



Academics Geoffrey London, Simon Anderson and John White at the UWA launch of the book *An Unfinished Experiment in Living: Australian Houses 1950-65* (12 Dec 2017, John Taylor)

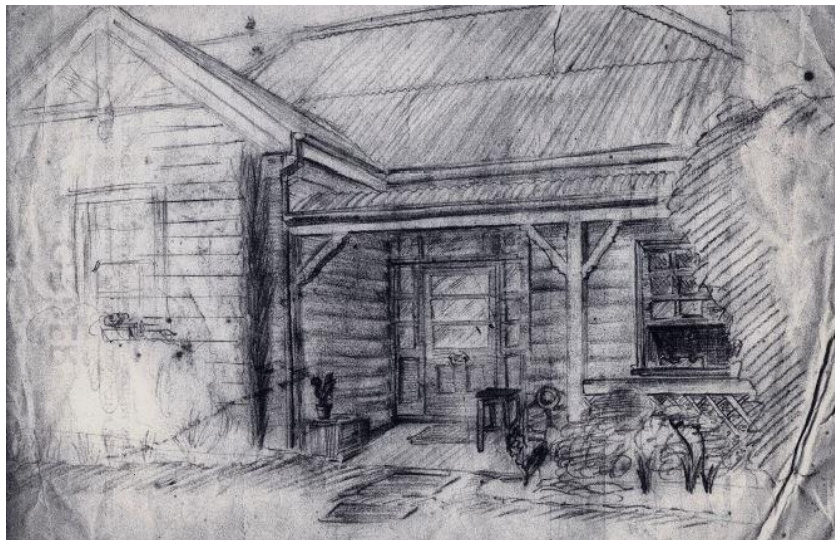
John Graham White (1927-2020) was born 24 October 1927 at Wickepin in the wheatbelt of Western Australia (WA). John was the son of Fremantle-born doctor Walter Percy White (1897-1965), who studied at Melbourne and enlisted for First World War (1914-1918) artillery service in 1916. During 1917, Percy White was asleep with other soldiers in a dugout when it was shelled, burying them. The shell-burst injured Percy's back and gave him 'shell-shock'. Discharged in 1918, he returned to Australia and completed his medical studies in Victoria, hence marrying Doris Brown at St George's Cathedral, Perth in April 1926. John's family appear to have been less affected than most by the Great Depression years of the 1930s, and he lived a comfortable childhood in the care of parents who had significant aspirations for their three sons. The Second World War (1939-1945) had an enormous effect on most lives in Australia, but again the teenager John was relatively immune to its consequences.

In much later years, John provides his recollections of this time: *At the beginning of the War, I was twelve years old, and a primary school student at Christ Church Grammar School in Claremont. We lived at that time in a large house on Canning Highway, East Fremantle, ... My father, who had remained in the military reserve after WW1, volunteered again for service, and as a doctor with military experience, took command of an army hospital constructed in South Street, Melville. The War was ten thousand miles away and we felt ourselves to be under no direct threat from it. My life as a child continued practically unaffected by it, although disasters such as the loss of the HMAS Sydney brought it much closer, ...*

When Japan entered the War my father, a commissioned officer with high - ranking connections in the military, deemed it necessary, because of the possibility of Japanese invasion, for the family to get out of the city. My parents

bought a small house in Leithdale Road, Darlington and my mother and brothers Bob and Andrew went to live there, while I remained in East Fremantle and continued to go each day to Christ Church, Claremont.

The Army soon requisitioned the large family house at East Fremantle, and the Whites never returned to it. John went to live with an aunt in Peppermint Grove until the threat from Japan lessened, and his parents then rented a weatherboard house at 42A Irvine Street, Peppermint Grove, where the family spent the next seven or eight years. From Christ Church, John transferred to Hale School in West Perth to complete his senior schooling. John described himself as a lazy student, but whilst seeking to approach a career, architect Athol Hobbs (1899-1979), a next door neighbour and one of his parents' closest friends, suggested architecture, particularly as a new course was about to begin at the Perth Technical College (PTC).



