson completed during this period is a series of buildings for the elite private girls’ school, St Hilda’s Anglican School for Girls in suburban Mosman Park. Beginning in 1969 and continuing into the 1970s, the commission included a science building, classrooms and an administration block, which were executed in an idiom closely modelled on the work at UWA, utilising red tiled roofs and cream coloured concrete and brickwork. The work was intended to refresh the campus identity, which as Ferguson remarked of the site, “There were so many rough old buildings of varying styles, and types, there was nothing there we could hang our hat on.” The formal arrangement and proportions extend those used at UWA and Murdoch, yet adapted for what is a smaller, more intimate campus catering for high school aged students (Fig. 56). The buildings employ similar details as previous projects, but executed in a more direct manner. An example includes the beautifully detailed copper down-pipes of the universities rendered here in off-the-shelf PVC sections – and rather than cast into the concrete, they are chased into the brickwork (Fig. 57). Modest in both scale and intent, the buildings for St Hilda’s Anglican School further illustrate Ferguson’s interest in the ability for economical individual buildings to strengthen and reinforce the existing campus context.

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396 Ferguson interviewed by Alra.
These additional three projects illustrate how Ferguson’s search for architectural meaning continued into the second phase of his career, as his practice rapidly expanded. While there is an identifiable progression in his work through Hale School, UWA and Murdoch University, these projects serve to demonstrate the complete nature of his architectural language at this point in his career. The core themes observed in his practice, including the importance of community, connection, and the focus of the outdoor space continue to be worked through with intensity in these three projects. The importance of the village or vernacular “group-form” is developed further, seen in the additive, megastructure language of WAIT, and the repetition of the Rottnest villas. The role of the outdoor space reaches its apogee in the Rottnest villas, with the linked courtyards almost the same size of the units. The projects are of a lesser scale, with much smaller budgets and aspirations of the case study buildings – indeed both St Hilda’s and Rottnest Island are executed in brick rather than concrete. Yet the interrogation of his own practice continues, within the restrictions of an increasingly busy commercial practice.
Figure 57: St Hilda’s Anglican School for Girls, Music Block.

Source: Author.
Conclusions.

This thesis set out to investigate the nature of Ferguson’s architectural practice, and how this could contribute to a broader understanding of Australian regional architecture. In addition, it sought to investigate the manner in which ideas and overseas experience can be “brought home”, through a range of experiences and methods. Through a close reading of his work, and following the path taken on his “search”, it has substantially added to the current understanding of the diversity present in Australian regional architecture. It has shown that Ferguson’s regionalism was constructed through a close study of global architectural traditions, executed through both building and writing, in response to the changing postwar situation.

The postwar period saw architecture enter a period of uncertainty, which led to many architects experiencing a kind of collective “anxiety”397 over a range of problems facing the discipline, including placelessness, consumerism and technological advances. Ferguson shared many of these concerns, which saw him turn to architectural traditions – searching for strategies which would enable him to mediate the effects of a rapidly changing world. This postwar anxiety was shared by other Australian architects who explored a range of alternative models, participating in what Legault and Goldhagen describe as a “wide-ranging international discourse on the future of the modern movement.”398 Illustrated by the work of architects like Dickson and Platten in South Australia and James Birrell in Queensland, and internationally through Louis Kahn, James Stirling and Paul Rudolph, the variety present within these practices reflect the personal, and often confusing, nature of this discourse.399

Architects that experienced this “anxiety” have often been linked to a regional discourse, and for many, responding to the local conditions was an essential a part of a wider reassessment of architectural practice. Ferguson illustrates this when he writes in his “Idiom” essay, “A structure which can carry the title Architecture will, of necessity, have something to say about Australia.”400 Challenging a traditional notion of regionalism produced primarily in response to the natural environment, Ferguson’s practice demonstrates a strand of Australian regionalism that instead directly reflects this global “anxiety”. It engages with the specificity of place in the pursuit of responding to a host of broader concerns facing the discipline, including the effects of rising commercialisation and architecture’s changing role within society.

