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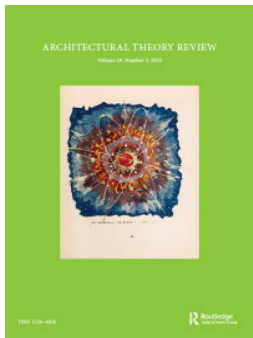
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John Duncan in the Office of Ernö Goldfinger

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ABSTRACT

The British Architectural profession throughout the twentieth century relied on an array of architectural assistants from a variety of backgrounds, working largely unseen across a variety of building projects. Within the architectural studio, ideas were developed in a complex process of transfer and exchange. These assistants would then return to their respective homes, taking their newly developed architectural knowledge with them. This paper looks at John Duncan, who travelled to Britain from Western Australia where he served as Ernö Goldfinger's chief assistant for 18 months between 1954 and 55. By constructing a biographical narrative of Duncan and his time in the Goldfinger office, this paper traces the exchange of ideas between them, and how this shaped Duncan's later architectural career. It argues that by acknowledging the experience and contribution of these assistants, it adds to the current understanding of how architectural knowledge was encountered, exchanged and produced in the post-war period.

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Introduction

On January 20, 1956, architect John Duncan sat on the deck of the SS Southern Cross as it sailed across the Pacific Ocean, writing a letter to his former employer, Ernö Goldfinger. Noting the design of the boat, the voyage so far, and the various groups of people on board, he also reflected on his time in the office:

My thoughts very occasionally turn to the jobs left behind, but as this is of little assistance to anyone, I don't allow remembrances of things undone or premonitions of things yet to be done, to worry me unduly. But I do hope that they all prosper, and that I shall eventually see them in the flesh—say in 10 years?¹

Duncan was heading home to Perth, Western Australia, having spent almost three years living and working in the UK, of which he had spent 18 months as chief assistant in the Goldfinger office. He was one of hundreds of young Antipodean architects that travelled to the metropolitan centre of London in the immediate post-war years, working their way through architectural offices across the country. They would then return home to commence practice with an expanded understanding of the profession and overflowing with new ideas. In their work as architectural assistants,

they played a supporting role in the construction of some of the most significant buildings of the post-war building boom. However, to date, the presence of these assistants has largely avoided scholarly attention, despite the enormity of their number and continuing presence late into the twentieth century. The fact that they have received little scholarly attention is perhaps not surprising—the contributions assistants made were typically those of technical skill and drafting capability. But these assistants provide a conduit through which to trace the way architectural ideas, knowledge, and methodologies circulated in the early post-war years.

In order to examine the role of assistants and the circulation of architectural ideas, this paper provides a microhistorical biography of John Duncan, focused specifically on the 18 months he spent in the Goldfinger office and his first few years of practice upon return to Perth. John Duncan is an architect well known in Western Australia for his services to the profession and the local architecture Institute, The Western Australian Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA WA), alongside his role as senior partner at Duncan, Stephen, and Mercer (DSM). However, his built work remains little known, and he is almost largely unknown outside of the state. This is compounded by the fact that he left no formal archive and few personal records, and so his work provides the researcher with limited material. Described as an architect with a “blunt, pragmatic and fundamental point of view,” his work was characterised by an enduring interest in expressed construction systems, economy of materials, and a functionalist approach to architecture.² He trained as an engineer before embarking on his architecture degree at Perth Technical College, where he graduated in 1952. He was a vocal student, and he wrote a series of articles for the student magazine *Phi* on the technical aspects of laminated timber and the administration of building by-laws, which point to his developing interests.

Following a stint overseas, he entered his father’s commercial practice, DSM, as a junior partner. He established himself early on as a leader of the profession, both through tireless advocacy and engagement with the profession and wider community. He was involved with the arbitration and mediation boards and was pivotal in the continued development of the local chapter of the Institute. He was a chapter councillor from 1956 to 1985, chapter president, national councillor, and a long-time member of the Practice, By-laws and Regulations, and Fees committees.³ It is this community service with the Institute rather than his architectural output that Duncan is best known for now, although recent efforts have begun to address this, noting his pioneering interest in the New Brutalism and his role as a student leader and publisher.⁴

By examining the overlapping personal and professional exchanges that occurred between Duncan, Goldfinger, and the Goldfinger office, we are able to examine the flows and development of architectural knowledge more acutely. This has explicit architectural consequences, particularly observable in the work of Duncan on his return. The identification of design methodologies derived from the Goldfinger office, namely the regulating grid and the use of key ratios, along with the London context in which Duncan operated, enables a revised assessment and more comprehensive assessment of his work in Western Australia. It also demonstrates the close connection between architecture in disparate geographical locations: that Duncan’s buildings in Perth were produced in dialogue with Goldfinger’s buildings in the UK. It allows

us to see Duncan's modernity as one incubated within the Goldfinger office and the broader architectural culture of London over a period of several years.

Architectural Translation

This paper uncovers an example of architectural exchange facilitated through Duncan's working holiday to the UK. The entanglement between the exchange of ideas and movement has been the subject of much scholarly attention of late, particularly given the current focus on networks and globalisation. An understanding of the considerable mobility of the architecture profession from across the twentieth century has had the effect of collapsing entrenched ideas of centre and periphery, and nationally bound architectural cultures. More broadly, this has led to a series of revised frameworks for conceptualising how architectural knowledge and discourse was made, transformed, and encountered. As Esra Akcan notes in her pioneering study, *Architecture in Translation*, "These circulations and their transformative effects have been so ubiquitous during modern times that one can hardly think of any pure "local" architecture that is produced at a place completely closed to other locations, or any pure "global" building produced in some abstract space outside the influence of local conditions."⁵ Central to this revision has been recognising the expanded cast of figures present in architectural production, whose presence illustrates the diversity of movement across the profession. This follows the directive of Tom Avermaete and Cathelijne Nuijsink in that producing a more global history of modern architecture requires the illumination of the "complex processes of knowledge exchange that are at the heart of the multi-authored character of architecture."⁶ Here, this is accomplished through foregrounding the figure of the assistant, and the path they took to arrive in the Goldfinger office. This is done not to simply break down the singular figure of Goldfinger, but rather as an access point to examine the relationships that support him.

