



Gil Nicol (*The Architect*, Nov 2010, p.5)

Gilbert Ridgway Nicol (1925-2010) was born 15 December 1925 at Eddington Private Hospital in Wasley Street, North Perth, the son of accountant Lindsay Ridgway Nicol and his wife Veda Kate (Flanders), who married at St George's Cathedral Perth in 1924. Lindsay Nicol had in 1917 enlisted as a gunner in the Australian Imperial Forces, serving on the Western Front during the First World War (1914-1918), returning safely to Western Australia in 1919, and in time becoming the chief financial officer for the local clothing firm Roland Smith and Co. The Nicols were to live at 7 Woodsome Street in Mount Lawley from around 1925 onward.

'Gil' Nicol graduated from Wesley College, and initially went to the University of Western Australia to study engineering, however Second World War (1939-1945) service interrupted this endeavor. Following his eighteenth birthday, Gil joined the Royal Australian Air Force for training in Canada. Fortunately the war ended before he was required to see action. With hostilities over, Nicol capitalised on government-sponsored education opportunities for returned servicemen, and with 'Commonwealth Reconstruction Trainee' assistance, elected to enrol in the newly-founded (1946) five year architecture course at Perth Technical College (PTC).

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. But as has been elucidated by Geoffrey London and Duncan Richards in the late twentieth-century study *Modern Houses*, the major post-war architectural style inspiration on the west coast of Australia was derived from British (particularly London) and Continental sources, leading to a regionally distinctive form of architectural modernism.

During his studies, Gil also worked for the architectural firm Powell, Cameron and Chisholm. Vice-President of the Architectural Students Association in 1949 and its Treasurer in 1950, Nicol was the winner of the prestigious E.G. Cohen Medal of 1950. The results of the annual examinations for the associateship course at PTC were announced in *The West Australian* newspaper in mid-December 1950, and the very first graduates of the course were feted by their colleagues as the 'magnificent seven'. Stuart Coll, Vin Davies, John Hallam, Gil Nicol, Alan Shepherd, Ray Strauss and Geoff Summerhayes had passed the final four units of the course. Gil soon celebrated completion of his final exams with marriage to Elenor Beresford ('Berry') Blake at St George's Cathedral Perth in December 1950, and embarked to work in England soon after. He was registered as an architect with the Architects Board of WA during February 1951 (reg. no. 216) in concert with his fellow PTC graduates: Davies 215, Shepherd 217, Summerhayes 218, Hallam 219, Strauss 220, and Coll 221.



Gil Nicol married Elenor (Berry) Blake at St George's Cathedral in Perth (*The West Australian*, 21 December 1950, p.30)

In London, Nicol worked for one of the most prominent modernist architectural firms of Post-War Britain, Yorke Rosenberg Mardall (YRM), and was able to enjoy acting as the best man at his fellow graduate Alan 'Shorty' Shepherd's wedding in London during September 1951. Whilst at YRM, Nicol developed a close working relationship with founding partner, Eugene Rosenberg (1907-1990), an architect who had worked with Le Corbusier. The young Nicol was invigorated by the International flavour of the firm which occasionally attracted social and professional interactions with architectural luminaries such as Walter Gropius, Jose Luis Sert and Marcel Breuer. Returning to Perth, Nicol became a partner with Powell, Cameron and Chisholm; hence known as Cameron, Chisholm and Nicol from August 1952.

Powell, Cameron & Chisholm had evolved from a practice initially founded in the nineteenth century. Oswald Chisholm (1903-1989) had become a partner in 1930, followed in turn by Ken Cameron (1909-1967) – son of Alex Cameron (1878-1961) - in 1934. By the time the 26 year old Nicol joined as a partner, Thomas Powell (1864-1946) had passed away, Alex Cameron had retired in 1949, and the senior partners were 49 year old 'Ossie' Chisholm and 42 year old Ken Cameron. Ossie's son Ross Chisholm (1931-1998) was made a partner in 1958, and became a long standing collaborator with Nicol. Gil was an influential partner in the commercially successful firm that would make a significant contribution to architecture in Australia during the second half of the twentieth century, with the business continuing into the twenty-first century.



RAC Adelaide Terrace Perth (*The West Australian*, 17 April 1954, p.8; SLWA 114297PD)

Gil's 'modern' influence was soon evident in the design style of Cameron, Chisholm and Nicol (CC&N) through the 1950s. A new administrative block for the Royal Automobile Club costing over £50 000 was erected in front of the club's existing premises at Adelaide-Terrace in Perth during 1954. The "functionally designed" building was constructed of brick, concrete and glass; with major emphasis given to lighting, sun-screening and ventilation.