399 An example of this shared anxiety, Adelaide architect Robert Dickson recalls that during this period he “was looking for an architecture that derived more directly from need.” Antony Radford, “Dickson & Platten in the Other Tradition of Modern Architecture,” in Dickson & Platten: Architects 1950-2000, eds. Michael Pilkington and Julie Collins (North Adelaide, South Australia: Phillips Pilkington Architects, 2017), 56.
400 Ferguson, “Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?”, 40.
The traditionally narrow understanding of regionalism in Australia was explored recently by Paul Walker in a review of *Hot Modernism*, a book which explores the postwar identity of Queensland architecture. In his review Walker noted the danger in reducing regional specificities to “the old question of climate”, and the reduction of architecture to “the mere provision of comfort.”

Instead Walker posited an alternative foundation for the local character, “it might be in this issue of scale and in the willingness not only of architects but also of institutions to think anew – for good or bad – that Queensland really is different.”

Accordingly, this thesis has shown that Ferguson’s regionalism is one much more in tune with the cultural and economic landscape of Western Australia, rather than its physical landscape. This returns to the idea of regionalism set out at the beginning of the thesis: a practice that operates within a particular local context, within its “fictional landscape”, but is firmly part of a much larger, global structure.

The anxiety that underlies Ferguson’s work places it in a discursive field that both engages with, and transcends, the geographical confines of Western Australia. However, Ferguson’s participation in this discourse has been diminished through the positioning of his work as representative of Western Australian regionalism at a national level. This has meant his work is traditionally framed through a series of terms that indicate an ideological basis at odds with his own. Various described as “romantic” and “relaxed”, his work has been typically associated with a sentimental regional discourse concentrated on the east coast of Australia. Through an examination of Ferguson’s practice, this thesis has demonstrated the uneasy relationship with this framing, and the importance of interrogating the multiple readings of terms like “romantic” or “relaxed” in Australian architecture.

**Bringing it Home.**

Through demonstrating the global discourse that Ferguson’s practice engaged with, this thesis furthers an understanding of both the diverse ideological sources present in postwar Australian regionalism, and how ideas are “brought home” to Australia. The critical examination of local traditions within a wider context, including the large sheltering roof, demonstrate Ferguson’s interest in the possibilities of continuing a local lineage, but within a broader cultural milieu. Ferguson had an interest in the colonial architecture of his home state, but as Donaldson Smith observe, the interest for Ferguson was in the functional lessons these buildings could provide, rather than a “romantic attachment to national heritage.” Ferguson treats his own history the same as anywhere, one to be mined for lessons and an understanding of architecture. The use of

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403 The phrase is taken from Goad, “Bringing it All Home.”
the overhanging roof, the expressed trabeated construction, and courtyards are all strategies that transcend specific cultures or periods.

Ferguson’s exposure to the London “Neo-avant-garde” scene in the 1950s and the late work of Le Corbusier provides an important context for the circumstances that initially directed his search, and his interest in the vernacular. Along with a shared affinity for the “modesty” inherent in Italian Neorealist architecture, Ferguson’s work further illustrates the broad range of cultural networks present in postwar Australian practice. In addition, Ferguson’s critique and subsequent rationalising of Le Corbusier’s concrete technique for local conditions contributes to the current understanding of how ideas, and construction methods, can be brought home to Australia. The process of rationalising and translating, following his direct exposure to the work, situates Ferguson as contemporary with other “late Cobusians” like Atelier 5 and Kenzo Tange, and suggests a paradigm shift placing Western Australia at the forefront of experimental concrete use in Australia during the early 1960s.

**The Nature of Ferguson’s Practice.**

By following the progression of Ferguson’s career through a series of key case study buildings, this thesis has provided new insights into a previously overlooked practice. By the early 1980s, Donaldson Smith noted that Ferguson had constructed “his own complete language” which had a “timeless quality that belies the period…in which it was produced.” 405 which is reflected in the clarity and consistency of the work up to this period. Through his meticulous documentation, revision and exploration of global architectural principles, he created a language that was almost entirely self-contained, and immediately identifiable as his own. Ferguson’s search for architectural understanding resulted in a clearly defined vocabulary comprised of a series of fundamental elements, able to be reconfigured as necessary for a range of different contexts. This language can be identified through its use of pitched roofs, load bearing walls, propped eaves, textured concrete surfaces and the use of open, colonnaded spaces. This assembly of details, combined with Ferguson’s interest in the power of assemblage and the “vitality of the village”, creates an almost anonymous character that echoes the vernacular traditions Ferguson pursued on his travels.