Within an Australian context, recent scholarship by Julie Willis, Katti Williams, and Stuart King on the movement of individual architects has done much to demonstrate both the interconnectedness of the profession, the multi directional flows of knowledge, and the limitations of national frameworks.⁷ Willis has noted in her extensive studies of how, why, and where architects move, that understanding these movements is crucial to understanding the architectural development of places, with particular emphasis on Australia and New Zealand and their dominant migration cultures.⁸ Central to this, Willis argues, is the imperative to transcend national borders and consider the complexity of journeys and movements that are encompassed in architectural production. This encompasses a move away from the idea of the one directional flow from centre to periphery in order to reframe architectural production as one forged in a "professional continuum" that transcends physical borders. Willis calls for future scholarship to "complicate the idea of where architects come from and go to" in order to fully understand how architectural knowledge is acquired, tested, and transferred.⁹ This paper heeds this call, looking at a particular mode of architectural travel and the attendant flow of knowledge that it facilitates: the working holiday. And it argues that the close relationships formed between Goldfinger and Duncan, as principal and assistant, set up a professional continuum that spans both

Australia and the UK that enables a productive dialogue between them. More than this, revealing Duncan's movement between Australia and the UK provides a productive means through which to understand Duncan's own work. The lack of archives or documentation covering his own work has relegated it to the sidelines of history. Uncovering this exchange and network adds otherwise unseen depth and context for his work, and so provides a kind of agency to his work in return.

The Working Holiday

Duncan's experience in the Goldfinger office occurred while he was undertaking a working holiday, a tradition with a specific history and character. This is important context for understanding the nature of this example of architectural exchange. In the post-war period, hundreds of young graduate architects arrived in London from Australia and New Zealand. They found their way into architectural offices across the country with the specific intention of gaining experience both professionally and personally, before returning home to establish their careers. This holiday was seen as a transition phase: it offered a clear break between study and the commencement of a career at home. Working holidays, and journeys for study, are taken by many around the world and experienced by a broad range of people across all professions, naturally drawn to the pull of the metropolitan centre and the "cultural capital" this affords the traveller.¹⁰ But it is in the sheer number of people travelling as an identifiable cohort to the UK from Australia, their almost uniform experience, and the culturally entrenched nature of this trip, which makes the architectural working holiday to London a specific phenomenon. As an example, of the 13 students that graduated in Duncan's year at PTC, 6 went to straight to London, which was a trend that continued across the 1950s.¹¹ Outside Australia and New Zealand, this kind of working holiday appears rare, variable in nature, or at least undocumented, particularly in other Commonwealth member states like Canada and South Africa.¹²

Essential to this conception of a working holiday is its length, which enables complete immersion in an environment far from home. Spending between six months to three years in an office, these young architects were embedded in the post-war profession in Britain, both intellectually, technically, and socially. A careful reading of period journals, like *Architectural Review* and *The Architects' Journal* reveal the presence of these antipodeans littered across the project credits for some of the leading projects of the day. But architects were just a small group within a much broader phenomenon. Historian Graeme Davison describes the importance of the trip in general: "Living in England, especially in London, has become firmly inscribed in Australian consciousness as a rite of passage, and a gateway to personal liberation."¹³ Yet despite this, the working holiday of the post-war period has received little scholarly attention in Australia across all disciplines including architecture. It occupies a peculiar position in the historiography in that, while largely undocumented, it is not an unknown phenomenon. Rather it is a frequently cited and well-known occurrence, described across a range of popular literature, particularly novels, and a journey that has been widely personally experienced.¹⁴ David Saunders' essay "...So I decided to go overseas" first identified the phenomenon of the pre-war architectural working holiday.¹⁵ A recent article by Willis and Williams examined a broader range of

movements by architects between the UK and Australia, and further articulated the pre-war foundations of the working holiday as it developed in the early twentieth century.¹⁶ It is these foundations, which this article builds upon.

John Duncan and the Selection of Case Study

Duncan was just one of many young Australians who followed the trail to the UK, and who ended up working in some of the leading offices of the day. Although focused on Duncan, this account is not intended to valorise or single him out. Rather, he provides an example with enough empirical evidence to adequately discuss his time in London and in Perth, a rarity when examining architectural exchanges during the working holiday. To echo Elizabeth Darling as she noted in her biography of Wells Coates, the intention of focusing on Duncan is not “to paint him as a pioneer outsider” but rather to “place him within a broader...scene.”¹⁷ Indeed, he is the focus of this paper partly due to happenstance and luck.

Duncan was involved with oral history in Western Australia and participated in chronicling the lives of local architects on tape.¹⁸ He was one of the few architects in Western Australia of his generation that recorded oral history interviews about their career, and to speak openly about their time in London and their influences. These details are typically brushed over in interviews with his contemporaries, keen to talk about their careers in Perth, but Duncan was eager to discuss his time with Goldfinger and was candid about the influence it had on him. Duncan passed away in 2005, but oral history conducted by the author with his wife Beth Duncan, who was also in London at the time, along with an interview conducted with him by journalist Jane Fleming for the “Architecture: Plans for Life” radio program on 6NR in 1982 and deposited in the State Library of Western Australia archive, provide key insight into his time in Britain. However, it was the ability to cross check and confirm what was said in these interviews with the contents of the considerable Goldfinger archive held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London that would provide the strongest evidence and account for his time away. This research underpins this paper.

The Goldfinger office has an extensive and well-documented archive, which is held within the RIBA collection. It contains extensive staff records and registers relating to employment including pay slips, letters of recommendation, applications, and comprehensive records of site visits that are rarely found in office archives. This rich archival source is also reinforced by the fact that Goldfinger and his office have been well examined in secondary literature through a series of books, biographies and journal articles. There is also a valuable series of lengthy interviews conducted with former office employees which forms part of the British Libraries “Architects’ Lives” oral history series. The Goldfinger records are vital, because beyond his interviews and oral histories, Duncan left little for the researcher. He left no personal papers, and no practice archive. His work was rarely published in the local newspapers or trade journals, and most of his work has been either demolished or significantly altered. This account is therefore based primarily on archival records found within the Goldfinger collection and supported by various oral histories conducted with John and Beth Duncan and employees from the Goldfinger office.

The ability to demonstrate the globalised nature of the post-war profession, with empirically based examples at an individual level—how these exchanges occurred, who was involved in these interactions, what was exchanged and how, and how these can be described and identified—is essential in order to counteract more top-level narratives and entrenched ideas of architectural influence and reception. Through an examination of Duncan's movement from Australia to the UK and back again, this paper identifies key institutions, people, practices, and methodologies that were encountered, navigated, and absorbed, providing a clear and legible account of one way in which these exchanges took place.

First Movements

John Duncan (1928–2005) was born in Perth, Western Australia (WA) and studied architecture at the Perth Technical College (PTC), which was then the only formal architectural course available in WA. His father was a prominent local architect, and a founding partner in the leading practice Duncan, Stephen and Mercer, through which John was able to gain considerable work experience before leaving to travel abroad. Having received his diploma in 1952, John Duncan travelled to the UK with fellow PTC graduates John White and Patrick (Ray) Leunig. In early 1953, they sailed from Fremantle to Naples where they purchased a cheap Mercedes, which would allow them to travel throughout Europe for three months before arriving in London. Once in London, the three met up with another PTC graduate that had also recently arrived, Edwin Whitaker, and all four rented a house together in Earls Court (fig. 1).