Opened in late 1954, one of the biggest factories to have been built since the Second World War was completed for Lewis Berger and Sons Pty Ltd in Scarborough Beach Road, Osborne Park. A warehouse, amenities and administrative block was designed by CC&N to stand on nearly 7 acres of land, and cost around £70 000. Modern design principles with sun-screening and orientation are also evident in this project.



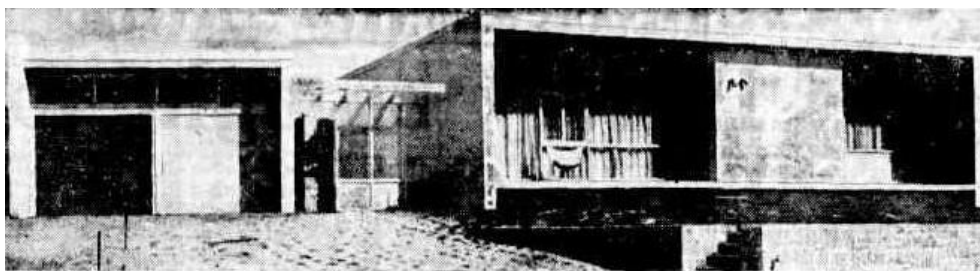
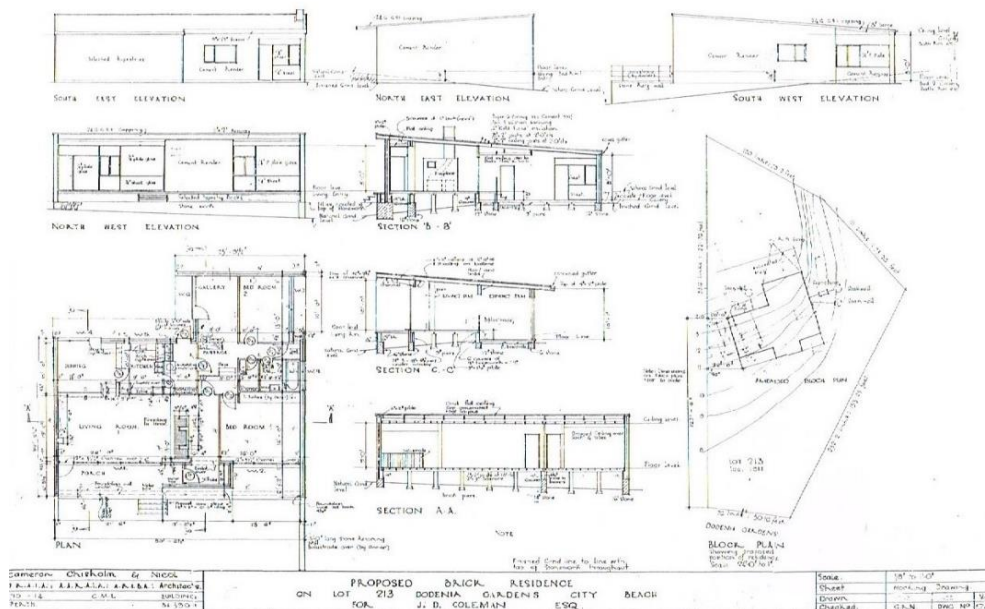
Admin block at Berger complex in Scarborough Beach Road, Osborne Park (SLWA 237,644PD)

Another large project of 1954 was the £80 000 show-room and service department designed for Wentworth Motors in Stirling Highway, Claremont. The building had an extensive floor area, with the showroom having frontage to the highway, and service department accessed from Loch Street.



Wentworth Motors being built at 201 Stirling Highway Claremont in 1954, and extant in 2020 (SLWA 237445PD, Google 2020)

