

Gus Ferguson (AIA - WA)

Ronald Jack (Gus) Ferguson (1931-2024) was born 26 November 1931 at Westcourt Private Hospital in Kalgoorlie, son of John William and Dorathea Bella Venters (nee McLaren) Ferguson, who had married at Kalgoorlie in 1929. Father and son were known as “Gus”, shortened from the surname. Gus senior was a woodwork instructor who, according to his son, loved ‘shaping timber into furniture, boats or any useful thing’. A notable sportsman, Gus senior won the Dillon Medal for fairest and best in the Goldfields Football League in 1930.

After the family moved to Fremantle in 1938, young Gus attended Alma Street and Richmond primary schools before moving to Fremantle Boys’ School and then Perth Modern School – a government school for the academically talented. A scholarship assisted Ferguson to enter the School of Architecture at Perth Technical College (PTC) in 1949 under the directorship of William (Bill) H. Robertson (1905-1953). Robertson had assisted to launch the architectural course at PTC in 1946. The close-knit architectural community were shocked when Bill Robertson died 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
 (Bill Weedon noted in 2021 that Bill Angove – a photographer – set up this image with a timer and then joined the group in the photo, taken at UWA’s James Oval).

Gus completed his architectural studies in 1955 within a soon-to-be-influential class that included Tony Brand, Stewart Combs, Brian Jackson, Garry Leighton, Noel Ryan, and Bill Weedon - who had first met Gus at Fremantle Boys' in 1944. Gus Ferguson was awarded the first Morawetz Prize (an £800 travel grant) in 1956. The travel prize, established in 1955 by Paul Morawetz, managing director at Tip Top Paints, was awarded based on the PTC applicant's 'ability in design and individual prospects of benefit from overseas travel.' Subsequent winners of the extremely lucrative but short-lived award included other notable (future) architects in WA, Duncan Richards, Neil Wood and Peter Hunt.

Gus and Clare Lorraine Port were married at Fremantle in 1957. The couple soon boarded the *Moreton Bay* in Fremantle and sailed to South Africa, passing Rottneest, where they had just spent their honeymoon. Over a period of three years, the couple toured and worked in Africa and the United Kingdom, spending eighteen months in London where Ferguson worked for Chamberlin, Powell and Bon on the new Barbican development. They then spent seven months travelling through Europe and the Middle East back to Western Australia, mostly by car.

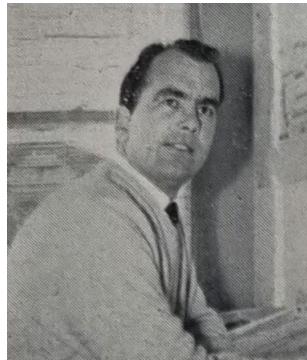
Returning to Perth in 1960, Gus was registered (no.297) with the Architects Board of Western Australia in June 1960, and soon entered into a partnership with Tony Brand (b.1932). The partnership was expanded with the joining of Antoni Solarski (1920-1975) in 1961, and continued until 1963.



1961 Hale School Memorial Hall (J.M. Freeland, *Architecture in Australia*, 1968, p.287).

Academic Andrew Murray notes that Ferguson's breakthrough building was the Hale School Memorial Hall of 1961, 'the first use of off-form concrete as a total

and complete finish in Australia, which would come to be a defining feature of his work across six decades of practice'. The young firm of Brand, Ferguson & Solarski was engaged to undertake the project [in association with Marshall Clifton (1903–1975) to reassure a conservative school board], and it was subsequently awarded a Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Bronze Medal (WA), and Building of the Year by *Architecture and Arts* magazine. It has been acknowledged by Tony Brand that the design of this building is primarily Gus' work. On termination of the partnership, Gus departed on a tour of the Cyclades Islands in Greece during June-July of 1964. On his return he established his own private practice.



Gus Ferguson in the mid-1960s (*The Architect*, June 1965, p.34).

The Hale School Hall caught the attention of Professor Gordon Stephenson, who commissioned Ferguson to design a new Law School at the University of Western Australia (UWA), completed in 1967. Murray notes that 'the result is a remarkably mature building that combines a contextual re-reading of the UWA campus and a synthesis of vernacular architecture from across Africa, Europe and Asia. It established a formal language and design vocabulary for Ferguson that is now instantly recognisable, and one that he would continually rework and refine'.



