The Mediterranean on the West Coast
R.J. Ferguson and Rottnest Island

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Abstract

“It is the Rotten-est island in the world!” Tongue in cheek or not, as Sir Paul McCartney so eloquently put it, by the late 1960’s Rottnest Island, a holiday resort located 19 kilometres west of Perth, had become an undesirable destination filled with suburban detritus and a place to indulge in debauchery away from mainland eyes. By the early 1980s however, the island had been transformed into the mythical holiday resort it is today is, due largely to the significant architectural intervention by R.J. Ferguson & Associates beginning in 1971. Consisting of over 300 individual cottages, as well as a variety of civic projects, the project carefully mediates between the original island buildings, a series of convict-built 19th Century cottages, and the aspirations of a once popular holiday resort. Recognising a latent Mediterranean quality in the original buildings, Ferguson embarked on a project to make tangible these qualities, transforming the island into a local paradise. The project appears as a loose quotation of a Mediterranean village, a series of almost identical cottages set into the steep dunes of the island, forming a cohesive, yet variegated ensemble of uniformly coloured units. By drawing out and amplifying the underlying qualities in the original buildings, Ferguson is able to conjure an evocative and powerful sense of place, which has gradually come to play a key role in the construction of West Australian identity. This paper then seeks to explore how exactly a Mediterranean village ended up on Rottnest, and how the use of an external model can reinforce local identity. This paper will further explore the commonly held idea of the Mediterranean as a suitable reference point in postwar Australian architecture, with the aim to further contribute to ideas of how identity and place are constructed in an Australian context.
Introduction

Mr Ferguson...visualises buildings like those in the Greek islands... made of stone, they are an integral part of the landscape.1

Rottnest Island, a public reserve in Western Australia, underwent a significant redevelopment in the postwar years, transforming the island from a former Aboriginal prison and war internment camp, to a popular holiday destination. The redevelopment of the island is one of the largest architectural projects the practice R.J. Ferguson and Associates Architects has undertaken, involving over 50 individual projects between the years 1971 and 1985, along with over 300 individual holiday units. Having recently returned from extensive travel throughout the Mediterranean, including Greece, Dubrovnik and Italian hillside villages, and with the opportunity to effectively redesign an entire island, Gus Ferguson (1931-) imagined Rottnest as a Mediterranean paradise. This redevelopment contributed greatly to what George Seddon describes as “The Rottnest Experience:”

Rottnest has played a significant part in sustaining Western Australians' self-image as a society that is friendly, gregarious, simple, unpretentious, physically orientated, pleasure loving and egalitarian.2

This paper sets out to explore how Rottnest Island was transformed from an Aboriginal penal colony, to “The Rottnest Experience”, and the role that Ferguson played in this transformation. It documents the way that the Mediterranean was constructed in Rottnest, and raises questions about the role that imported European models can play in the construction of local identity.

Rottnest Island

Located 18km directly west from Perth, Rottnest Island, or its Nyoongar title, Wadjemup, has had a long and difficult history since European occupation in Western Australia. The island, although not inhabited at the time of colonisation, has long been a site of significance for the local Aboriginal population. Following the establishment of the Swan River Colony in 1829, a township, Kingston, was quickly planned for the island, and by 1831 the first people had taken up land there, mainly using the island for farming and fishing stations. However the uptake was slow, and the community never flourished. In 1838 the decision was made to turn the island into an Aboriginal prison, and by 1839 all previously allocated land was resumed by the Crown and returned to the state. The island functioned primarily as a prison for Aboriginals until 1903, when it became an outpost of the Fremantle Prison until its closure in 1931.3 Rottnest opened briefly for tourism in 1911, but closed several times, hosting internment camps during the First World War, and operating as a defence outpost during the Second World War. In 1945 the island was completely opened up to tourism as a ‘pleasure resort’, and continues to operate purely for tourism to the present day.4