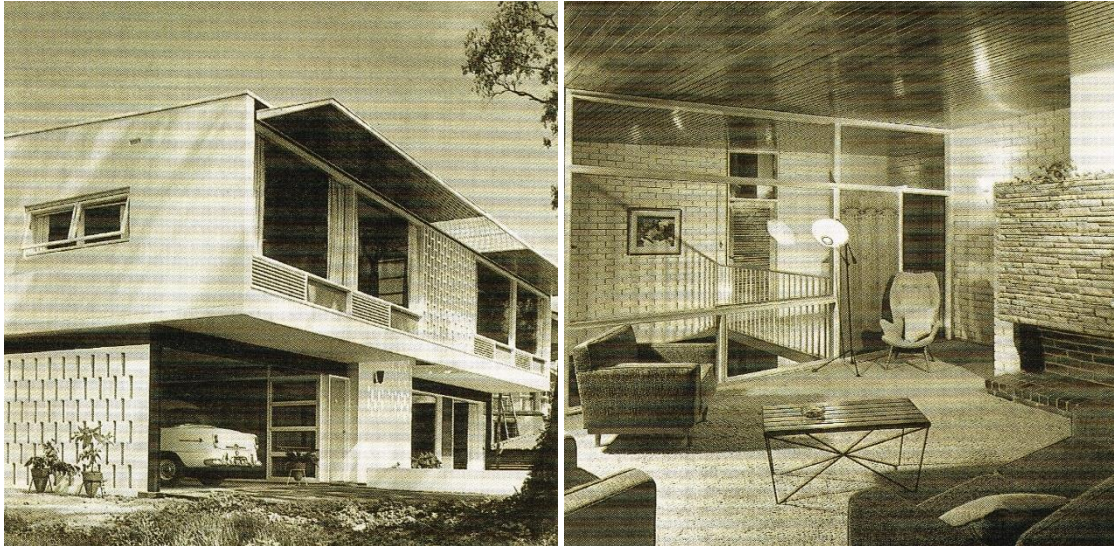
By 1953, Nicol was also bringing the new modern design ethos to domestic projects undertaken by CC&N. The residence for his sister Donna and brother-in-law John Coleman at Dodonia Gardens, City Beach was designed by Nicol and lauded for its innovative methods of reducing cost by a local writer: ‘How a contemporary home, although smaller than those of former days, can achieve a feeling of spaciousness by good planning is shown in the house illustrated ... Where today's high building costs force smaller rooms, careful planning is essential to avoid tiny boxlike rooms. But good designers can achieve a feeling of spaciousness and dignity in a limited area. One method used in this home was by erecting built-in furniture instead of internal walls.’



Front view of this striking City Beach home.

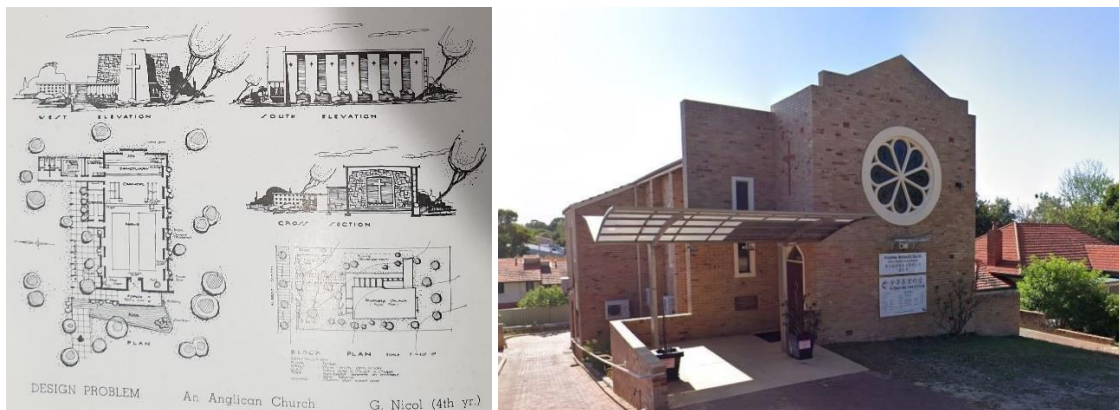
The CC&N designed Coleman Residence of 1953-54 at Dodonia Gardens in City Beach (drawing in *Modern Houses*, p.41; photo in *Sunday Times*, 30 January 1955, p.28).

The Nicol home at South Perth was another example of the evolving Perth-based architect designs of the 1950s that ‘proposed an innovative response to social, economic and climatic conditions while embracing the technological and egalitarian aspirations of modern architecture’.



Nicol residence of 1954 at South Perth (*Modern Houses*, p.44).

Built in 1955, the CC&N designed St Paul's Presbyterian Church at Nedlands, was erected in front of an existing church. Nicol had completed a design for an Anglican Church whilst a student at PTC in 1949, and his influence on the design of St Paul's is evident. Costing £14 000, the church at Kingsway was designed to seat around 200 people, and later became a Methodist Church.