Whitaker had begun working with Denis Clarke Hall and he secured Duncan a job in the office during the summer break where he stayed on for six months. Duncan worked primarily on the High Wycombe Girls School and he spent three months doing window schedules.¹⁹ Duncan recalled it as a rather uninteresting work, describing it simply as, "... six months getting used to English practice and building materials."²⁰

Duncan then moved to Penzance to take up an opportunity in the office of Bazeley and Barbary, headed by first wave modernist George Bazeley who had previously worked with Serge Chermayeff and was best known for his 1935–36 Tregannick House.²¹ Duncan spent six months producing the competition entry for a new secondary school for 600 students in Falmouth, Cornwall.²² The firm was typically known for its residential and military work and had limited experience in design for education, and so Duncan was hired partly on the back of his experience designing schools with Clarke Hall.²³ Bazeley and Barbary were invited to put forward a scheme, and they submitted a fairly austere modernist block. With extensive face brickwork and industrial glazing set within a regulating frame, it was an extension of the inter-war Modern Movement buildings produced by Bazeley, with the scheme was described in *The Architects' Journal* by Astragal as "fairly orthodox."²⁴ The competition was eventually won by Lyons, Israel and Ellis with a much more hard-edged scheme.²⁵ Having spent six months in Penzance, Duncan was keen to move on, both geographically but also career wise, and so he headed to London where he quickly secured work with Goldfinger arranged through the job agency at the Architectural Association (AA).



Figure 1. John Duncan in London, 1954. Photographer unknown (provided by Beth Duncan).

Training in Perth

That Duncan and his fellow travellers were so easily able to move between offices, picking up various six months stints and pursuing opportunities in more well-known practices and increased office responsibilities speaks to the practical training they had received in Perth. This had been a characteristic of the PTC course since its inception in 1946. Francis Senior Bolland, who had trained in Manchester and took over as head of PTC in 1954, noted the unusual and outsized practical proportion of the course upon his arrival:

The emphasis placed on practical experience in the present course at Perth is, however, greater than in the majority of the other schools mentioned above [in the UK and Australia]; most British schools require a period of only six months during the course.²⁶

It was both a blessing and a curse. The structure that Bolland had inherited, and that Duncan had undertaken, consisted of two years of full-time study and three years practical training within an office. Bolland soon reversed this, but the emphasis on office experience remained a hallmark of architectural education in WA into the 1960s, placing it out of step with the trend towards a full academic education then being implemented around the world. While this would disadvantage the students in terms of a theoretical grounding, it meant that students graduating from PTC had significant practical advantages over those who had gone through the university system. The first PTC graduate to travel overseas, Gilbert Nicol, remarked upon his return from London having spent a year with Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardall in 1952, “I had no reason to feel at all inferior, but to the contrary, very well satisfied with

my Perth training.”²⁷ After a year in London, John Lidbury wrote a further report on his experience in London, which was published in local journal *The Architect* where he drew attention to the benefit of his decidedly practical training:

The training I received at the School of Architecture, Perth, has at all times stood me in good stead. The work [in London] was a little strange at first; local practice, the use of a greater range of methods and materials; office administration; methods of construction, etc., all had to be mastered (the process always goes on) but I found that after a week or even less I could take my place beside any assistant of comparable experience and hold my own with them. Generally speaking, I have found that in English schools the bias is on Design and less on Technical knowledge, with the result that an assistant trained in this country takes longer to adjust himself to the practice in an office that does a student from Perth. He takes longer to become an efficient assistant.²⁸

John White, who travelled to London with Duncan, recalled a similar situation as he worked his way through a number of offices:

We were very practical. We were trained as architects to do things. We weren't just straight out of school. We had all worked, I had designed and had houses built before I graduated. Working in other offices with graduates from the AA they didn't know all sorts of things which we had to sort out for them.²⁹

This likely made the Perth graduates attractive to UK employers, and given the sheer number of them arriving in London may imply that their reputation for practical knowledge was known.

Entering the Goldfinger office

Having moved back to London from Penzance, Duncan looked for work utilising the job register at the AA, which had become a key node for arriving Australian architects. They were able to join as members and then get access to a job register, with vacancies advertised largely in the practices of ex-AA graduates or those with close AA affiliations. He described his return to London in his interview with Fleming:

There was never any shortages of jobs in those days, it was just a matter of where and when you would work, not whether you would get a job. So I went to the AA where they had a job bureau and they sent me off to TP Bennetts, which was known as being the biggest organization in town that did nothing interesting at all. But it was a job so I went there for three weeks. And then they [The AA] rang up and said there is another going that you may be interested in with Ernő Goldfinger.³⁰

Duncan described his time with Goldfinger as the “highpoint” of his whole trip.³¹ He began work on the 23rd of August 1954, and he would stay on for almost 18 months, which he recalled as being “a record for Ernő's office!”³² Goldfinger's office was small at this stage, with between 4 and 6 assistants working alongside Ernő and his secretary Rosemary Gough. For much of the time in the office Duncan worked alongside Anthony Short and John Roberts, and later Denise Scott Brown.

Given his extensive practical training, Duncan was quickly promoted to Chief Assistant. He worked across a number of jobs, but became closely involved with three key projects from this time: the Carr and Co. offices in Birmingham (1954), the Regent's Park Road flats (1954), and an office building designed for Arnold Lee of

Mason Pearson at 45–46 Albemarle Street, Mayfair³³ (fig. 2). He was involved in updating the interiors for the S. Weiss Lingerie shop in Shaftesbury Avenue which an assistant from New Zealand, Lillian Chrystall (nee Laidlaw), had previously worked on.³⁴ As chief assistant, Duncan assumed a high degree of responsibility in the office. Looks through the Goldfinger archives held at the RIBA reveal he was heavily involved in all aspects of the practice and often stood in for Goldfinger on site visits and other meetings. Of these, he was most involved with the Albemarle Street project. Duncan was the corresponding architect for the first six months of its construction and produced the early drawings. He arranged the preliminary works and engaged in various on-site disputes involving building surveyance, and other issues,

