



**John Duncan**  
(AIA WA)

**John Kenneth Duncan** (1928-2005) was born 17 January 1928 at Hopetoun Street, South Perth, the son of Kenneth Charles and Helen Jean Duncan. John's father Ken (1898-1983) was a locally-born architect, first commencing private practice in 1921, then later in partnership with Cyril James Stephen (1893-1974) from 1940. Duncan & Stephen were joined in practice by John Duart Mercer (1923-1988) in 1948, with the firm then known as Duncan Stephen & Mercer (DSM). John Duncan entered the practice from 1956, and Ron Bodycoat joined in 1979, carrying DSM into the 1990s.

John Duncan had attended Wesley College in South Perth from 1940 to 1944, then moving on to complete a Bachelor in Engineering Degree at the University of Western Australia in 1949, and an Associate in Architecture at Perth Technical College in 1952. His final three years of study were part-time, also working in the office of DSM. Duncan obtained his architect registration in WA (no. 242) during December 1952, and hence spent three years away from Australia, including time in Italy, Scandinavia, Poland and the United Kingdom.

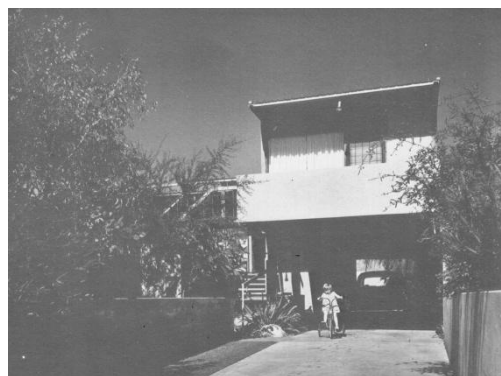
Whilst in Britain, John gained experience in the offices of a number of influential Modernist architects. In the latter half of 1953 he was an assistant at the London office of the renowned Dennis Clarke Hall, in the first half of 1954 he was employed by Bazeley & Barbary in Penzance, before 16 months at Ernő Goldfinger's practice in London through to December of 1955. The Hungarian-born Goldfinger was known as a humourless man given to notorious rages, and Duncan noted that his employment time was "a record for Ernő's office"!

Upon his return from overseas in 1956, John was made a partner at DSM. He brought the Modernist architectural approach of the 1950s into the work of the practice, illustrated by his work as designer and partner in charge for the construction of Ngal-a at South Perth, a mothercraft nursing home and training centre finished in 1959. Ngal-a utilised a 2 and 3 storey exposed steel frame system with precast suspended floors, infill windows and wall panels. Architectural historian Ian Molyneux described this work as: “One of the better and least ostentatious of the Modern Movement buildings. Its elegance and liveliness are derived from reduction of construction to essentials.”



Ngal-a at South Perth, a John Duncan designed mothercraft nursing home and training centre finished in 1959. (*Looking Around Perth*, p.73)

John’s own family home at 15 Teslin Road in Mount Claremont was completed in 1963, and he noted that it was the runner up in the ‘Home of the Year’ award. *Western Towns and Buildings* states that it “has the qualities of delicacy and light simplicity, and derives from the constructional technique of precast concrete wall panels bolted to a steel frame. Domestic, human qualities are thereby achieved within a rationalistic, systematised construction approach.”



John Duncan’s family residence at 15 Teslin Road Mount Claremont, completed in 1963. (*Western Towns and Buildings*, p.150)



Soil Science Building of 1968 at University of Western Australia, Crawley. (John Taylor 2019)

Duncan recorded that some of his own more personal projects included the 1968 design of the Soil Science Building (with Gordon Stephenson) at the University of Western Australia campus in Crawley; an ANZ Bank branch at Railway Terrace Rockingham in 1973; fire stations at South Hedland c.1974 and Phillimore Street Fremantle in 1976; and the Trinity Arcade development at Perth in 1980. Ron Bodycoat noted in an obituary for his business partner that: “It is the design excellence in these projects that demonstrates the professional skill of John as architect and engineer”. Within these schemes John Duncan mentored a number of younger design architects working under his direction who were to become skilled practitioners in their own right, including Alan Stoney, Phil Faigen and Bernard Seeber.



Fire Station at Phillimore Street Fremantle of 1976. (Google 2019)

President of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (WA) 1972-74, John Duncan was a national councillor for the RAlA during 1979-85. He maintained 'a long and at times tenacious presence' on the Institute's Practice Committee, By-Laws and Regulations Committee, and the Fees Committee. Duncan retired from practice in 1993, but continued to provide expert advice as an arbitrator, and opinions on a wide range of issues of disputation.

John was the inaugural winner of the Architects Board of Western Australia Award in 1982, recognising amongst other things his 'special endeavours outside of those which would be considered the normal business activities of an architect.' With a tremendous record of community service, with many other contributions he was a Board Member of the Silver Chain Nursing Association from 1984.

John married Beth Walton Blair in 1956, and they raised three children. A long and valued contributor to architectural practice in Australia, John Duncan died 4 August 2005 at Mount Claremont, aged 77 years. His life, community service and extensive portfolio of projects would make a fine subject for further research at tertiary level, perhaps in tandem with his father's work.

References:

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Auto-biographical details of J.K. Duncan; and funeral obituary delivered August 2005 by Ronald Bodycoat; courtesy Ronald Bodycoat 2013.

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Heritage Committee meeting approval date: 25 June 2019 Last updated: 25 June 2019

**Citation details:**

Taylor, Dr John J., 'John Kenneth Duncan (1928-2005)', *Western Australian Architect Biographies*, <http://www.architecture.com.au/> accessed DATE.