

Gordon Finn (AIA - WA)

**Gordon William Finn** (1908-1998) was born in Perth on 6 January 1908, to parents Ernest William (c.1881-1960) and Matilda Ellen Finn (nee Gulbrandson, 1879-1968). The family resided at 66 Chatsworth Road Highgate Hill 1906-1910, and moved a short distance to be overlooking Hyde Park at 118 Vincent Street North Perth from 1911 to at least 1949. Gordon's sister Winifred Vosper Finn was born in 1905, and brother Arthur Edward Finn was born in 1912.

Gordon was educated at Highgate Hill State School, and then Perth Modern School from 1921 to 1925, where he was an outstanding athlete. Interviewed in the early 1990s by Kelly Rippingale to assist with the writing of a comprehensive undergraduate thesis on his architecture, Finn remembered that as a child he always wanted to build houses. After finishing at Perth Modern, his mother attempted to find a position for him in a private firm. At this time, architectural education was gained by apprenticeship and it was necessary to pay a fee to the architects to whom a person was articulated. Finn showed early signs of an economical approach to life by refusing to put his parents to this expense. Fortunately, vacancies were advertised at the Public Works Department (PWD) and Finn applied, along with schoolmate Allan Allman Gamble (1907-2001).

Gordon entered a cadetship with the PWD architectural division in 1926. He attended drawing classes at Perth Technical College when they were available, completed a compulsory five year International Correspondence School architectural course, and also attended history lectures by A.R.L. Wright. In 1929 Finn passed the examination for the architecture section of the University of Western Australia (UWA) Art Certificate (at the same time as Allan Gamble and Nancy L. Allen), and in November 1931 passed the Architects Board of Western Australia examination.

Deciding that he need to broaden his design experience, Finn travelled to London and worked in architects' offices; from July 1936 to March 1937 at Colcutt & Hamp, and April to July 1937 at Joseph Emberton Architect. Finn then travelled with Sydney friend and architect Harold Orr through Europe and Scandinavia for four months, studying and photographing contemporary buildings. The 'Tee Square Journal' of 1937 records that he was at Welch and Lander at the same time as his WA architect friends Des Sands and Mervyn Parry. Further WA architects in London at the same time included Dorothea Hancock (at Mewes & Davis), Gregory W.C. Wright (with F Jones, Haymarket), Alexander W. Bateman (at Hall-Jones & Partners), and Osborne K. Fisher (in the office of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott). Gordon again travelled in Europe for six weeks in 1938, and from November 1938 to June 1939 worked at Gordon Jeeves Architect. With the Second World War (1939-1945) looming, Gordon undertook four months further study travel in North America - spending time with Frank Lloyd Wright and others, examining the projects they had completed.

It appears Gordon may have enjoyed the company of his brother whilst overseas. In April 1939 local press noted that Arthur E. Finn had returned from the United Kingdom to WA on the *SS Otranto*. Arthur had been the Western Australian Rhodes Scholar (from Perth Modern School) of 1933, subsequently gaining his Doctor of Philosophy degree at Oxford, then attached to the explosives factory of Imperial Chemicals Industries (ICI) in Scotland for two years. He went onto Melbourne to take up a position with the ICI's Australian factory at Deer Park.

Gordon returned from the USA to Perth via Sydney and re-joined the PWD in late 1939, registering with the Architects Board of Western Australia (no.167) on 20 May 1940, hence working under principal architect A.E. 'Paddy' Clare on the PWD's reconstruction of Royal Perth Hospital from 1940, extensions to Hollywood Hospital c.1942-1943, and the Denmark Agricultural College around 1945. In January 1949 it was announced Finn had won third prize in the competition for the design of Anzac House at Sydney, earning a £600 prize. Finn's notes record that he worked with Eduard Van Mens on this design, although Van Mens is not mentioned in the press, probably because as he was not registered until 1952.



Finn's third prize design, Anzac House Sydney Competition (*Construction*, 5 January 1949, p.3)

Finn's work on the Nurses' Quarters at King Edward Memorial Hospital in the late 1940s was rewarded with the PWD gaining the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Bronze Medal in 1955. He also designed the Mount Henry Women's Home in the early 1950s, Armadale High School in the mid 1950s, the UWA Engineering School c.1956-1957, and extensions to Perth Modern School in the late 1950s; all executed in refined modernism