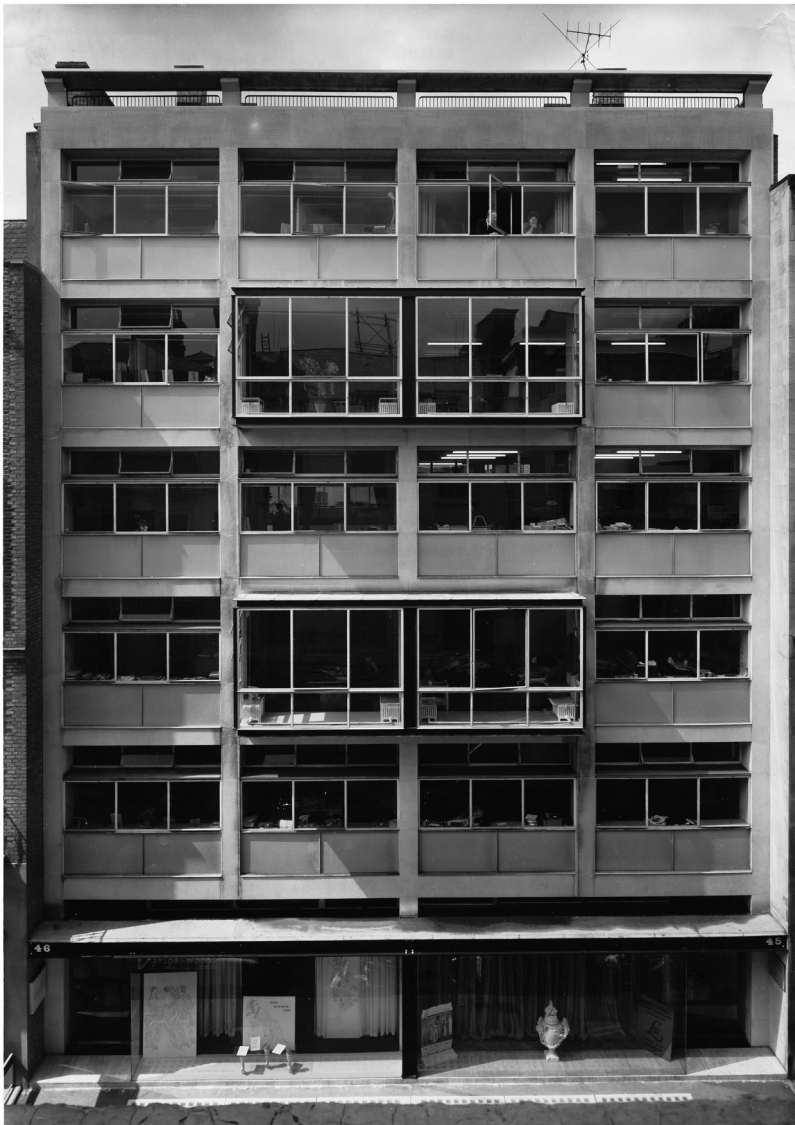


Figure 2. Albemarle Street Offices, London. Erno Goldfinger 1957. Photographer: Colin Westwood (RIBA Collections).

including those relating to the party walls and chimneystacks of the neighbouring lots.³⁵ Detailed site visit records show that Duncan was on site up to four times a week for much of 1955, and attended the majority of the weekly site meetings together with Goldfinger until he left the office in December.³⁶ Indeed, almost all correspondence regarding the job during 1955 is signed off with the initials EG/JKD/RFG (Goldfinger, Duncan and Gough), and a number of letters in the archive are addressed directly to Duncan. During his time on the Albemarle job, Duncan had a number of assistants working alongside him, including Scott Brown, John Winter, and John Roberts who would continue on once Duncan left.³⁷ Notes on Carr and Co. and the Regent's Road flats similarly show him liaising with clients, assisting with interior decorating advice, and attending a number of site visits in Goldfinger's absence.³⁸

Further details of Duncan's position within the office are found in an interview within the British Library's "Architects' Lives" series conducted with fellow assistant John Roberts. Interviewed in 2002, he precisely detailed the staff, the general environment, and the volatile nature of the office which he recalled Duncan capable of withstanding.

His chief assistant at the time was an Australian. For some reason he often employed Australians... [Duncan] was a marvelous character and he knew just how to cope with Ernő. Being Hungarian, Ernő was extremely voluble, and John Duncan was very taciturn... He just let all this stuff wash over him and didn't react or at least didn't react adversely.³⁹

The period that Duncan was in the office was one of high turnover amongst the Goldfinger staff. Although some, like Short, would stay for relatively lengthy periods of almost 10 months, Duncan's 18-month tenure provided Goldfinger with some much-needed stability within the office along with his technical and practical expertise. Short recalled the volatility of the office, "I lasted until November, the 13th to leave in the year, the 26th in two years."⁴⁰ Denise Scott Brown, who spent six months in the office, also recalled her time working on the Albemarle project "...the person behind me left because they couldn't stand it any longer. We were an office of seven people, but I think ten people came and went in that six months."⁴¹

The mid-1950s were a period of transition for Goldfinger as he struggled to regain the prominence he had pre-war. During this time, Duncan offered a constant that Goldfinger could rely upon. Before Duncan, the previous longest-serving assistant that Goldfinger had, at least that can be established from the archive, was Lillian Chrystall (nee Laidlaw) from New Zealand, who had spent 15 months in the Goldfinger office between 1950 and 51 during her working holiday. It was not until Jacob Blacker joined the office in 1958, staying for nine years, that Goldfinger had another long-lasting assistant.⁴² That two of the longest serving members of the office in the post-war years were both antipodeans on working holidays speaks to the particular kind of engagement that travelling Australians and New Zealanders had with the UK in this period.

Given the considerable distances involved, journeys were lengthy by requirement and so the potential for meaningful and long engagement within select offices was increased. The working holiday also came at a point in their careers when they had much to prove: immediately after their studies, but before commencing in their own practice.

Both Chrystall and Duncan maintained their relationship with Goldfinger long after they had left the practice, and it is possible that the good impression left by Chrystall opened the door for Duncan in the first place. Following Chrystall and Duncan, antipodeans maintained a strong presence within the office over the coming decade in numbers that far outweighed those arriving from other places. A search through the staff cards and employment records held in the Goldfinger archive shows that by the end of the 1960s, there had been at least 16 Australians and New Zealanders that had gone through the Piccadilly office, many spending comparatively long periods there.⁴³

Duncan, Goldfinger, and Gough remained in touch over the years, and clearly their relationship meant a lot, at least to Duncan. They would exchange Christmas Cards well into the 1970s, and in the immediate years of his return there is evidence of regular communication between the three. When Duncan published a special issue of *The Architect*, the official journal of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Western Australian (RAIA WA) chapter, on modern architecture in Perth he sent a copy to Ernö. When the projects that Duncan had worked on were published in the 1963 special issue of *Architectural Design*, Ernö reciprocated and sent out a copy to Perth. In a letter to Duncan apologising for his slow correspondence Ernö remarked “you are still being quoted as the best assistant I ever had... When are you coming to England?”⁴⁴ Duncan’s wife Beth, who was in London on a working holiday at the same time as John, met Ernö a number of times and recalled that Goldfinger offered John a partnership when he left, which Duncan thought “was an empty threat to get him to stay.”⁴⁵

