



Lex Hill at left, Peter Parkinson at right (*The Architect*, 05 of 2002, p.3)

**Alfred Alexander (Lex) Whitely Hill** (1923-2002) was born 25 July 1923 at Belfast in Ireland, the only child of Alfred Edwin and Kathleen Hill. Alfred was the manager of the *Belfast Newsletter*, thought to be the oldest English-language newspaper still published today. Lex's initial schooling was undertaken at Campbell College in Belfast. He enlisted for Second World War (1939-1945) service in the Royal Navy, and was discharged in Hong Kong. In 1948 he travelled via Queensland to Western Australia, where he had family connections with an orchard at Kalamunda. His parents followed later.

Lex Hill studied at Perth Technical College (PTC) from 1949 and completed his Associateship in Architecture in 1953 with Warwick Broomfield, Ted Cartwright, Ross Chisholm, Bob Day, Ray Durbridge, Bob Lyon, Fred Warren and Jim Wilkinson. Lex was working with Powell Cameron & Chisholm, and registered with the Architects Board of WA (no. 266) in February 1954.

With the PTC architecture course only commencing after the Second World War (1939-1945), in the first three PTC graduating years (1950-1952) preceding Lex's class there had been just 23 graduates, and he soon joined a fair number of these young architects who travelled to gain further architectural and worldly experience, living as 'ex-pats' overseas in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. These colleagues included 1950 graduates Stuart Coll, Gil Nicol, Alan Shepherd, Geoff Summerhayes; 1951 graduate Ed Whitaker; 1952 graduates John Duncan, Ray Leunig, John Lidbury, John White; and fellow 1953 graduate Ross Chisholm.

In December 1953, Lex met Barbara Helen Miller at the annual 'T-Square Ball'. Barbara had attended as a friend of John Lidbury, and the precocious Hill soon asked Lidbury for her phone number. The two began a relationship, and with Lex travelling by Piraeus in Greece and then through Italy in 1954, he arranged to meet Barbara, already in Venice, where he proposed. Lex soon gained work in London and by the middle of 1954, there were at least ten former PTC students living and working together there.



Photo of Lex and Barbara Hill on their Vespa scooter in 1955 (taken by their friend David Moore 1927-2003, the renowned Australian photojournalist)

Lex and Barbara married in England on 23 April 1955, and they soon departed London in company with John White. With the Hills together on a Vespa and White on his BSA, the group took three months to drive to Colombo, before arriving back in Perth in September 1955. Lex soon commenced work with the progressive architectural office Hawkins & Sands. Meanwhile, Duncan, Lidbury and Chisholm sailed home together aboard the *SS Southern Cross*, leaving Southampton in December 1955 and arriving back in WA during January 1956.

Following their return, John Duncan, John White and Lex Hill jointly became the new editors of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects WA Chapter journal, *The Architect*, taking over from the retiring editor Desmond Sands. This was not the trio's first editorial role, as with other staff Jack Finney, Alan Hutton, Tony Brand and Peter Grigg, they had previously put together the final issue of *Phi*, the magazine of the Architectural Students Association of Western Australia, published in January 1953.

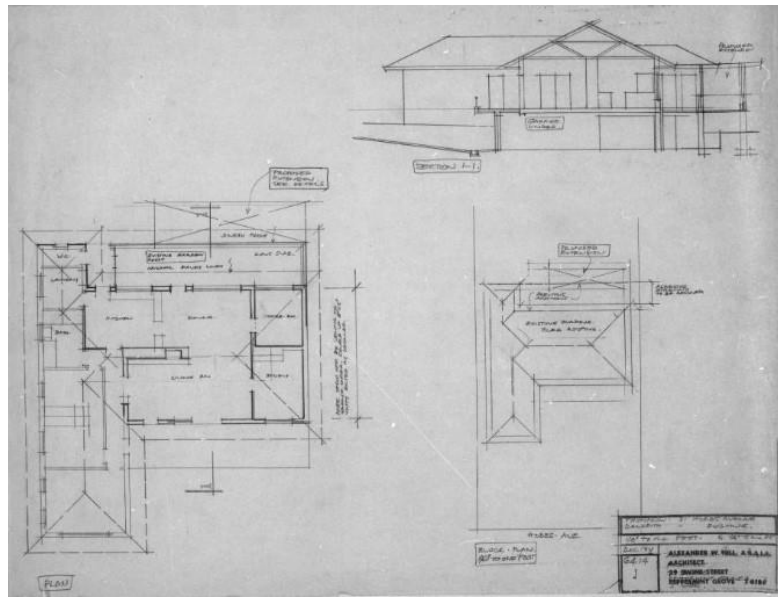
The first issue of *The Architect* that Duncan, White and Hill edited was published in March 1956. In their introductory editorial, the trio clarified their intentions for the journal's future: '*Not enough contentious matter is allowed to rise to the surface to animate our Architects [...] we are living in a changing world — a world in which the status and working of an Architect cannot remain static*'.