The increasingly anonymous character that develops in Ferguson’s buildings is indicative of an ideological shift that appears in his work, as he moves away from form making towards an interest in the environments his buildings create. A quote that Ferguson admired of Bernard Rudofsky articulates this changing emphasis, “Architecture is a tangible expression of a way of

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life rather than as the art of building.” The ability for a building to play a symbolic and supportive role in the user’s life became a key concern for Ferguson. Working with a brace of standard details and the material and technological constraints of concrete, he was free to pursue an architecture that focussed on the phenomenological development – “the enjoyment of man” – rather than the technological. The focus on this enjoyment is demonstrated in two main ways: the care he takes in marking the buildings, including the concrete texture, sculptures, and impressing symbols into their surface; and the increasing emphasis on open space.

From the texture of the concrete formwork and sculptural panels at Hale School, to the abstract symbols at UWA and Murdoch University, Ferguson’s buildings have made explicit attempts to engage the users. The marks that he impresses on the work are never signatures or personal markings. Their ambiguous nature allows for open interpretation and provides space for communities to impart a form of ownership over the buildings. Equally, the increasing emphasis and number of outdoor areas included in his buildings illustrate this shift away from specific form making. The charged space of the internal cloister in the UWA Law School, the generous colonnades at the UWA Sports Centre and Murdoch University, and the linked open courtyards in the Rottnest Island project provide sheltered spaces for communities to gather and interact. Through these devices Ferguson’s architecture provides space within an institutional context for joy, humour, and cultural nourishment, drawing upon a long lineage of architectural traditions.

Returning to Oliver’s definition of vernacular architecture, the qualities that Ferguson sought out in these traditions as essential for making “architecture” become clear.

[T]he dwellings and all other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources, they are customarily owner- or community- built, utilizing traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of living of the cultures that produce them.

In later projects produced by Ferguson, exemplified by Murdoch University, Rottnest Island and St Hilda’s, the importance placed on the group and not on the individual buildings indicate that his interests were increasingly in the community and urban aspects of architecture. As Ferguson’s practice developed, the emphasis shifted away from the building as the centre of a community (Hale) to the building acting as a backdrop for the community (Murdoch, Rottnest). While not owner built, Ferguson’s buildings are intended to be explicitly “of the people”,

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406 This is a quote by Ferguson, paraphrasing Rudofsky. R.J. Ferguson, Personal note to Andrew Murray, July 2017. Rudofsky writes, “cities… are the tangible expression of a nation’s spirit.” Bernard Rudofsky, Streets For People: A Primer for Americans (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 17.
demonstrated by the strategies employed which are designed to facilitate interaction, discussion and reflection, supporting a particularly Western Australian lifestyle.

This thesis set out to explore the nature of Ferguson’s practice, and it has demonstrated that it encompassed more than simply building. Ferguson’s “search for understanding” was carried out in a public forum, and encompassed building, writing and teaching. His commitment to architectural culture, particularly in Western Australia is significant. He published often, and actively participated in a discourse about place, history and practice. Emerging out of a global questioning over the future of architecture in the postwar period, Ferguson directly engaged with Perth’s economic shifts and isolation, continuing a lineage of frugal, direct architecture that has persisted in Western Australia since European settlement. His work extends the current understanding of postwar Australian architecture, including the diversity of sources, and ideological bases that underpin the complexities within Australian regionalism. It illustrates a regional discourse that relies as much on forming relationships with communities and cultural environments, as it does with the natural, formed through both building and writing. In demonstrating this diversity, it suggests that further study of Australian regional discourses is needed, providing insight into the depth of and range of “regional responses” that were present in the postwar period.

