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A ‘NOT QUITE GOLD’ MEDAL WINNER: GUS FERGUSON AND THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA LAW SCHOOL BUILDING

In 1964 Ronald Jack (Gus) Ferguson was commissioned by the University of Western Australia (UWA) as the architect for the new Law School building. Awarded the 1969 RAIA Bronze Medal and later, the RAIA 25-year award, the Law School is a pivotal work within the UWA campus, and part of a four-building suite that articulated and codified a campus aesthetic that was largely followed until today. Whilst all four buildings worked in concert, interpreting and updating the existing language of the early campus buildings, it is Ferguson’s Law School which has had the most sustained effect. The Law School is a key building within the campus history, but its broader implications within postwar Australian architecture are yet to be addressed.

Whilst being featured in most historical accounts, the building has been subject to little critical discussion. Formally situated between Ferguson’s pioneering, radical Brutalist work, the Hale School Memorial Hall (1961) and the relaxed Mediterranean context of UWA, the formal expression and the complexity of its origins are in need of investigation. Whilst the building possesses many of the characteristics of what has come to be known as Brutalism, its use of historical reference points, contextual response and idiosyncratic expression make it an uneasy fit for the term.

This paper then seeks to provide a close reading of this building as a way to further demonstrate the instability of the term ‘Brutalism’ in Australia.

It aims to use this building as a vehicle for contributing to the ongoing revision of post-war Australian architectural history, and how a developed regional understanding can affect this.
As Philip Goad articulates in his recent survey, providing the groundwork for further examination of the period, “the emergence in late 1950s Australian architecture of what has come to be known historically as Brutalism was complex, diffuse and, across a vast continent, regionally split.” This paper attempts to engage with this complexity by offering an account from the margins as a way of further exposing the difficulties inherent in the term ‘Brutalism’. This paper is not concerned with the semantics of the term, but rather offers a close reading of a single project to demonstrate the instability of the term, highlighting the need for an expanded definition. By way of entering into this debate, this paper will use the case study of the Law School building at the University of Western Australia (UWA), 1967, designed by R.J Ferguson Architects, as a vehicle for opening up this discussion into Australia's regions.

But why the Law School building? Key to breaking open this complex, regionally split architecture, clearly, is the study of work from the regions, and the Law School is one of the best known West Australian buildings of this period. Having won the 1969 RAIA WA Bronze Medal, and recently awarded the 2010 RAIA WA Enduring Architecture Award, it is the most lauded and frequently cited of Ferguson's works. Whilst there is a growing body of scholarship on postwar Brutalism in Australia, to date, details on the West Australian contribution is lacking. The Law School is also interesting for its relation to Brutalism. Although included in the recent Brutalist survey by Goad, and displaying the general characteristics of the term, including the use of béton brut concrete, it is rarely included in discussions of Australian Brutalism, and is usually relegated to being either regional or romantic.

Through engaging and building upon recent scholarship in the area, this paper argues that a re-reading of this building allows an expansion and challenge to an understanding of Brutalism in the Australian postwar period in three ways: by demonstrating the use of historical reference points as a way of providing a critical response to place; by exploring further the effect of travel on built form through notions of exchange and revision; and the potential to incorporate personal expression.