In February 1956 Lex and Barbara Hill, together with Lex's parents, opened a basement coffee shop in Howard Street Perth, assisted by recent PTC graduate Bill Weedon (and his later wife Judy). The premises were modelled on the new London coffee shops that the couple had experienced during their time in England. Owing to its connection to Lex and its convenient location near PTC, the 'Shiralee' soon became a notable gathering space for the city's architects and students. This relationship was cemented when it was decided that an architects' Christmas pantomime should be staged there each year; this saw the coffee shop temporarily transformed into the Shiralee Playhouse.

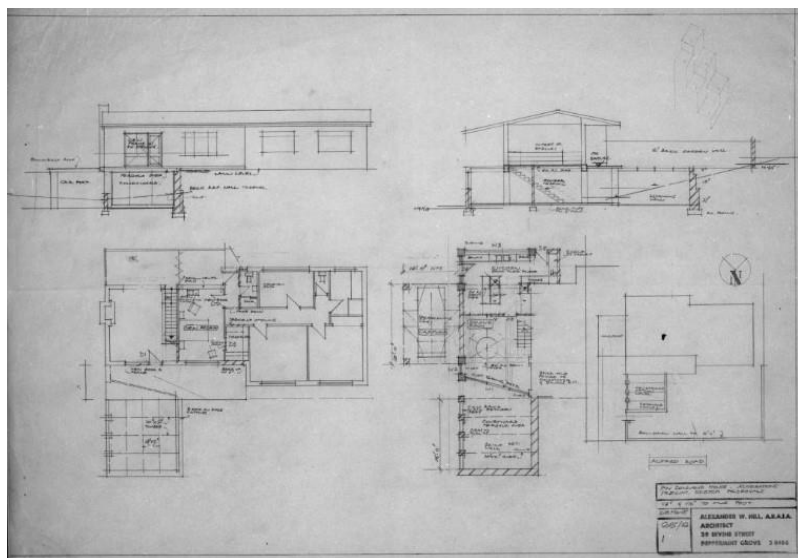
The pantomime was the brainchild of Lex and Peter Parkinson (1925-2014), with Parkinson writing and directing the productions under his alter-ego Sir Benjamin Buzzard, and Hill as Sir Henry Striving. Parkinson had been trained in London before immigrating to Australia in 1952, hence finding work at Hawkins & Sands, where he was to remain for 13 years. It was there that Lex met the more effusive but similarly-minded Parkinson, and the idea of the pantomime was hatched. Staged over a two-week period, the Shiralee pantomimes were lively events, whose cast comprised local architects, including Duncan and White, along with artists and their friends who were roped in to play music, serve food, and act as ushers. Unlike typical architectural revues, these were public affairs that attracted a diverse crowd who witnessed the festivities and reviewed them in local newspapers.

Lex also worked with Ean McDonald and Ed Whitaker for a period in the 1950s, and moved his young family to Kuching, Sarawak in 1958, where he practiced for the British Colonial Service, designing various premises including schools, hospitals and office blocks. The adventurous Hill family returned to WA in 1961 via Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan and Melbourne, eventually crossing the Nullarbor in a Volkswagen campervan.