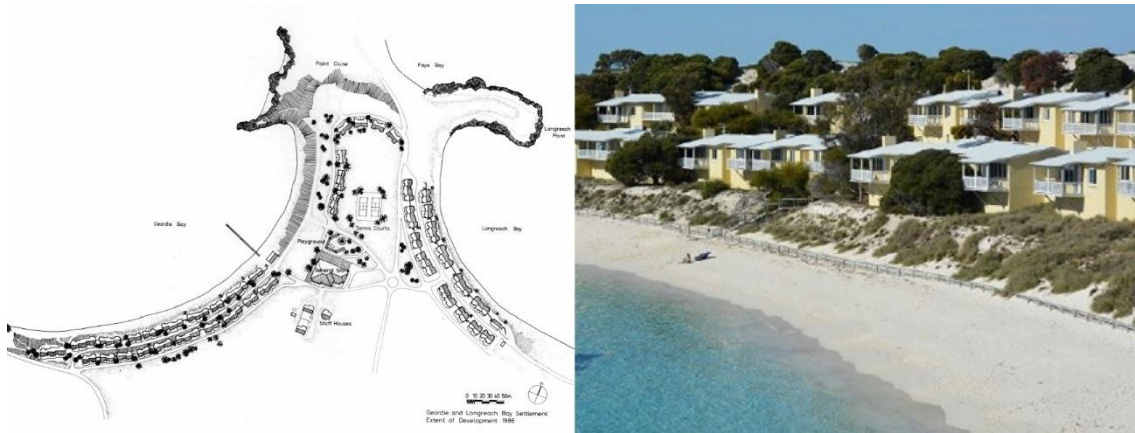
1964 UWA Law School model (Ferguson Architects in Andrew Murray, 2016, p.521) and 1967 photo (SLWA b2417374_1, Fritz Kos).

Following the success of the Law School, which was awarded the 2010 Australian Institute of Architects Enduring Architecture Award, Ferguson and his practice would go on to design more than twenty major buildings on the UWA Crawley campus. In 1966, Arthur Austen Bunbury (1920-1990) took up the position of Staff Architect to the University of Western Australia, which had been previously held by Gordon Stephenson. Bunbury retired in 1985, and was succeeded by Gus Ferguson. Ferguson developed a reputation as the leading campus architect in the State and designed buildings at every university and several technical colleges. Most notable is Murdoch University where, together with Stephenson, he designed the entirety of the initial campus.



Town Houses at Broadway in Nedlands – the 1968 Clay Brick Award Winner (Booklet for 21st Anniversary Clay Brick Awards, 1987, p.16).

While Ferguson's practice is known for its educational buildings, it was in housing that his original interest lay. Key examples include the Broadway Town Houses in Nedlands, which won the Clay Brick Award in 1968, and a series of housing clusters for the WA State Housing Commission. The most visible example of his housing work was the redevelopment of Rottnest Island, which the practice undertook from 1971 into the 1990s. Gus was able to funnel his extensive travel experience into a stunning reformulation of the island accommodation. He also documented buildings erected on the island between 1830 and 1903 - the results were published in two books on the history and architecture of Rottnest Island.



From 1971 onward - Rottnest Island accommodation (AIA Gold Medal Nomination 2022).

Ferguson's output was vast, and made a huge contribution to the built environment of WA. Yet the extent of his productivity is little known elsewhere in Australia. He was an architect committed to the next generation, and during 2003-2013 he offered an annual travel prize for graduates from UWA's school of architecture, encompassing travel abroad. The former Morawetz prize winner knew the huge value that international experience imparted to young graduates from the most isolated capital city in the world. Alongside his generous travel scholarship he was a teacher and mentor, and his office nurtured the careers of many young architects. Ferguson was elected an associate of RIBA in 1956, a Fellow of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in 1970, Life Fellow in 1978, and was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Architecture from UWA in 2000.



St Mary's Anglican Girls' School Library (Ferguson Architects website 2024)

Ronald Jack Ferguson died 14 August 2024 at East Fremantle aged 92 years, and was survived by his daughter, Anne. Clare Ferguson had passed away in December 2021.

Gus Ferguson is amongst the most notable of the more than 120 Western Australian architects who graduated from PTC between 1950 and 1967, when the course was transferred to the Western Australian Institute of Technology. Gus' significant and locally distinctive design portfolio, particularly in the tertiary education sector, forms a large portion of highly valued architecture in the State from the later Twentieth Century. Andrew Murray concludes in his 2018 thesis *A Search for Understanding: 'This thesis has challenged current thinking on Western Australian architecture, and illuminated an important and over-looked practice. The work of R.J. Ferguson warrants wider recognition, and the significant contribution his buildings and writing made towards a national discourse which interrogated the possibilities of an Australian architectural idiom.'* The great value of Ferguson's portfolio will undoubtedly be further recognised, adding to a broader understanding of the diverse nature of Twentieth Century architecture in Australia.

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