Development

In order to discuss the construction of the Law School, there are two formative moments in Ferguson’s career that need to be addressed: the awarding of the Morawetz Travel prize, which allowed him to travel extensively upon graduation, and the completion of his first building, the Hale School Memorial Hall. Ferguson, born 1931 in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, was educated at Perth Modern School, and studied architecture at the Perth Technical College (PTC). Graduating in 1955, he was awarded £800 as the winner of the inaugural Morawetz Travel prize in 1956, which he used to travel and work, spending 1957 working in Africa, then eighteen months in London working at Chamberlin, Powell and Bon (CPB) on the 1959 Barbican redevelopment report. Upon his return in 1960, he went into practice with fellow PTC graduate Anthony Brand, under the name of Brand and Ferguson, Architects. The practice was soon given the commission for the Hale School Memorial Hall, working in partnership with Marshall Clifton, and Ferguson acting as project architect. Built to commemorate old Haelians that died in the world wars, the grey béton brut concrete Memorial Hall stands in stark contrast to the low, brown brick buildings of the existing Hale School campus. The Memorial Hall was the first béton brut, off-form concrete building completed in Australia, and the bold expression of the flat roofed, double height concrete framed structure, offset with decorative sculpted panels projects an image that directly reflects the horror and sacrifices of war. Jennifer Taylor singles out the Hall for its use of “brutally expressed concrete” whilst noting that it was “a strangely isolated example” not joined by a work of similar formalist pretensions until 1969 in Adelaide (curiously ignoring the UWA Law School of 1967). The Memorial Hall is the first time Ferguson gets the opportunity to apply what he has seen and learnt overseas, experimenting with a formal vocabulary that the Law School later refines; but it also gains the attention of Gordon Stephenson, then recently appointed as Consultant Architect at UWA.
Gordon Stephenson, originally from Liverpool, had previously been brought out to Western Australia in 1953 to develop the 1955 Metropolitan Plan for Perth.11 In 1960 he returned when offered the joint role of Consultant Architect and Professor of Architecture at UWA.12 In 1961 Stephenson convened the Jury of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) WA Bronze Medal award, for the most meritorious building constructed in Western Australia for the years 1959-61, and pushed for the Memorial Hall to be awarded the winner.13 The jury praised the architects for “a robust, masculine and well-proportioned design which has symbolic significance as well as a very practical purpose” as well as the builders “on the result of the pioneer work they undertook.”14 Stephenson recalled it being “simple, bold, well studied in detail and used reinforced concrete in an unusual way...it was the most original and modern building the jury saw, yet in the architectural main-stream.”15 The Hall clearly made a lasting impression on Stephenson, and when time came to select architects to complete new works on the UWA campus several years later, he would call upon Ferguson. Before the commissioning of the Law School is discussed, it is necessary to examine the state of the UWA campus and lead-up to Stephenson’s appointment as Consultant Architect.

The UWA Campus

What we want now is some local Howard Roark (semi-literary illusion) to blow up the new Physics Building and the University may begin to look like a University in a few years.

Caliban16

The first building constructed on the main campus of the University of Western Australia was completed in 1925, following a modified campus plan prepared by Harold Desbrowe-Annear.17 This was quickly followed by the landmark Winthrop Hall and Hackett Memorial buildings, completed in 1932 by Rodney Alsop and Conrad Sayce. The Alsop and Sayce buildings were completed in a vague Mediterranean manner, and established early on a clear character for the campus. However, as Caliban notes in his rather pointed attack, the period between the Alsop and Sayce buildings, and the appointment of Stephenson as consultant architect in 1960, the University of Western Australia’s campus had largely been filled with a fairly ordinary group of International Style buildings, designed by the Public Works Department. Upon Stephenson’s permanent appointment to UWA as Consultant Architect in 1960, work began on the implementation of his campus plan. This 1962 plan, itself a revision of Stephenson’s earlier 1955 plan completed during a visit to Perth whilst acting as planning consultant to the State Government, was the first major campus plan upgrade since 1927.18 The 1962 plan, along with setting out proposed building development, articulated basic planning principles including the use of quiet, inner courtyards, and the pedestrianisation of the campus.19 Whilst these principles are important to consider when reading these buildings, the most visible and enduring legacy of this plan, codified by an initial suite of four buildings constructed between 1963 and 1967, is the return to the “Alsop Spirit.”20 This decision was made by the Senate Buildings Committee, arguing that buildings needed a distinct University character, and should respond directly to the material and formal structure established by the 1930s buildings on campus designed by Alsop and Sayce; characterised by a low key, Mediterranean feel, with Cottesloe stone walls and Cordova roof tiles.21 The first four buildings constructed after the implementation of this 1962 plan, which will be referred to as the first ‘Post Stephenson’ buildings, are the Reid Library; Arts; Economic and Commerce; and Law.

The interpretation of the ‘Alsop Spirit’ was addressed in different ways in each of the four ‘Post-Stephenson’ buildings. The Arts building (1963) used the same materials as the Alsop buildings, but in a rigid Mediterranean pose; the Reid Library (1964) used a sandy aggregate concrete panel with terracotta roof within a classically modern frame, whilst the Economics and Commerce building (1966) used limestone panels within a concrete frame and tiled mansard roof. Ferguson’s interpretation evokes the strongest spirit of the Alsop buildings, by using a range of historical sources and strategies to establish a dialogue between it and the existing campus. Through these strategies, the Law School is able to make a direct response to the cultural and political context surrounding it, to its “fictional landscape.”22 These sources and strategies will be addressed later in the paper.