In the period that the island functioned as an Aboriginal prison, a variety of buildings were constructed which are today visible reminders of this fraught period of occupation. These small buildings, mostly constructed under the supervision of Henry Vincent, the Superintendent of the Native Establishment on the Island, were begun in 1839 and continued until 1867. This group of buildings form a cohesive architectural ensemble, and are clustered around the main settlement known as Thomson Bay. The buildings were constructed using limestone quarried on the island, with limestone slab floors and flat or thatched roofs with innovative split timber trusses.5 The buildings were all single storey with simple timber framed windows and lime washed a brilliant white, set above a long sea wall running the length of the settlement. The Vincent buildings established a clear built identity and a strong urban core for the island. Built using convict labour, the buildings are remarkably direct in their expression, a kind of crude Georgian which Ian Molyneux describes as “Simple buildings, improvised from materials at hand and free of ornament or historical stylisms”.6 Whilst the buildings clearly belong to a particular stylistic period, they are the amongst the best examples of what Geoffrey London and Simon Anderson suggest is a particular character of West Australian buildings: “[they] have a sense of
austerity about them, of a minimalist frugality...traced back to the impoverished conditions of the colony in the 19th Century.\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{Figure 1.} Second Boathouse. 1859, constructed under Vincent.
Source: Michal Lewi.

Work on the island continued slowly after Vincent left in 1867 - more houses, a delightful school chapel and the bizarre Tudor Government House - but the island remained sparsely built up. Once the decision to close the prison in 1903 was made, most of the former prison buildings were converted into accommodation. Upon opening as a pleasure resort in 1911, a series of lightweight timber and hessian camp buildings were provided to holiday makers, which along with the renovated Prison buildings, were the main sources of accommodation until the 1960s.\textsuperscript{8} During this time, the original whitewashed convict built structures on the island were painted an ochre colour to reduce glare for tourists, which has come to be a recognisable symbol of Rottnest.\textsuperscript{9}

An honorary architect for the Island was appointed in 1933, Edgar le Blond Henderson, but little work of consequence was completed in the following decades until 1960, when the first permanent building was constructed since the prison was closed. Henderson designed a brick cottage which was erected to the north of the main Thomson Bay settlement in October 1960.\textsuperscript{10} This cottage was to serve as a template for future development, and was repeated across the Thomson Bay settlement as demand for accommodation on the island increased. This cottage was a single storey, three bedroom house constructed from cream bricks, with a chocolate base string course and a range of differently finished roofs, including mottled blue tiles. An unremarkable building, the most striking thing about this first cottage was the inclusion on the side wall of a Rolf Harris mural of a Quokka (the local fauna) complete with fired on thumb print signature.\textsuperscript{11} With an awkward plan, and an out of place suburban look, the new brick cottages, whilst satisfying the demand for accommodation, were criticized widely in the local press.

Noted naturalist Vincent Serventy remarked in the local newspaper:

\begin{quote}
We’re trying to make another suburb of an island more beautiful than any other. Everything added since the original buildings is an architectural disaster. It’s being loved to death.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

A column reviewing the Henderson house in \textit{The Architect WA} by Caliban, titled ‘Rottnest Monster’ also suggests the attitude of the local profession.\textsuperscript{13} George Seddon also commented, writing in \textit{Sense of Place}, “[T]he new buildings are vulgar in design. They are places with little regard for the contours of the landscape, and no regard for their relation to one another”.\textsuperscript{14}
Motivated by recent trips to the Mediterranean, visiting Greece, Italy and Dubrovnik, Ferguson saw this development as a missed opportunity to create something similar to what he experienced on his travels on Rottnest. He became a vocal proponent of the recent developments, writing numerous critiques in both *The West Australian* newspaper, and local institute journal *The Architect WA*. In an article published in 1965, he issued a plea for the preservation of the original fabric on the island, through either architectural or photographic means, as he saw the current works on the island as a means to a disastrous end. He pointedly writes:

Suburbia has crossed the waters. Brick walled, asbestos or tile roofed bungalows in neat rows are to provide us with the relief we need from our brick walled, asbestos or tile roofed bungalows in neat rows on the mainland.\(^{15}\)