This thesis has challenged current thinking on Western Australian architecture, and illuminated an important and over-looked practice. The work of R.J. Ferguson warrants wider recognition, and the significant contribution his buildings and writing made towards a national discourse which interrogated the possibilities of an Australian architectural idiom.
Figure 58: UWA Sports Centre, with Winthrop Hall in the background, 1970. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson.
Source: Ferguson Architects.

Figure 59: Murdoch University, 1975. Photographer: R.J. Ferguson.
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Institutions and Organisations.

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The Australian Institute of Architects, Western Australia, Perth.

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State Library of Western Australia, Perth.

Rottnest Island Authority, Perth.

Privately Held Collections.

R.J. Ferguson’s personal papers, Perth.

Anthony Brand’s personal papers, Perth.

Robert Hanlin’s personal papers, Perth.

Duncan Richard’s personal papers, New South Wales.


R.J. Ferguson, interviewed by Robyn Alra, Curtin University of Technology, no date. (State Library of Western Australia, Oral History Collection).

R.J. Ferguson, personal communication with Author, November 2015- December 2017.

R.J. Ferguson, Interview with Author, December 21, 2015.

R.J. Ferguson, Interview with Author, October 21, 2016

Simon Holthouse, Interview with Author, March 16, 2017.

Peter Bruechle, Interview with Author, October 20, 2016.

Robert Hanlin, Interview with Author, September 5, 2017.

Duncan Richards, correspondence with Author, Feb-September 2017.

Personal correspondence was also recorded between the author and the following people throughout the project, often over several occasions: Anthony Brand, Robert Hanlin, Katrina Chisholm, Simon Holthouse, Peter Deakins, Graham Hutton.

General Bibliography.


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Murray, Andrew. “Concrete: A West Australian Tradition.” Forthcoming paper to be presented at SAHANZ 35: Historiographies of Technology and Architecture. 4-7 July 2018, Wellington, NZ. (This draws primarily on material in Chapter 2).
Has Australia Achieved an Architectural Idiom?

A controversial question such as “Has Australia achieved an Architectural Idiom?” has no real answer, but within the opinions of today’s architects lies an inductive anguish typified in the general confusion. In “The Australian Ugliness” by Robin Boyd, he describes this confusion as “The National Character is as cut up and mixed up as can be. Yet undoubtedly a distinctive quality does exist and is to some extent recognised by visitors immediately they arrive. Naturally, then, the visitor is inclined to look expectantly for more evidence or confirmation of it in the streets and homes and in all the popular arts and crafts. He is often disappointed, not because there is no Australian character in building and display and product design but because it is so confused and so subtle that all but the historian or an intense student are likely to lose patience in the search.”

The following comments by three well-known local architects should stimulate us to be more conscious of the dictates of our environment.

RON FERGUSON
Meaning, I assume, is Australian building recognisably Australian? Apparently not, or the question would not arise. The word “Architectural” is confusing. It is so often used broadly to cover both Building and Architecture when, in fact, there is a marked difference.

I take the liberty of asking another question and answer that. Why has Australia not achieved an Architectural idiom?

We, the “Architects,” have not been erecting Architecture but Buildings. A structure which can carry the title Architecture will, of necessity, have something to say about Australia. The difference between Architecture and Building? A structure which meets the client’s pocket satisfies the direct physical function and is of sound construction can be a very fine building but on top this must have emotional content to be Architecture. The emotional content does not refer to folded roofs, twisted, gravity defying structures, too much glass nor an over usage of slick materials. It does refer to proportion, scale, the shaping of buildings according to climate (not just orientation and sun screening) and particularly, it refers to the enjoyment of man. It is this shaping for climate and enjoyment which will subconsciously tell an Australian story.

Here, the retailers will object. Those who shop wholesale in the glossy magazines and retail to the clients will ask of the International Style and particularly of Mies van der Rohe, whose buildings seem to be the most “International.” Mies uses steel and glass with the same admirable skill as Michelangelo used marble and the result is closer to pure Sculpture than Architecture should go. The solid third enclosing dimension, which one finds so enjoyable in Spanish courtyard and Italian colonnade Architecture, is missing. Air conditioning can, for a price, correct Architectural errors, in lack of shaping for climatic comfort, physiologically but not psychologically.