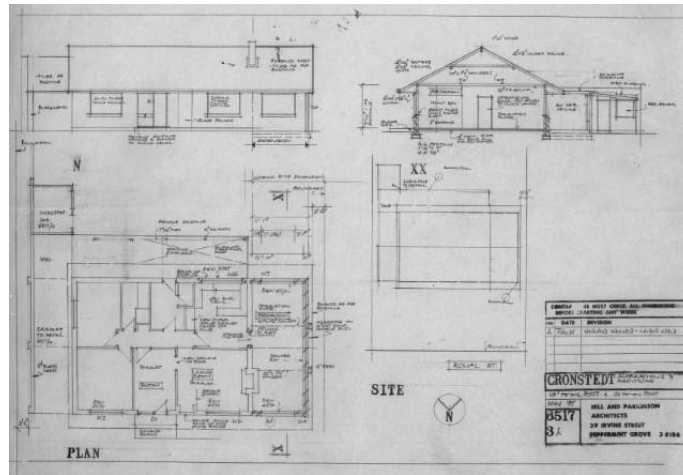
Following their return to Perth, Lex and Barbara Hill purchased a house at 39 Irvine Street Peppermint Grove, and he ran his small practice from the home. With the serious car accident to Desmond Sands in 1963 and the turmoil in the office that followed this unfortunate event, his office gradually disintegrated. Peter Parkinson left Hawkins & Sands and worked briefly at Howlett & Bailey in 1965, before joining in a practice with Lex Hill that carried through until 1979, when Ian G. Harris was taken into partnership and the company name changed to Hill Parkinson & Harris.



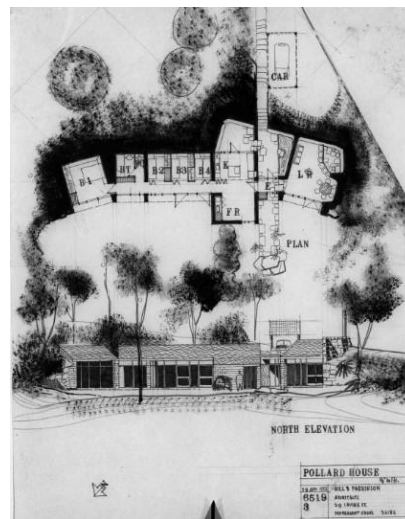
1964-65 Proposed extensions to 31 Hobbs Avenue, Dalkeith for Hugh Thomson - by Alexander W. Hill ARAIA Architect, 39 Irvine Street Peppermint Grove (SLWA394021PD)



1965 House alteration plans for Ian and Audrey Dowland, 134 Alfred Road, Mt Claremont - by Alexander W. Hill ARAIA Architect, 39 Irvine Street Peppermint Grove (SLWA394053PD)



1965 house alterations and additions for H. Cronstedt, 208 Royal Street, Yokine – perhaps the first project by Hill & Parkinson of 39 Irvine Street Peppermint Grove - earlier drawings of this project carry Hill's name only (SLWA394062PD)



1965 House plans for David and Doris Pollard at 13 Vernallan Way, Lesmurdie - by Hill & Parkinson of 39 Irvine Street Peppermint Grove (SLWA394077PD)

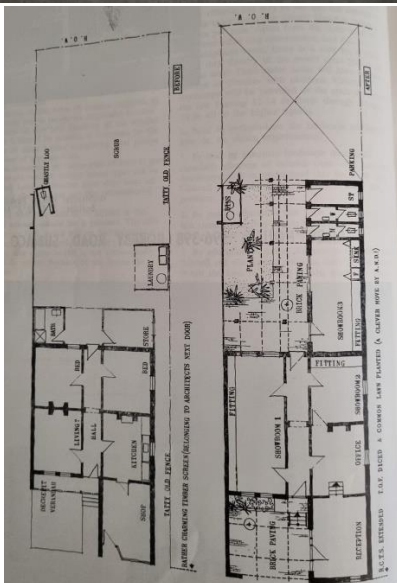
With respect to the formation of the business partnership, Parkinson later noted with characteristic wry humour that *“Lex and I, with the help of some family money and an (for those days) enormous commission (\$300,000), hung our shingle in a converted carport [at 39 Irvine Street Peppermint Grove] and set out to astonish the world. I suppose we did, in a way. We always said that we became partners on the basis that each thought the other had a keen business sense. By the time we discovered that neither of us had, it was too late, but apart from the lack of Mercedes it didn’t really show. Between us, however, we had contacts, and we built lots of houses for doctors and university people, and of course we had the two university theatres and diverse other commercial buildings ...”*