Sketch of 42A Irvine Street Peppermint Grove, drawn by John White in the late 1940s (John Taylor Architect, Heritage Assessment of 42A Irvine Street, 2019)

Prior to the Second World War, architectural students who did not receive academic training overseas or in other States, had been obliged to train in WA under a system of indenture to individual architects. The products of this system of architectural education were trained rather than educated and clearly bore the marks of the architect who trained them. During the war it could be foreseen that great demands would be placed on the building industry when peace eventuated, and in 1946 William (Bill) Robertson (with Arnold Camerer) inaugurated the first academic architectural course at PTC.

Robertson had attended meetings of the Modern Architectural Research Society (MARS) in Sydney in the early 1940s, and through him the society's philosophies had an obvious influence on the nature of the course at PTC. The war had made housing a major consideration, and a practical objective of industrialization for the Modern Movement. Robertson was also strongly oriented to construction and practical aspects, and the curriculum he organized was accordingly a very practical one.

Eighteen year old John White commenced a preliminary year at PTC in early 1946, where he and Ed Whitaker (1928-2013) joined perhaps thirty older ex-servicemen taking advantage of government assistance toward peace-time training. After being admitted to the architecture course in 1947, John was to study architecture for five years, coming strongly under the influence of Bill Robertson.



Water colour sketch by John White (*Phi*, Architectural Students of WA Assoc. 1951, p.36)

Taking one year off, John completed his studies at PTC in 1952 within a class group that included future architects of influence in Western Australia such as Gres Cohen, Alex Doepel, John Duncan, Morris Fairbrother, Jack Finney, John Lidbury, Eddie McMillan, Leslie Moon (died 1959 at just 34yo), Colin Nicholas, Dennis Silver, and Bill Waters. White would have been shocked to hear of Bill Robertson's unexpected death in March 1953, aged just 48 years.



PTC School of Architecture football team 1952 (courtesy Lidbury family)

Back: Peter Bruechle, Don Collins, Jack Finney, Bob Lyon, Ross Chisholm, Bill Weedon, Alex Doepel
 M: Arch Jones, Ron Facius, Gus Ferguson, Col Nicholas, Morris Fairbrother, Scott Thompson, Bill Angove
 Front: Eddie McMillan, Bill Waters, Bill Robertson, John Lidbury, Bob Day, Ted Cartwright

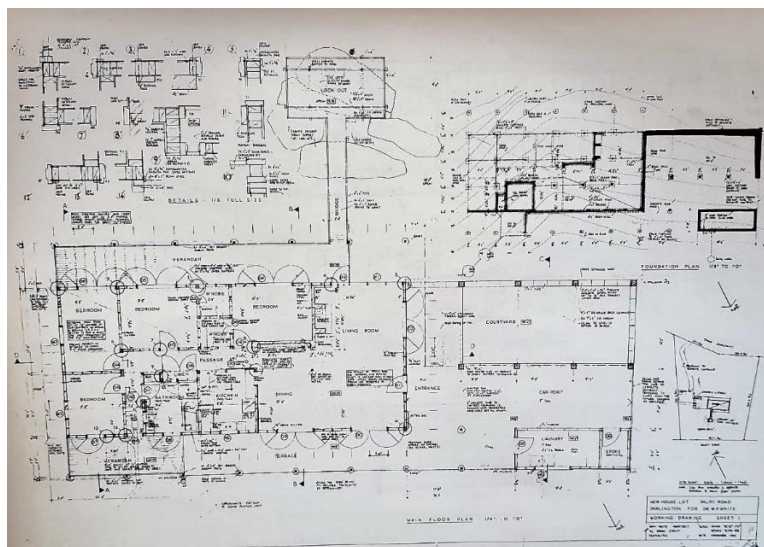
At the end of John's second year he began work with Hobbs Winning & Leighton, whose first floor office was at 104 St. Georges Terrace in Perth. After about a year there, John began looking around for more interesting work. Leaving HW&L was more difficult than just changing jobs due to the close relationship between Athol Hobbs and White's parents. When it came to the point where he had been offered a job with one of Perth's more progressive practices, Marshall Clifton and Leach, White had to negotiate a break. His parents were supportive and Athol Hobbs, though hurt by the decision, was helpful to John in later times.