This is where we fail.

The International Style is nothing more than fashion. In the fourteen hundreds, it was fashionable to build Gothic, although there is a marked difference between English and Italian Gothic. The contemporary fashion leans towards a basic glass box with as few solids as possible and to show our contempt for the solids, they are applied in thin layers of dubious materials which are known to deteriorate in a remarkably short time. The number of new shapes and materials available to us through the magazines is confusing and our buildings display this confusion.

There seems a tendency to use as many shapes, textures and colours as possible. These new things must be explored and digested, but also purged in order that the problem can be approached with a clean sheet. Too much of the waste matter is getting past the drawing board. Our planners adequately solve the machine function of the building, that is, it will be the right cost and will work but there is a hard line is drawn and the gifting on of materials, facades and roofs takes the place of pure Architectural shaping—solids and spaces working consistently together to shelter and define man and the functions of man.

Analyse the gems of Architecture and one finds a sophisticated poverty in the number of materials. A one predominant material is being used at its sculptural best. Maximum profit returning floor space for the minimum cost is the flag under which we fight but Architecture must go beyond the necessary and the economic. Is it reasonable that offices be walled at the edge of the precipice with impenetrable glass? Is it unreasonable to extend the one hundred per cent efficient working space to a balcony or colonnade—a space to soften the in and out barrier and a space to enjoy?

True, we have not the financial backing of a wealthy Church, or State or even Merchants but at no stage in Architectural history has there been more money than was needed for a work of artistic. Today, there seems to be less demand for Architecture. To remedy this, we, the Architects, must prove that Architecture is a necessity. Someone has said that “it is not enough to build something or do something, it must also say something.”

THE ARCHITECT, MARCH 1950
R.J. Ferguson Timeline.

November 26 1931 – Born, Kalgoorlie, Western Australia.

1938 – Moved to South Fremantle, attended Alma St. Primary School, then Richmond Primary School.

1945 – Began at Fremantle Boys Secondary School, later switched to Perth Modern School.

1949 – Began Architectural studies at Perth Technical College (PTC).

1950 –Began work with Reginald Summerhayes, part time.

1951-1952 – Worked for Summerhayes full time, and at the Fremantle Wharf most nights.

1953 - Returned to Perth Technical College, taking night courses.

1953 – Began work for Marshall Clifton and Eric Leach.

Late 1953 – Clifton and Leach split up, Ferguson continues to work with Eric Leach.

1954 – Awarded prize for Hale School Boarding House, with Brand and Weedon.


(Final project: ‘The House”)

1955/6 - Worked for Hawkins and Sands.

1956 – Awarded the inaugural Morawetz Travel Scholarship.

February 1957 – Married.

February 1957 – Leaves for South Africa.

February 1957- January 1958 – Africa, working for both Ross Mackenzie, van Heerden & Hartford (Salisbury) and Charles Bransgrove and Associates (Tanzania).


Jan-Jun 1960 – Working at PTC, and at Hawkins and Sands.

May 1960 - Established Brand and Ferguson Architects.


September 1960 – Awarded third place in Perth Town Hall competition, with Brand and Weedon.

December 1961 – Hale School Memorial Hall completed


July 1964 – Brand, Ferguson & Solarski folds.


1967 – Practice moves to 31 Malcolm Street Perth.

1968 – Travel to Japan

1970 - Fellow of the RAIA


1978 – Life Fellow of the RAIA

1985 – Appointed UWA Consultant Architect

1990 – UWA Campus Plan

2000 – Honorary Doctorate of Architecture, UWA.
Select List of Works (1960-1980).

The list of works for Brand and Ferguson; and Brand, Ferguson & Solarski, was pieced together from various sources, including journals, newspapers, tender documents and oral histories. It is not intended to be complete but represents the most comprehensive list of works to date. Addresses are included where known.