Duncan was also asked to carry out an interview remotely on behalf of Goldfinger for another Australian graduate wanting to gain experience within the office. In 1967 another young WA architect, Ian Molyneux, was preparing to embark on his own working holiday and wrote to Goldfinger asking for a job for the two years that he was planning to be in London. Goldfinger replied, suggesting “I think it would be best if you were to be interviewed by my friend: John Duncan ... He could then advise me on whether you would be a suitable person to work in my office.”⁴⁶ At the same time he wrote to John requesting him to do the interview noting, “I have not heard from you for some time. Perhaps you will let me know how things are. I have quite a lot of work at present. I will send you the publications as soon as they come out.”⁴⁷ Duncan dutifully carried out the interview and replied to Goldfinger with a personal note: “The only thing published of recent times is my own house which I sent you some photographs at Christmas ... The Client we are really looking for is one who will shout me another trip to England to see you all again some time.”⁴⁸ Molyneux started in the office several months later but left shortly after. This exchange offers an interesting example of an architectural relationship that was both personal and professional which continued long after their time shared in the office. Duncan and Goldfinger had much to offer each other, and they freely exchanged knowledge, stability, trust, and friendship, which enriched each other’s practice and personal lives.

Translating Goldfinger to Perth

Having been away for almost three years, the desire to return home came for Duncan. He sailed back to Perth, together with fellow Perth travellers Ross

Chisholm and John Lidbury, who had worked in the Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, and Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardell offices respectively. The three arrived in Perth on the 30th of January 1956. Back home, Duncan entered the family practice where he was immediately made a partner, alongside his father Kenneth Duncan, John Mercer, and Cyril Stephen. Duncan, Stephen and Mercer (DSM) were a major commercial practice in Perth by this time, and in 1956 Kenneth Duncan had been elected the President of the RAIA WA chapter, affording further recognition for the firm at the time. DSM were architects for a number of major institutions including the WA Fire Brigade Board, Silver Chain nursing, and the Commonwealth Industrial Gasses Limited in WA, and the firm had a steady flow of work across the state.⁴⁹ To this, Duncan would bring a number of residential projects for friends and colleagues, which would provide him with a small scale testing ground through which to work through the new design methodologies and ideas that he had encountered abroad.

Duncan returned to Australia with new interests, most notably in the New Brutalism, and a thoroughly challenged perspective on practice that he had garnered on his journey.⁵⁰ He also returned with a renewed sense for the importance of passive solar design, something he had been taught at PTC. Having experienced the variety of climates and responses abroad, the centrality of designing with the sun was confirmed to him.⁵¹ He also returned with a host of refined design skills, of which the most evident was a design methodology that he had developed in the Goldfinger office. The most obvious, and perhaps the most easily traceable aspect of this was the use of a regulating, modular grid to control the design. In an interview with journalist Jane Fleming, Duncan recalled certain design processes that he picked up during his 18 months in Goldfinger's office, and makes a direct link between the ways he would begin an architectural design in WA:

I had also become, through Goldfinger's office, very much addicted to designing on a module system. We used to work, because Englishmen were smaller, on a 2 foot 9 module. But it worked out very well, almost anything you wanted would fit on that...because he did so many of them, you had 5ft 6, 8ft 3, 11ft, they were quite useful dimensions.⁵²

This module spacing, Duncan explained, was designed to account for British door frames, and so at home he simply adapted the module to fit Australian door sizes, which meant he ended up with a 3-foot module. He recalled: "For many years the first thing I would ever do is draw up my grid on the paper."⁵³ Given his engineering background and interest in systems, the grid would have been immediately appealing for Duncan, and it offered a way to control the design and provide a structured approach to the design process.

Goldfinger's own use of the 2-foot-9 grid during this period is well documented.⁵⁴ Originating partly from his training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under Auguste Perret, Goldfinger first used the 2-foot-9 grid in his design for a house for Colonel Fletcher in 1947, and as James Dunnett and Nigel Hiscock write, this grid was "derived from the ergonomic dimensions of man, and it became the basis of most of his design afterwards."⁵⁵ In a reply to a critique by JM Richards in *AJ* of his Albemarle Street Office building, perhaps the project, which used this regulating grid, most

explicitly, Goldfinger outlined this modular approach which he was then using as a basis for his architectural projects:

Mr. Richards raises the question of the Golden Section. I design all my buildings on a proportion derived from the Square ... and use a rigorous control of the elements of facades and plans. The plans are also controlled by a grid of 2ft. 9 in. (giving 5ft. 6in., 8ft. 3in., 11ft., etc., as multiples and 1ft. 10 in., 11in. or 3 in. increments). This gives me a control of scale.⁵⁶

Anthony Short, who was in the office alongside Duncan, also recalled the use of the grid in a letter to the *AJ*:

The 2'9" grid related, according to Ernö, to the iron age and bronze age proportion of 5'6" which was a measure used on megaliths. At the same Herts County Council was evolving the 8'3" grid which was three 2'9" modules. The 2'9" grid was a standard door and frame, but took no account of partitions, which would fall a bit haphazardly on one side of the other as was most expedient. The grid did provide a discipline.⁵⁷

That Duncan could quickly list off the exact grid multiples in the interview almost 30 years after being in the office demonstrates how ingrained the system was for him. Duncan's adoption of the grid once home also provides an insight into the working method and culture of the Goldfinger office. This was not something that Goldfinger kept to himself, but rather impressed upon his employees, providing a set of principles and rules through which to filter and translate his ideas into built outcomes.

Applying the Grid

The first few years of Duncan's career back in Perth were enormously busy, and he produced a handful of buildings, mostly houses, which he used to test out various ideas he had accumulated in his career to date. This period was made all the more vital as it abruptly ended in the mid 1960s when Duncan assumed a senior leadership role within DSM, at which point his individual works and design ideas become more difficult to discern or trace.

Duncan left few archival traces. The DSM drawings and practice records were all disposed of or returned to individual owners when the business was dismantled in the late 1990s, along with any photographs or other papers. The drawings and photographs of Duncan's own early projects have also disappeared, including the work he completed when he first returned to Perth in the late 1950s. Most were never photographed in the first place. Given that they were private domestic houses, there are no alternative archives to consult. The few projects that have not been demolished have since been altered beyond recognition, which leaves very little to work with, namely a handful of newspaper articles featuring his work, the brief mentions in oral histories, and personal archives held by the clients and their families. But within the few traces that can be found, his interest in the grid and its application immediately upon his return became clearly apparent.