Through the Hobbs family, John became involved with sailing at Royal Freshwater Bay Yacht Club, and from there he sailed in cadet dinghies with Athol's son Michael, before going into skiffs at Mounts Bay Yacht Club. Athol owned the twenty-two foot plum-to-stem-and-stern gaff-rigged yacht *Hermes* in which Percy White sailed as crew, and the beautiful varnished powerboat *Nereid*, which was the official club tender for races and had belonged to his famous architect-soldier father, Sir J.J. Talbot Hobbs (1864-1938).

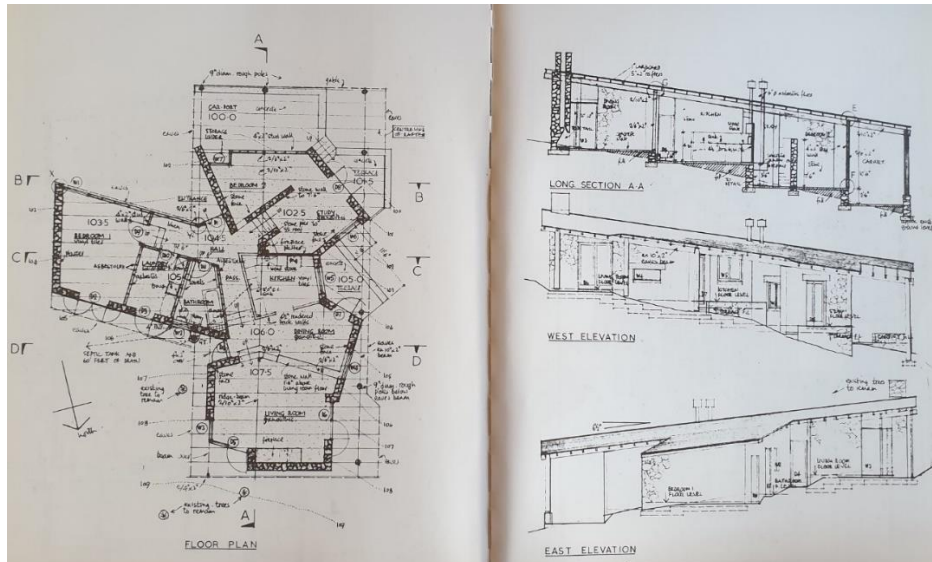
Clifton and Leach was a very different type of practice, and White considered Eric Leach to be a brilliant designer. The older established firms such as HW&L had large corporate clients from pre-war years, leaving smaller practices to get by on domestic work and smaller commercial projects. Such was the case with Clifton and Leach, which was the sort of work with which White wanted to become involved. Working with his close friend and fellow student Ed McMillan, John quickly became a good draftsman, absorbing the office design ethic, and before he left the firm to go overseas, had been given the opportunity to design houses, produce full documentation for them and see them built, which he considered an immense privilege.

John finished at PTC at the end of 1952, graduating with an Associateship in Architecture, and stayed on with Clifton and Leach until he left for Europe with his two friends and fellow students, John Duncan and Ray Leunig, in March 1953, arriving at Naples in April at the start of their 'Grand Tour'. For a time in London they shared a residence at Earls Court with Ed Whitaker. John arrived back in Australia in late 1955, having travelled by motorcycle from England to Ceylon, accompanied by another fellow PTC graduate Alexander (Lex) Hill.