Engaging Ferguson
In 1964, Ferguson, now running his own practice, R. J. Ferguson Architects, was approached by consultant architect Gordon Stephenson to design the new Law School at UWA, working with Stephenson as architects in association. The University had recently adopted a new commissioning policy, in which an architect in private practice would be partnered with the consultant architect to work in concert preparing an agreed sketch design to present to the University Buildings Committee. Once this was accepted, the private architect became wholly responsible for the documentation and supervision of the work. It is through this method of procurement that the strong visual language of the campus was implemented and codified, through the first four ‘post-Stephenson’ buildings.

In May 1964, the first scheme for the Law School was presented to the UWA buildings committee, a three-storey rectangular courtyard building with projecting balconies, capped off with a large parapet and concealed tiled roof. The committee expressed concerns with this proposal, citing the cost, material choice of off-form concrete, and the lack of eaves on the tiled roof. After some initial resistance, the committee approved the roof and the use of off-form concrete, provided the colour was able to be correctly and evenly applied, and eventually accepted the use of the more expensive Cordova roof tiles. Construction began in November 1965, and the building took just over a year to complete. It was officially opened by the Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, Sir Garfield Barwick, on the 28 September 1967, with the total cost of the building being $410,000, with $390,000 coming from the 1963 Universities Financial Assistance Act. The building was later awarded the RAIA WA Chapter Bronze Medal, for the years 1967-9.

The site for the Law School is an awkward, long, north-south oriented site, sandwiched between Hackett Drive to the east, the main University carpark to the north, and the recently built Economics and Commerce building to the west. A link building between Law and Economics had already been proposed, along with a 350-seat lecture theatre, so the floor levels of the two buildings were required to match, and the building footprint was to line up with this proposed theatre. These constraints, meaning the long facades faced east and west, were problematic for shading and climate...
control but had the advantage of offering more access to river views for staff members.30

As constructed, the Law School is a three storey rectangular building with a central open air courtyard, ringed by a cloistered walkway and with all rooms opening off it. To the south of the courtyard is the Law Library; to the north are student work rooms and a lecture theatre. To the east and west are a series of offices, tutorial rooms and bathrooms. The building is entered through the courtyard, provided by two gated openings between the Library and the rest of the building. All the facades of the building are different: the projecting balconies on the east relieved by the stairwell; the over scaled seated alcove on the west; the blank north wall of the Lecture Theatre and the detached concrete framed brise-soleil stretching across the south façade. The building is finished in a golden off-form concrete, with an open jarrah framed, Cordova tiled roof, brick tiled floors, French doors, timber-framed windows and cast-in copper downpipes. The building, whilst visually connected to the campus, is programmatically closed to it. Entry is only through the gated courtyard, and the high level windows on the ground floor of the building – save for in the Library – emphasise the fortified nature of the building.

Formal Language

Ferguson’s experience working on the Barbican in London, one of the key Brutalist projects of the post-war era, points to a direct link for the Brutalist origins of the Law School, but it is rather his travel experiences afterwards that more directly inform this work. Whilst the office culture at CPB is a crucial part of his education, Ferguson credits his time working on the Barbican as more helpful in losing his fear of big jobs, rather than a formal influence. 31 Prior to the construction of the Law School, Ferguson went on two major overseas trips. Following his work on the Barbican development, in 1959 Ferguson embarked on a seven month tour of Europe and Asia which ended in Sri Lanka, 32 then in 1964 he completed a three month tour of Greece and its islands. As Ferguson recalls, “I was raw around the edges when I came back and full of beans, having seen just about everything that was great. I guess I absorbed more than I could handle, and I pushed it all out into the Hale School.”33 This acknowledgment of ‘pushing out’ what he observed allows one to view the Law School through the lens of his travels. This acknowledgment is also important to note,
given the propensity for late Modern architects to often attribute their work to being purely functional and builderly; for example, John Andrews describing the key driver of his work as “Common Sense”34 and Ferguson himself explains, “My work just wants to be modest and do a bloody good job.”35 Taylor further emphasises this, suggesting Ferguson’s architecture results from “direct solutions to the business of building.”36 This reluctance to reveal sources is telling of an anxiety of influence that modern architects exhibit,37 but as this paper will demonstrate, Ferguson draws heavily on what he sees and photographs of his travels, clearly going beyond “the business of building.” The way that Ferguson draws upon and manipulates these experiences is crucial to the way he interprets and expands upon the ‘Alsop Spirit’ of the University. Ferguson draws on a diverse range of sources and strategies in order to address the University context, providing him with a formal language that is able to engage with the ‘Alsop Spirit’. One strategy that can be seen is the referring to buildings recently experienced on his travels, and in particular the palazzo and Le Corbusier’s La Tourette. The ways that these references are used establish a relationship that aligns with Argan’s idea of the type/model. The Palazzo becomes a type –, La Tourette- The palazzo, rendered here as a three-storey courtyard building, with a clear base, tiled roof and fortified entry, is both a convincing simulacra and an emptied symbol. Through the use of this type Ferguson becomes a type –, La Tourette- The palazzo, rendered here as a three-storey courtyard building, with a clear base, tiled roof and fortified entry, is both a convincing simulacra and an emptied symbol. Through the use of this type Ferguson is able to establish two key cultural links, firstly to the origin of the university, the sixteenth century Renaissance guilds of Italy,38 and secondly to the immediate surrounds of the University, the ‘Mediterranean’ nature of the Alsop building suite. This places the building firmly within a University tradition, in dialogue with the immediate campus, and a clear interpretation of what the UWA senate committee desired in having a ‘distinct University character.’ This initial strategy allows Ferguson to engage with the classical origins of the campus and project a vision for its future.