His first commission upon his return was for a major new building, the Alexander Home wing at Ngal-a Mothercraft Home and Training Centre in South Perth (fig. 3). Duncan was made partner in charge of the project having received the commission through his mother, Helen Duncan, who was then vice-president of the centre.

Designed in late 1956 and completed in 1959, it comprised a long linear building with four fingers branching off the central block, ranging between two and three storeys. It had an exposed steel frame system with alternating timber framed infill windows and brick panels.⁵⁸ Into this steel frame a number of prefabricated elements were inserted including precast suspended slab floors, and vermiculite filled plaster wall panels, which were intended to fit together “dry” within the steel frame, allowing the construction system to remain legible.⁵⁹ The building demonstrates Duncan’s interest in the work of the Smithsons and New Brutalism, which he had recently encountered. It made deliberate formal nods to Hunstanton, but also explored the celebration of prefabricated elements, an interest in the coordination of trades, and a level of “hands-off detailing.”⁶⁰ Overlaid with his interest in the New Brutalism, this was his first attempt at using the grid as a regulating device in the manner he learnt in the Goldfinger office. Both the plan and the façade are tightly controlled through a grid, which picks up major structural elements and defines the room sizes and openings. The individual wings are designed so that the dimensions of the corridor and rooms align with the ratios of the golden section, and the rhythm of the façade indicates the strong use of a controlling grid.

But it was a series of small house designs that Duncan carried out for his friends and himself that most clearly demonstrated his application of the grid. Some of these were published in the weekly architecture section of *The West Australian* newspaper, the main newspaper in the state, and written by journalist Frank Platell. During the 1950s and 60s this section provided the widest coverage of architecture in the state and regularly published new houses and plans. The early houses that Duncan designed



Figure 3. Ngal-a Mothercraft Home and Training Centre, 1956–59. South Perth, WA (Ngal-a Archives).

were modest. They had double brick cavity walls, concrete slab, pitched tiled roofs, and timber-framed interior walls which was the standard construction method for houses in WA.⁶¹ The budgets were tight, the sites were suburban, the clients were young families, and they utilised the existing skills of the local construction industry and readily available materials. They were quite literally worlds apart from the high budget, high profile work of Goldfinger in London, but the grid provides a lens through which to examine them more closely and identify their shared origins.

One example is a house designed in early 1960 for the Bubna of Litic, who had fled Czechoslovakia following the Communist coup. Located in the suburb of Mount Claremont, it was a small 76-square-metre, 2-bedroom house, split across two levels in order to save on foundations and brick courses. A small article in the *The West Australian* is the only surviving record of the house. Platell, originally a motoring journalist, was often fed information directly by the architects and so the text in the article was likely provided directly by Duncan. This is use of the grid is the focus of the text: “The rafters have been spaced at 3 ft. intervals so that standard-size plywood and asbestos-cement sheets could be used in the ceiling and rough joined over the rafters.”⁶² There is an accompanying plan complete with 3-foot grid lines drawn clearly across the plan—unusual for any plans typically published in *The West Australian* at the time—and shows the grid clearly defining the major openings of the house, along with room sizes, stair placements and bathroom fixtures.⁶³ The caption below the plan further notes this, “The lines conform with all window and door openings.”⁶⁴ This is the only surviving document of this house, but Duncan’s interest in the regulating grid is plainly evident.

A house designed for his close friend Arnold Potts in City Beach brings the grid directly into the house as a design element (fig. 4). It was designed in 1957, one of the first projects he received upon his return, but construction was delayed and not built until 1960.⁶⁵ Constructed in 16 weeks, the house presents a U-shaped plan around a central courtyard, which opens up to the north. With cavity brick end walls, the house is predominantly timber framed with extensive window walls. While there is no surviving plan of the original house, contemporary photographs show how Duncan ran a 3 ft. open timber grid across the living room as a kind of suspended ceiling, which directly lined up with the mullions of the window wall frame to the north. This device is described in an article in *The West Australian*, “But here there is suspended an egg-crate screen of the blackbutt [wood] which was included to make a cosy and interesting section near the open fireplace”⁶⁶ (fig. 5). A further grid extends out from the kitchen as a pergola for the courtyard, which reads as an exposed roof frame. While the grid is less visible in plan, the prominence of this grid directly exposed as a design feature in a house for a very close friend, provides an early illustration of Duncan’s interest in the controlling grid as a design method.

In the house he designed for his own family in 1963 in Teslin Road, Mount Claremont, the grid continues to dictate the design decisions (fig. 6). This was a more substantial house than his previous efforts, and he was able to extend the material palette to include a series of prefabricated concrete panels, brick floors, and a flat steel frame roof. Given it was the first house he had designed for himself, the project was of special importance, and he wrote a kind of memoir documenting the key details of the house in 2002 shortly before he passed away. The document outlines a



Figure 4. Potts House exterior. Duncan Stephen Mercer, 1960 (Private Collection, Julie Potts).

number of guiding principles in the house, including the material choices, planning history, and his interest in the New Brutalism. It is one of the rare occasions that he wrote explicitly on his design process. He writes, “The design is based on a 100 mm structural grid intervention between each set of 3×915 (3 ft) planning grids, with 100sq concrete columns at 2850 centres. This control extends to the garden retaining walls and external paving, giving (we believe) a discernible sense of order and discipline, inside and out.”⁶⁷ The walls of the house largely followed this grid, while the steel roof frame echoed the grid across the plan, with aluminium decking on top.⁶⁸ Elsewhere, the use of exposed aggregate panels for walls and entry steps recall details of the Regents Park Road flats, which Duncan had worked on. These are details which otherwise might be assumed to be standard, but when placed in the context of his time in the Goldfinger office, they begin to unfurl a different story.

The application of the grid—a strong, clearly identifiable formal device—provides a lens through which to follow the transfer of architectural knowledge, which occurred within the Goldfinger office. But this transfer would have been far more complex and



Figure 5. Potts House interior showing the exposed timber framed ceiling grid. Duncan Stephen Mercer, 1960 (Private Collection, Julie Potts).

multi-faceted than the simple application of a grid. Office administration, drafting conventions, navigation of social structures, contractors, clients and building sites, and a series of interpersonal skills and relationships all would have factored into the development of Duncan's practice upon return. This would not have been a one-way exchange. Ideas would have circulated between Duncan, Goldfinger, and the other members of staff, each contributing to the ongoing process of exchange and development. These are things, which are almost impossible to identify but naturally unfold over the course of years spent in close working relationships.