With the support of much lobbying from Parkinson's co-theatrical admirers, the University of Western Australia (UWA) announced in 1965 that he had won the commission to design their new lecture theatre, and his parallel vocation helped him gain future prominence as a theatre architect. With the UWA commission secured, he was able to bring this project into the new practice.



"The most exciting new theatre building in Australia."  
Katherine Bellamy, *The Australian*, 6.2.69.

The Octagon Theatre at the University of Western Australia was opened in 1969.  
(*'Peter Parkinson Theatre Architecture'*, p.6)



Before, after and current photos and plans illustrating Hill & Parkinson work in 1968 at 396  
Rokeby Road Subiaco (*The Architect*, March 1968, p.47; Google 2022)

Hill & Parkinson developed a thrust stage concept for the UWA project into the final form that was opened in 1969 as the Octagon Theatre, winning a Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) Bronze Medal Citation that year. The demand for theatre designs in WA is necessarily infrequent, and it was not until 1973 that Hill & Parkinson was asked by UWA to design a replacement for the old Dolphin Theatre. In the years between the Octagon and Dolphin schemes, they had established a reputation for quality residential designs.

Parkinson wrote of his recollections of working with Lex in *The Architect*: *'We had a huge country house near Esperance to build [Barbara Hill notes this project was at Neds Corner] and we started off by hiring a plane and pilot for the inspection trips. Lex said one afternoon "Bugger this, I'm going to learn to fly". And he did. ... He owned a yacht, the Tehana, acquired from John Plunkett, the builder who built it himself, and sailed regularly with Peter Packer, who also became a valued client. His hospitality was legendary, both at home and in the office. One season we set up a party in the 'Maj' for all our clients and consultants together with the cast and crew of the current show ... and took over the Circle Bar, after filling half the Circle with a built-in audience.'*

In 1971 they won a Clay Brick Award for the Little House at Applecross. The Dolphin Theatre, and the Music & Drama complex developed with the Public Works Department at the Churchlands campus of the Western Australian College of Advanced Education (WACAE) occupied the practice in 1974-76.



The New Dolphin Theatre at the University of Western Australia was opened in 1976.  
(*'Peter Parkinson Theatre Architecture'*, p.13)

The Hayman Theatre at the West Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) was completed early in 1978, and Hill & Parkinson then worked on an unrealised scheme for a campus theatre space at Murdoch University. The practice was

commissioned in 1977 to design the Queens Park Theatre at Geraldton. But the project for which Hill & Parkinson (particularly the effervescent Parkinson) is best remembered is the recycling of His Majesty's Theatre for the State Government during 1977-1980.



His Majesty's Theatre on the corner Hay and King Streets in Perth was first completed in 1904 to the design of William Wolf, and re-opened in May of 1980. (Wikipedia 2019)

Following a flat period after the works on His Majesty's Theatre had been completed, the Hill Parkinson & Harris business was dissolved by mutual agreement in January 1981. Approaching his 60s, Lex undertook smaller projects again, and retired around 1990. Lex and Barbara had four children Simon (1956) Selina (1957) Peter (1959) and Lucinda (1963). Lex and Barbara moved to Albany in 1992, and he died there on 3 October 2002.

#### References:

Lex Hill, 'Furniture: The Modern Style', *Phi*, ASAWA, 1953, pp.22-23.

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Pers. comms. Anna-Lucinda Baxter (granddaughter), 15 December 2021, 15 June 2022.

Pers. comm. Barbara Hill, 15 June 2022.

Contributing author: John Taylor

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