While the palazzo situates the building in a much broader lineage, the use of La Tourette as a model places it within a much more contemporary discussion. Whilst the earlier Hale School Hall deals with Corbusier in much more abstract terms, the use here is more direct, closer to what Amanda Reeser Lawrence describes as a ‘revision’, to see an element again.39 The use of La Tourette as a specific model is speculative, but based on his travel recollections, one can be fairly certain he visited it.40 Elements of La Tourette can be seen in the planning, the use of brise-soleil, the projecting cellular balconies and the béton brut concrete. The projecting balconies to the east of the Law School recall the cells of La Tourette, but here they are thin, open, and climatically responsive. Rather than being places to prospect, they become shading devices, allowing cross ventilation of the spaces. They function more like a verandah rather than the enclosures of La Tourette. The parapeted roof of La Tourette (also seen in the 1964 original Law School scheme) is revised to a tiled, hipped roof – a contextual response to the ‘landscape’. The variegations and rough concrete work of La Tourette is here simplified and refined. These revisions; simplifying elements, material refinement, and climatic adjustments, can be seen as another strategy at play. They allow the Law School to be much more direct in its expression: a frugal, no-nonsense builderly revision, aligning it with a recurring theme in West Australian Modernism.41 Indeed by observing t, allows one to begin to see the development of a ‘local’ version of Brutalism, including. Along with these strategies, Ferguson collages a series of images into the building drawn from his recent travels. Sources for these can be found in several articles on his travels he has published, as well as his later Architectural Images, a self-published book of photographs taken during his 1959 overland travels as a way of displaying “some images of buildings, details and places that have impacted upon a personal search for architectural understanding.”42 Cycladic architecture, which appears in a 1965 issue of The Architect (WA) features a photo essay of a trip he made to Greece during the sketch design phase of the Law School in 1964. Versions of these photos appear as built vignettes throughout the Law School - an arch placed above a stair well entrance, the short steps to a service door. Photographs from Architectural Images appear like ghostly traces of his travels; the flattened arch of the Palazzo Vecchio, the courtyard of the Belfry in Bruges, the layering and framing of space in the Great Mosque of Ardestan, the texture of a hill village in the Dolomites, the deep shadows within the Alhambra; fragments that can be seen within the building, but are never explicitly there. Whilst there is a clear debt formally to Le Corbusier in the Law School, the parallels in process are more telling; the collaging of sources,43 searching for the ‘origins’ of architecture, and the use of universal precedents.44 What this demonstrates is more than a following of style. Instead there is a desire to understand architecture at its most elemental. This working through of experiences, the search for architectural meaning, signifies a general feeling in this period - one that Tafuri describes as “an architecture folding on itself, in search of its own ‘why’, of the ‘why’ of its structure and of its historical permissibility.”45

This personal search for meaning within architecture extends to the detailing of the building, which exhibits the direct
involvement of Ferguson’s hand, a quality rare in large institutional buildings. Much like Le Corbusier’s late works that feature cast-in sculptural work, Ferguson includes a six pointed ‘flower of life’ symbol, cast directly into the concrete at several points throughout the building, usually hidden, as a way of lending some sort of extra meaning and play to the building.46 Further to this he includes a series of hand carved, cast brass plugs with the faces of Greek gods, including Zeus, covering the conduit junction box openings. These and other details like the single arched timber doorway and window, ‘martini glass’ fountain, copper downpipe brackets, Grecian ‘meander’ brickwork pattern surrounding the building, and the decorative iron gates, further suggest an interest in an architecture that transcends structure, akin to what Louis Kahn describes as the immeasurable.47 Combined with imagery taken directly from his travels, these details reveal the intensely close relationship between Ferguson and the Law School. The aim in highlighting the various strategies, sources and personal questioning at play in the Law School is to demonstrate the diversity within a single building, and the difficulties in using a term like Brutalism to describe it.