Duncan's use of a design methodology learnt from Goldfinger office speaks directly to the long-term engagement that the working holiday facilitated. This was not a fleeting exchange, or a brief period of observation. This was a method learned, refined, and developed alongside Goldfinger within the high-pressure environment of the office over a period of 18 months. The grid itself continued to develop and change in Perth, and was stretched to accommodate local materials, construction technology, and site conditions. Significantly, it was not just a standard grid pattern, but it was



Figure 6. Duncan House interior, Mt Claremont. Duncan Stephen Mercer, 1963. Photographer: Fritz Kos (SLWA).

one with a specific origin and development. It allows us to see Goldfinger in Duncan's work, but crucially, it allows us to see Duncan in Goldfinger's work. It clarifies the significance of the grid for Goldfinger, and its presence within the office as a design tool. And it reminds us that Goldfinger didn't practice alone, rather, he had a supporting cast of talented assistants from around the world that worked with him and developed their ideas together.

Conclusion

This paper has followed the path of John Duncan as he travelled to London, spent an extended period working within the Goldfinger office, before returning home where he was able to implement his experiences abroad into his own practice. In doing so, the paper provides a personal illustration of how architectural knowledge was transferred in the post-war period. Significantly it has shown how exchanges that occurred within the metropolitan centre could be absorbed and extended along the profession's periphery, making tangible links between the two sites of operation in what Willis has described as a "professional continuum."

Through following his journey, this paper demonstrates that Duncan, and hundreds of others like him from the periphery, were actively involved in architectural production in Britain. To borrow a phrase from Paul Walker and Justine Clark, these architects were not separate, but instead "embedded in the give and take of architectural ideas and culture."⁶⁹ These individuals were not just visiting and

learning, they were actively contributing, producing, and immersed in the profession. They brought with them their own ideas, attitudes, and skills, and these were shared and interrogated across the office, job site, and the pub over several years. They were then able to return home with an updated and expanded knowledge and skills set. The architecture they produced in their respective contexts, in this instance, Perth, Western Australia, reflects this immersive engagement and it enables the resultant architecture to be more clearly understood. Through identifying and articulating these exchanges it allows us to better articulate the complexity present in the making of architectural culture within the rapidly globalising post-war period.

Notes on Contributor

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Disclosure Statement

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Notes

1. London, RIBA Collections [Hereafter RIBA] The Ernö Goldfinger Papers, GolEr/268/4. Personal letter from John Duncan to the Ernö Goldfinger Office, Jan 20, 1956.
2. Simon Pendal, Jonathan Strauss, and Georgina Willis, "Vale: Bernard Seeber," *The Architect* (2022): 100.
3. David Sanden, "John Duncan FRAIA 17/01/1928 to 04/08/2005," *The Architect* (Summer 2005), 10.
4. See: Andrew Murray, "Brutal Beginnings: The New Brutalism and Western Australia in the 1950s," *The Journal of Architecture* 26, no. 8 (2021): 1219–40; Andrew Murray, "Tee Square Journal, Phi, Aspect, and Aedicule: The Publications of the Architectural Students Association of Western Australia," *Fabrications* 33, no. 1 (2023): 142–70.
5. Esra Akcan, *Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey & the Modern House* (Duke University Press, 2012), 3.
6. Tom Avermaete and Cathelijne Nuijsink, "Architectural Contact Zones: Another Way to Write Global Histories of the Post-War Period?," *Architectural Theory Review* 25, no. 3 (2021): 352.
7. Julie Willis, "Architectural Movements: Journeys of an Inter-Colonial Profession," *Fabrications* 26, no. 2 (2016): 158–79; Katti Williams, "Anzacs and Lamingtons: An Exploration of Architects' Trans-Tasman Movements in the War Memorial Years," *Fabrications* 33, no. 3 (2023): 594–630; Stuart King, "New Zealand Architects and Australia's Federation Architecture," *Fabrications* 33, no. 3 (2023): 571–93.
8. Willis, "Architectural Movements," 158–59.
9. Willis, "Architectural Movements," 164.
10. The architectural profession in London in the 1930s to the 1960s was enormously diverse, and offices were staffed by architects from across the world. However, this was largely the result of migration, with architects having moved to the metropolitan centre

to study, to further their careers in high profile offices, or to flee volatile political situations. Architects would then settle in the UK, or continue moving further afield, most visibly to America.

11. For a comprehensive overview of the working holiday and the numbers that went, see Andrew Murray, "Do It Properly and Make the Most of It: Western Australian Architects and the UK Working Holiday 1946-1960" (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2023).
12. While this is difficult to document, a survey of national histories from similar countries do not identify the working holiday as a phenomenon, whereas Australian and New Zealand histories clearly do. An examination of other national architectural biographical databases, like *Artefacts: The Built Environment of Southern Africa*, which comprehensively document the careers of twentieth century architects in South Africa, show the working holiday to be a rare occurrence in South Africa for example. See *Artefacts: The Built Environment of Southern Africa*, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.artefacts.co.za>.
13. Graeme Davison, "Tourists, Expats and Invisible Immigrants: Being Australian in England in the 1960s and 70s," in *Australian in Britain: The Twentieth-Century Experience*, ed. Carl Bridge, Robert Crawford, and David Dunstan (Monash University ePress, 2009), n.p, https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/monograph/Australians_in_Britain_The_Twentieth-Century_Experience/12821246.
14. Living and working in the UK is a common motif in Australian and NZ novels, see Elizabeth Harrower, *The Catherine Wheel* (Cassell, 1960); Janet Frame, *The Envoy from Mirror City* (Women's Press, 1985); Louise Mack, *An Australian Girl in London* (T. Fisher Unwin, 1902).
15. David Saunders, "... So I Decided to Go Overseas," *Architecture Australia* (February/March, 1977), 22–28.
16. Julie Willis and Katti Williams, "Travel a la Mode: Australian Architects and the Changing Nature of the International Tour," *Fabrications* 31, no. 3 (2021).
17. Darling, "In Plain Sight," 106.
18. See David Sanden, "John Duncan FRAIA 17/01/1928 to 04/08/2005," *The Architect* (Summer 2005), 10.
19. State Library of Western Australia oral History Collection, Perth [hereafter SLWAOH], OH1805, Jane Fleming, Interview with John Duncan, 1983. Conducted for the "Architecture: Plans for Life" radio program on 6NR.
20. SLWAOH, Fleming, Interview with John Duncan, 1983.
21. Alan Powers, *Modern: The Modern Movement in Britain* (London, 2005), 48–49.
22. "Students' Notes," *The Architect* (June, 1954), 20.
23. John Duncan, letter to Arnold Potts, January 14, 1954, Private Collection, Julie Potts.
24. "Astragal notes and topics," *The Architects' Journal* 119, no. 3082 (March 25, 1954), 357.
25. "Cornish Vernacular," *The Architects' Journal* 119, no. 3082 (March 25, 1954), 358.
26. Perth, Curtin University Archives [hereafter CUA], Perth Technical College Administrative Files, Item 739586, Box 68447, file 32, F.S. Bolland, "Proposals for reform of the Associateship course in Architecture," July 27, 1954.
27. Perth, State Records Office of Western Australia Archives [hereafter SROWA] AU WA S24-cons 16543 1945/0084, Technical Education Branch internal memo, August 12, 1952.
28. J.D. Lidbury, "W.H. Robertson Memorial Travel Grant," *The Architect* (December, 1955): 31.
29. John White, interview with author, October 2, 2019, Bunbury, WA. Geraint Franklin has also noted that this tension also played out within London itself, between those trained at the AA, and those at the competing Regent Street Polytechnic along the lines of a class distinction: "it was said that the AA turned out principles; the Poly, assistants." Geraint Franklin, *John Outram* (Liverpool University Press, 2022), 2–3.
30. SLWAOH, Fleming, Interview with John Duncan, 1983.
31. SLWAOH, Fleming, Interview with John Duncan, 1983.
32. Directory of Architects and Buildings in Western Australia 1945–1996, Questionnaire, John Duncan. Private Collection, Simon Anderson. Duncan left the office on December 9, 1955.