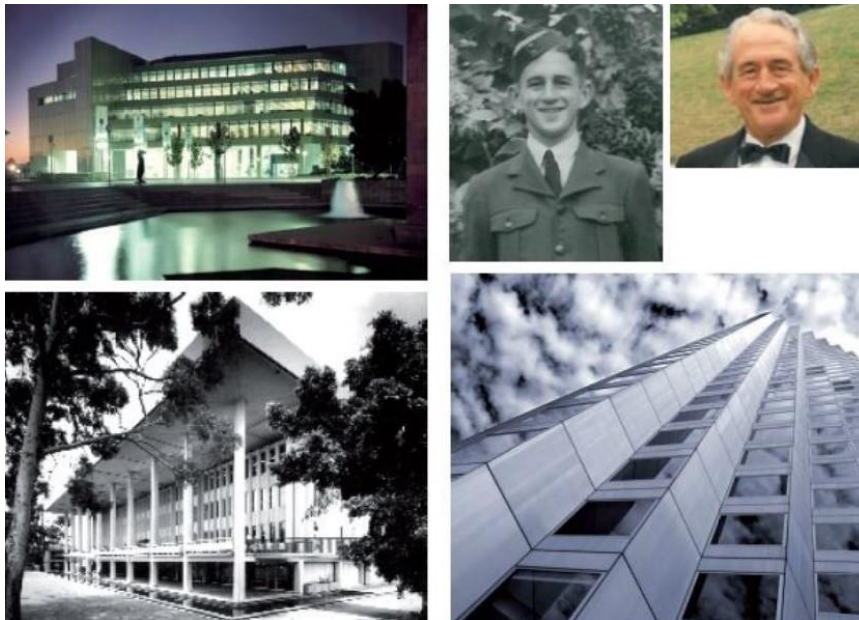


Nicol's student design of an Anglican Church from 1949 (*Phi*, 1950, p.43); and the CC&N designed St Paul's Church of 1955 at 38 Kingsway Nedlands (Google 2020)

The younger partners at CC&N in Nicol and Ross Chisholm soon asserted their directional influence on the practice, with the added input of Jim Wilkinson (1929-2020) from the 1960s. In 1963 Gil was awarded fellowship and in 1971 life fellowship of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA). Individual buildings that bear Nicol's particular stamp, and which have received the highest state and national RAIA awards, include the Reid Library at the University of Western Australia, Allendale Square, the Wesfarmers Building, the

Metropolitan Water Centre and the Alexander Library Building within the Perth Cultural Centre. A further honour for his outstanding contribution to architecture was the award of the RAIAs Gold Medal in 1983, shared with Ross Chisholm.

CC&N gradually assimilated a number of new leaders into the practice through the 1970s and 1980s, including Bill Weedon, Laurie Fuhrmann, John Koivisto, Ian Watson, Gerry Bosich and Eddy Goodfellow. An interview following the Gold Medal award shows Gil's modesty and recognition of a team contribution: *"... but bear in mind it's the calibre of the other guys in the office that is just as important as the two people. In many ways winning an award such as the Gold Medal carries a certain amount of embarrassment because you know that the credit should go all the way around, there is no doubt about that."*



Alexander Library Building (1985); Gil in 1940s uniform and in later years; Reid Library (1964); and Allendale Square (1976) in *St George's Terrace Perth (The Architect, Nov 2010, p.5)*.

Gil's first marriage was dissolved in 1973, and in 1984 he married architect Jenny Shannon. Following Gil's retirement in 1986, they enjoyed travel in Queensland while developing an interest in stud cattle. Back in WA, Springfield Farm was purchased near Yallingup. Fifty acres of vineyard were developed, fringed with avenues of poplars, surrounding a unique, playful farmhouse. Gil and Jenny extended hospitality to visitors on an extensive deck overlooking a lake. A fruitful architectural partnership ensued, adding some twenty new buildings to the area, including the Fermoy Winery, in a distinct style which became identifiable as a benchmark of quality in the locality.



Nicol farmhouse at Commonage Road Yallingup (Jenny Nicol, 2021)

Steeped in the ideals and aesthetics of the International School of modern architecture, Gil Nicol was one of the post-war innovators of the profession in WA: well-educated, well-travelled, engaged with the spheres of business and industry, committed to community service and working with his peers in roles of professional guidance and architectural education. Gil died at Nedlands on 9 September 2010, aged 84 years, and was survived by Jenny and two children from his previous marriage, Jonathon and Annabel, and four grandchildren: Tao, Matt, Angus and Ben. Jenny established the Gil Nicol Award with the AIA (WA) for a period from 2013, providing a cash prize to a number of recipients that was utilised for travel, research or study associated with architecture.

It is important to recognise that prior to the First World War, the overwhelming majority of architects in WA had been born and trained elsewhere. This gradually changed during the Inter-War years (1919-1939), as more locally born individuals studied whilst under articulated arrangements with senior practitioners. Nicol was one of the first of the new breed of architects in WA in the highly-charged post Second World War development period. Although a few still chose to develop their skills through an article system (with Architect Board examinations), and immigration brought a small number of European refugee architects, the majority of WA architects at this time were locally born and graduates of PTC. The close association of PTC graduates of the 1950s and 1960s gave this group a strong sense of familiarity and cohesion, and many soon travelled overseas together to absorb further international developments in modern architecture. They developed distinctive local domestic and commercial styles, now gaining further study and recognition.



Nicol Design Architects produced the McKenzie farmhouse at Caves Road Yallingup in 2000, documented for construction by D'Agostino and Luff Architects (Greg Rogers, November 2011)

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Pers. comms., Jenny Nicol, Bill Weedon, January 2021.

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