The lists of works for R.J. Ferguson Architect; R.J. Ferguson and Associates; and R.J. Ferguson and Gordon Stephenson Architects were mostly drawn from office job books made available by Ferguson Architects. It is a brief selection and far from exhaustive.

The project dates were taken from a wide range of resources, and as such can vary from construction, completion and commission dates.

**Brand and Ferguson.**

1960 - Benson House, Jutland Parade, Dalkeith.
1960 - Jahn House, Grant St, Cottesloe.
1960 - Newberry House, Hobbs Ave, Dalkeith.
1960 - Methodist Church, Waroona.
1960 - Methodist Manse, Katanning.
1960 - George St House, Applecross.
1960 - Residence, Floreat Park.
1960-61 - South Terrace Primary School, Alma Street, Fremantle.

**Marshall Clifton and Anthony Brand Architects in Association.**

1961 - Hale School Memorial Hall (R.J. Ferguson Project Architect)

**Brand, Ferguson & Solarski.**

1961 - Galbraith House, Cnr Alyth and Cromarty Road, Floreat.
1962 - Residence, Augusta.
1962 - Gibbs Bright and Co Office and Showroom, Belmont.
1962 - Behr-Manning Office and Warehouse, Welshpool.
1963 - Chamberlain House, Birdwood Pde, Dalkeith.
1964 - Saw House, Jutland Pde, Dalkeith.
1964 - Whitely House, Doubleview.
1962 - Shire Hall alterations, Wandering.
1962 - Exchange Hotel alterations, Pinjarra.
1962 - MLC Dwellings alterations, Claremont.
1962 – Residence, City Beach.
1962 – Pilipel Print Shop Extensions, Stirling Street, Perth
1962 – MLC Toilet Block and Science Block additions, South Perth.
1962 – Matrons Flat, Pemberton Hospital, Pemberton.
1964 – Major Extensions to St Mary’s Anglican Church, Middle Swan.

R.J. Ferguson Architect.
1964 – Gibbs Bright Warehouse extension.
1964 – Harbourne Park Estate, Wembley.
1965 – Ferguson House, Columba Place, Peppermint Grove.
1965 – Hampton Park School Additions, Hampton Park.
1965 – Peter Bruechle House Additions, Mt. Lawley.
1966- State Housing Commission Development (SHC), Stephano Way, Coolbellup.
1967 – Mundaring Primary School Additions, Mundaring.
1968 – Geraldton High School Additions, Geraldton.
1968 – Home Units Development, East Fremantle.
1968 – Carmel Primary School Additions, Carmel.
1968 – Alterations and Additions, 31 Malcolm Street, Perth.
1969 – Chaddesley Units, Victoria Avenue, Claremont.
1969 – Busselton Youth Centre, Busselton.

1969 – Veneris Duplex, Pier Street, East Fremantle.


1969 – Unit Development, Cnr Fletcher and Petra Streets, East Fremantle.


1969 – Alexandra Mews, Alexandra Road, East Fremantle.

1969 – Fortescue Terrace Houses, Fortescue Street, East Fremantle.

1970 - 1971 – Guild Building, Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), Bentley.

1968 -1972 – UWA Student Guild Building, Crawley.


1971 – WAIT Student Housing, Bentley.

1971- Owen Dental Surgery, Midland.

1971 – Thomson Bay Development and Additions to Lodge, Rottnest Island.

1972 – UWA Social Sciences Building, Crawley.


1973 – UWA Law School extension, Crawley.

**R.J. Ferguson & Associates Architects.**

1973- Thomson Bay Cottages, Rottnest Island.

1976 – Longreach Bay Village, Rottnest Island.

1977 – Geordie Bay Village, Rottnest Island.


1978 – Sir David Brand Centre, Treatment and Training Centre, Coolbinia.

1978 – Fremantle Police Station, Fremantle.

1980 – Thomson Bay Cottages, Rottnest Island.

**R.J. Ferguson and Gordon Stephenson Architects.**

1971-1978 – Murdoch University.
Author/s: Murray, Andrew

Title: A search for understanding: the architecture of R.J. Ferguson

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