33. In January 1955, just 4 months after joining the office, Duncan was already signing his letters “chief assistant.” See RIBA, The Ernő Goldfinger Papers, GolEr/78/3. For details of his role in various jobs see “Contractors etc,” *The Architectural Review* 124, no. 740 (September 1, 1958), c210. Roberts took over the Albemarle Street job when Duncan left, and when the project was published in 1958 Roberts is listed as the lead assistant. “Offices in Albemarle Street, W.1,” *The Architectural Review* 123, no. 733 (Feb 1, 1958), 119.
34. James Dunnett and Gavin Stamp, *Ernő Goldfinger: Works 1* (Architectural Association, 1983), 85; Elain Harwood and Alan Powers, *Ernő Goldfinger* (Liverpool University Press, 2024), 162.
35. Duncan’s involvement in issues concerning the party walls and chimney stacks are documented in RIBA, The Ernő Goldfinger Papers GolEr/79/3.
36. RIBA, The Ernő Goldfinger Papers, GolEr/81/4.
37. RIBA, The Ernő Goldfinger Papers, GolEr/81/6, Minutes of Site Meetings 1955–57.
38. Numerous references to Duncan’s involvement on the project can be found within the project files within the Goldfinger archive at the RIBA. See for example RIBA, The Ernő Goldfinger Papers, GolEr/456/7; GolEr 456/4; GolEr 456/3; GolEr 457/2; GolEr 458/15; GolEr 458/11.
39. Cathy Courtney, Interview with John Roberts, National Life Story Collection: Architects’ Lives, 2002, British Library, C467/69.
40. Anthony Short, “Confessions of an Ernő employee,” *The Architects’ Journal* 203 (April 18, 1996), 24.
41. Smithsonian Archives of American Art, “Oral History interview with Denise Scott Brown, October 25, 1990–November 9, 1991” https://www.aaa.si.edu/download_pdf_transcript/ajax?record_id=edanmdm-AAADCD_oh_215692 (accessed April 9, 2024). Interestingly, Scott-Brown left Goldfinger’s to go to Denis Clark Hall where Duncan had just left, and perhaps on his recommendation.
42. Jacob Blacker, “Ernő the Geometrist,” *The Architects’ Journal* 193, no. 3 (January 16, 1991), 21.
43. RIBA, The Ernő Goldfinger Papers, GolEr/397A/1–3.
44. RIBA, The Ernő Goldfinger Papers, GolEr/269/1. Ernő Goldfinger, Letter to John Duncan, January 10, 1960.
45. Beth Duncan, interview with author, March 10, 2021, Swanbourne, WA.
46. RIBA, The Ernő Goldfinger Papers, GolEr Box 383. Ernő Goldfinger, Letter to Ian Molyneux, March 7, 1967.
47. RIBA, The Ernő Goldfinger Papers, GolEr Box 383. Ernő Goldfinger, Letter to John Duncan, March 8, 1967.
48. Letter to John Duncan, March 8, 1967.
49. John Taylor, “Kenneth Charles Duncan,” *Western Australian Architect Biographies* [https://www.taylorarchitects.com.au/Biographies/KC%20Duncan%20for%20AIA%20\(WA\).pdf](https://www.taylorarchitects.com.au/Biographies/KC%20Duncan%20for%20AIA%20(WA).pdf), accessed May 20, 2022.
50. Murray, “Brutal Beginnings.”
51. SLWAOH, Fleming, Interview with John Duncan, 1983.
52. SLWAOH, Fleming, Interview with John Duncan, 1983.
53. SLWAOH, Fleming, Interview with John Duncan, 1983.
54. See James Dunnett and Nigel Hiscock, “‘To This Measure of Man’: Proportional Design in the work of Ernő Goldfinger, in *Twentieth Century Architecture and Its Histories*, ed. Louise Campbell (Society of Architectural Historians Great Britain, 2000), 87–124.
55. Dunnett and Hiscock, “To This Measure of Man,” 102.
56. Ernő Goldfinger, “Criticism: The Architect Replies,” *The Architects’ Journal* 126, no. 3256 (July 25, 1957): 133.
57. Short, “Confessions,” 24.
58. Directory of Architects and Buildings in Western Australia 1945–1996, questionnaire, John Duncan. Private Collection, Simon Anderson.

59. See Ian Molyneux, *Looking Around Perth: A Guide to the Architecture of Perth and Surrounding Towns* (Wescolour Press, 1981), 73; Perth, SLWA, Ngal-a Mothercraft Home and Training Records box 6093a/114, Tender Letter, September 4, 1957.
60. Murray, "Brutal Beginnings," 1228.
61. Other houses by Duncan from this period that follow similar lines include the Saunders House, and Besley House, both of which were never published.
62. Frank Platell, "Architects Kept Costs Down," *The West Australian*, July 16, 1960, 19.
63. Platell, "Architects Kept Costs Down," 19.
64. Platell, "Architects Kept Costs Down," 19.
65. Julie Potts, Telephone Communication with author, February 9, 2021.
66. "Timber ceiling links living rooms," *The West Australian*, December 10, 1960, 26.
67. John Duncan, "15 Teslin Road, Mt Claremont," unpublished article, 2002, private collection, gifted to the author from Beth Duncan.
68. Whether Duncan's use of the grid was simply a rational approach to planning or aligned more with Goldfinger's interest in the grid for its systematic "control" together with a more abstract idea of "geometric harmony," linking the "human dimension" with construction logic, is unclear. See Dunnett and Hiscock, "To This Measure of Man," 111, 119.
69. Paul Walker and Justine Clark, *Looking for the Local: Architecture and the New Zealand Modern* (Victoria University Press, 2000), 80.