The idea of redefining Brutalism, an already fraught term with inherently negative connotations, seems counterproductive. However rather than dismissing it, this paper instead suggests the need to allow the term to become more open; to encompass more nuanced understandings. Although the Law School shares many of the characteristics of what has come to be known broadly as Brutalism: béton brut concrete and the legibility of structure and plan; through this close reading, it demonstrates the limits of the term. It highlights the difficulties of accommodating formal divergences, contextual sensitivity, historical and personal content, and accounting for Antipodean translations. By expanding the framework of the term, it allows one to better accommodate the richness and diversity of Australia’s postwar architectural output, the nature of which has yet to be fully addressed.
Endnotes


2 The work of Ferguson represents a large, consistent and influential oeuvre, including work at five out of six major university campuses in Western Australia, and a career that spans more than fifty years.


5 The Morawetz travel prize, established in 1955 by Paul Morawetz, managing director at Tip Top Paints, was awarded based on the applicant’s ‘ability in design and individual prospects of benefit from overseas travel.’ “Migrant endows a big scholarship,” Good Neighbour (1 August 1955): 2.

6 The practice Brand and Ferguson was formed in 1960, and quickly added Antoni Solarski as partner, becoming Brand Ferguson Solarski in 1961. The practice disbanded in 1963-4.

7 Taylor, Australian Architecture since 1960, 79.


9 Taylor, Australian Architecture since 1960, 179.

10 Stephenson was consultant Architect from 1960-1969. R.J Ferguson, Crawley Campus: The Planning and Architecture of the University of Western Australia (Nedlands: UWA Press, 1993), 80.

11 Gordon Stephenson, On a Human Scale (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992), 134.

12 Stephenson, On a Human Scale, 182.


15 Stephenson, Planning for the University, 27


17 Desbrowe-Annear’s plan was heavily modified by the Public Words Department, but elements remained. Ferguson, Crawley Campus, 10.

18 Ferguson, Crawley Campus, 70.

19 These principles can be seen in the Law School, evident, for example, in the plan form and the incorporation of a long bench seat on the building’s western side. See Stephenson, Planning for the University, 50.

20 Jenny Gregory (ed), Seeking Wisdom: A centenary history of the University of Western Australia (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2013), 49.

21 Stephenson, Planning for the University, 12.


23 Stephenson, Planning for the University, 12.

24 Stephenson, Planning for the University, 12.

25 UWA Building Committee Notes, 8 May 1964. The Buildings Committee inspected the recent Deaf and Dumb school, then under construction in Mosman Park. This building, designed by Hawkins and Sands, Ferguson’s previous employer, is a small, Corbusian-styled block finished in stark white béton brut concrete. Members found this concrete finish was a “considerable improvement on the grey concrete used at the Hale School Hall.”

26 UWA Building Committee notes, 18 August 1965.


29 R.J Ferguson, The University of Western Australia (Perth: n.p, 1993).

30 Ferguson, The University of Western Australia, n.p.
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31 Gus Ferguson, interview with Andrew Murray, 21 December 2015.
32 Gus Ferguson, interview with Andrew Murray, 21 December 2015. Also travelling with Ferguson were notable Chamberlin, Powell and Bon architects Michael Neylan and Peter Deakins, along with Liz Verco from Bates, Smart and McCutcheon, and Claire Ferguson. The tour included France, Italy, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan.
35 Gus Ferguson, interview with Andrew Murray, 4 November 2015.
36 Taylor, Australian Architecture since 1960, 180.
39 Amanda Reeser Lawrence, James Stirling: Revisionary Modernist (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 16. Lawrence describes revisioning as ‘seeing again’, looking to the past to reinvent the present, a concept distinct from referencing or copying.
40 Ferguson recalls visiting most of this work, including Chandigarh on his 1959 overland trip. Ferguson, interview with Andrew Murray, 21 December 2015.
43 Much like Le Corbusier ‘builds’ elements of his sketches, Ferguson ‘builds’ his photographs.
44 For example, many of the places visited in his overland trips are also places covered in Le Corbusier’s Voyage d’Orient.
46 Ferguson describes: “It just makes you stop and wonder. You might wander around and ask, what is that bloody thing? It’s just mystical.” Ferguson, interview with Andrew Murray, 21 December 2015.