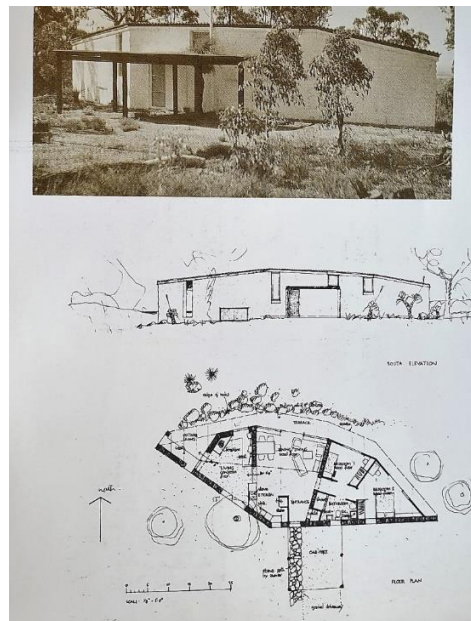
With local and overseas experience in hand, the next step in John's career as an architect began in 1955, back in Perth. White was important in the development and building of houses using new practices sympathetic to climate and spatial location. He adopted designs incorporating indoor/outdoor designs commonly seen in WA housing today.



Dr W.P. White house at Dalry Road Darlington of 1962 (*Modern Houses*, p.77)



Page Smith House Kalamunda of 1964 (*Modern Houses*, p.92)



Sawday House Gooseberry Hill of 1965 (*Modern Houses*, p.97)

John first taught architecture at PTC, before the course morphed into the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), and then Curtin University. White moved from WAIT to commence lecturing at the University of Western Australia (UWA) School of Architecture from 1968, in what was a fledgling architectural course, becoming a senior lecturer from 1973. He was Dean of the School as early as 1972, and served terms as Head of Department between 1973-1986. John had been researching the history of architecture in WA, and, with Margaret Pitt Morison (1900-1985), co-edited *Western Towns and Buildings* in 1979, a definitive text on architecture and planning in the State.

At UWA, John also taught the history of architecture, local and international. A former student of White, and later fellow-UWA academic Geoffrey London noted in an address following White's passing that *"John was a reluctant but effective Head of the School from 1980-86 – they were difficult years at the University and John was a real fighter for the discipline. John kept the School going through his strong commitment to it and his colleagues, his very apparent integrity, and a tenacious, calm manner. He was an honourable man."*

John was instrumental in the provision of a new building for the UWA School of Architecture at Crawley, although this was soon to be relinquished in favour of a 'remote' Nedlands campus, and he finished at UWA in 1988, beginning a quieter career post-university. Wearied by fighting a developer at their North Fremantle property, the Whites moved to Gingin, where John enjoyed being the sole architect in a small country town, having some influence on local planning and development. Maintaining his ties with UWA, John was still involved in some student projects, working with Geoffrey London, Simon Anderson and a team of students to survey the bush-build architecture of a coastal WA holiday camp at Sandy Cape, near Jurien Bay. White was pleased that his academic colleague (and former student) in Anderson was responsible for the design of the Gravity Discovery Centre at Gingin. Eventually the Gingin property became too large an upkeep, and the Whites relocated to Bunbury.

John White and Penny Hanrahan were married in 1956, he later remarried, to Anne Lefroy. John died following a fall at his home in Bunbury on 3 February 2020, aged 92 years. A notice in *The West Australian* newspaper of 5 February 2020 (p.71) recorded: *'Beloved husband of Anne, father of Bill, Celia, and step-father to Digby and Buffy. Architect, academic historian, Sailor. A man for all seasons. He will be sadly missed by all who knew him. In accordance with John's wishes a private cremation will be held.'*

Geoffrey London's astute recollections of John White's character will resonate with those who knew the man: *"He appeared, at first, to be taciturn – something we came to recognise as an engaging shyness, but with a wry sense of humour, and an infectious laugh. He was a warm, gentle man, civilised and humble – an architect down to his bootlaces – which were invariably tied into his signature beige [tan?] suede desert boots."*

John's introverted nature meant that he would be the last to lay claim to having been of influence, however his body of housing work, and significant longevity in the teaching (enthusiastically) and administration (reluctantly) of architecture in WA during the second half of the Twentieth Century marks him as a highly important member of the profession in the State. This recognition parallels the great affection and respect held for him by the many architectural staff and students who were fortunate to enjoy a portion of his tremendous contributions. The work of White and fellow PTC students of 1946-1967 is likely to be the subject of greater analysis in the near future.

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