1947 KEMH Nurses' Quarters (A.E. Clare retirement album)



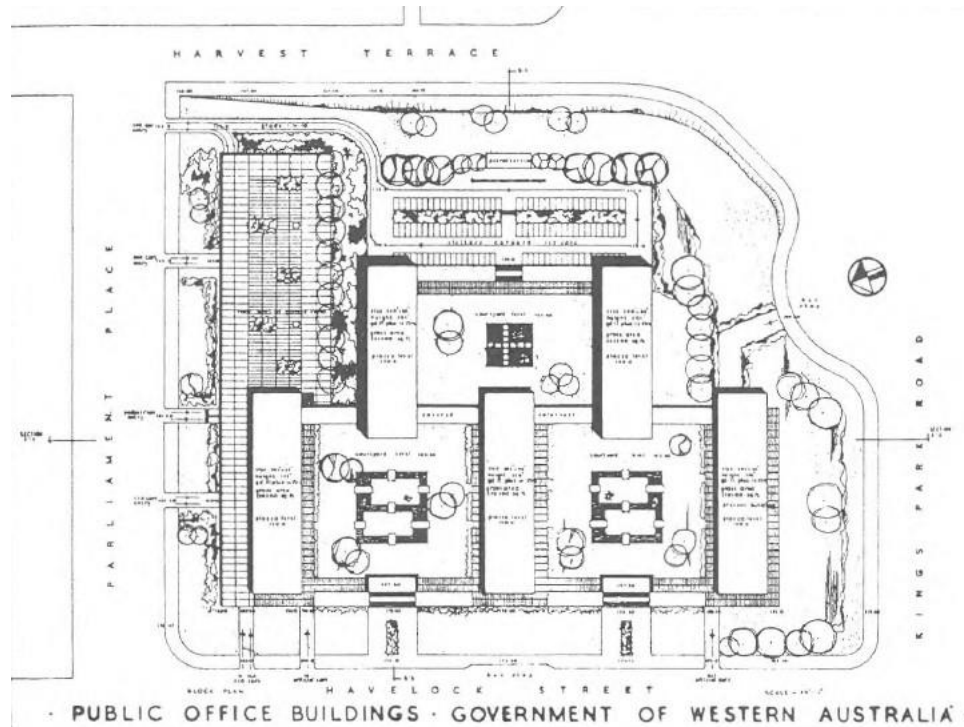
1947 Mt Henry Women's Home (A.E. Clare retirement album)



1953 Perth Modern School (A.E. Clare retirement album)

With six months long service leave, Gordon travelled extensively in 1957 through England, Europe; and then was sent by the Australian Legation to be introduced in person to the work of the South American modernists in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Venezuela - including Lucia Costa, Oscar Niemayer etc.

Eventually Gordon was placed in charge of the PWD design team. A momentous event came about when Finn, with fellow PWD architects Eduard Van Mens and Peter Maidment, won an Australia-wide competition to design the master-plan for five State Government office buildings on the Mount Eliza site at Perth. Subsequently all three architects resigned from the PWD and commenced private practice in March 1960 – continuing through to 1974, whereupon Finn worked with Hobbs Winning & Leighton as a consultant on Princess Margaret Hospital until 1981.



1960 site plan for the WA Government offices West Perth site (in K. Rippingale, 1993).



1960 original masterplan for the WA Government offices West Perth site (in H. Lewi, 2012)

Only one of the five towers envisaged in the winning design scheme was ever in fact completed. Since 1966, when it was opened by the then Premier of Western Australia, David Brand, the WA Government office building at West Perth has always accommodated government offices and civil servants of one department or another. On 24 February 1978, the Government offices building was named Dumas House in honour of Sir Russell Dumas (1887-1975) former Public Works Department Director of Works and Buildings.

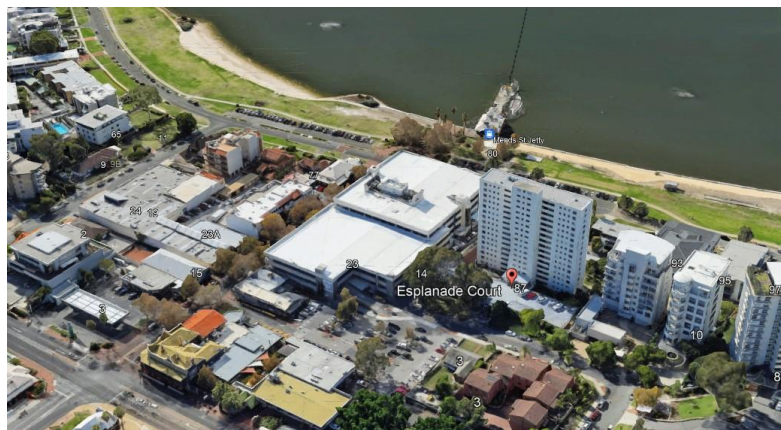


1965 the nearly finished WA Government offices (Fritz Kos SLWA 340770PD)



Dumas House with former Observatory at right (Rob Frith photo in H. Lewi, 2012)

Continuing in private practice, Finn and Maidment designed the Heathcote Hospital Administration Block in 1968, and the slender 'Esplanade Court' apartment building at 87 South Perth Esplanade for Peet and Company, completed in the late 1960s.



Esplanade Court 87 South Perth Esplanade (Google Earth June 2022)

In 1996 an exhibition of Finn's photographs taken during his study travels of 1937-1939, and 1957 was shown at the UWA architectural school, where Rippingale's wide-ranging thesis on his work may be sourced. During his career, Finn became an Associate of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) in 1943, Fellow in 1961, Life Fellow 1971, and was President of RAIA (WA) 1965-1966. As Simon Anderson so exactly cited Finn's work: *'Finn's early works show a clear fascination with the buildings he photographed, in particular those of Willem Dudok, while his mature works show a rejection of style and image in a relentless pursuit of sun and air through deployment of expansive, narrow finger planning and strict cardinal orientations, coupled with masterful dimensional control, robust material selection and prosaic detailing.'*

Gordon Finn and Betty Joan Bradshaw were married in 1965. Gordon died aged 90 years at Peppermint Grove on 9 June 1998, and Betty passed away at Claremont in 2006, aged 81.

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