The critiques did not go unnoticed by the Rottnest board, noting in a report, “The new cottages at Bathurst have proved very popular except with a certain columnist”.\(^{16}\) This general negative sentiment evidently had an effect on the board, as they shortly discussed the possibility of running an architectural competition for new developments, which didn’t proceed.\(^{17}\) However it was not just architectural critiques that were aimed at the Island during this period. With a newly opened betting shop, widespread illegal camping, underage drinking, and arrests, journalist Athol Thomas claimed the “rot set in”.\(^{18}\) This negative press set the wheels in motion for change. In 1971 Henderson retired, and John Fitzhardinge took over as Board architect, quickly inviting Ferguson to become involved with reshaping the island. Ferguson suggests that it was his critiques that helped land him the job:

He [Henderson] retired then they said “righto … you’ve been mouthing off so much, why don’t you tell us what to do”. So we started bringing all the cottages together, using the same colour it was originally.\(^{19}\)

**Ferguson Becomes Involved**

Ferguson was first commissioned in 1971 to undertake a feasibility study of the Thomson Bay settlement due to increasing pressure on existing accommodation. In the report, he demonstrated the possibility of increasing the density within the existing settlement area which eliminated the need to establish a new settlement, which was the current plan.\(^{20}\) On the success of the report’s findings, Ferguson was given the opportunity to work on the island, initially with minor extensions to the Rottnest Hotel, and some beach shelters in Thomson Bay. Ferguson was then engaged to provide a major accommodation overhaul on the island, providing both new cottages, as well as substantial...
upgrades to the Henderson cottages in Thomson Bay. This was to follow the recommendations he made in the 1971 report, in an area south of the Hotel. Ferguson sought to inject a Mediterranean atmosphere into the island, merging the original Vincent buildings and his new cottages, unified by a material palette and language drawn from his recent trips to Greece and Dubrovnik, constructing a dense, social environment. He makes his intention for the island quite clear when he writes:

There is in the original group of stone buildings a nucleus which could have developed into a village with the atmosphere of the Mediterranean villages which so many of us spend so much to visit... They are unified into one ‘belonging’ group by the then one available material, stone. The shapes are solid, the surfaces friendly and receptive to light and shadow patterns from the superb trees which have become so much a part of the environment.21

Ferguson’s strategy was to first increase the density by inserting new cottages in between the existing ones, turning single cottages into duplex and triplex units. He reworked the existing cottages to match the new; bricking around the existing circular steel columns, reroofing them in asbestos sheeting and re-pitching the roofs lower at 7.5 degrees. Low brick courtyard walls were added with large chamfered edges, complete with half height ledge and braced gates, and barbecue plates inset. These courtyards are staggered along the road, creating a meandering path.22 The cottages were then rendered and painted in an orange lime wash, creating a unity between the early convict built core and the new infill units. The first five trial cottages were completed in December 1972, and clearly impressed the Rottnest Board.23 A further five were commissioned and opened in May 1973, which the Board commented that they were “easily the most popular we have”.24

Figure 3. Thomson Bay development plans. Source: Ferguson Architects

Following this successful first stage of redevelopment, Ferguson was engaged to develop the settlement north of the Hotel, including both the infill and renovation of existing cottages, and a series of stand-alone new units, located on the steep seaward side of the foreshore road. Completed in 1975, these 14 new units are in four clusters, spaced out unevenly along the coast, in two, three, and four bedroom configurations. Due to the steep contour of the site which sloped down five metres from the road to the beach, high sea walls were built to provide level access to the units, and matching the original sea wall in the Thomson Bay settlement.25 These units provided the opportunity for Ferguson to construct his most developed vision for the island, freed from the restrictions of the infill and extension cottages. The material palette for the units matches those established south of the Hotel. Construction is cavity brick walls, thickly lime washed and rendered ochre externally, bagged and
painted white internally. Roofs are low pitched asbestos cement sheet without gutters on white painted timber framing, matching the windows. The cottages at either end of the clusters have open fireplaces. The plans of the units are direct and economical. Entry is through a courtyard directly into the open kitchen/living space connected to a balcony overlooking the beach. Off the living area, is the sole bathroom and a series of bedrooms. Detailing is similarly direct: flooring is vinyl tiles on Aquatile, plasterboard ceilings follow the pitch of the roof with no cornices. Standard bullnose skirting boards, stainless steel fixtures, jarrah window frames and particleboard doors are used throughout. The only concession to ‘detail’ is an arched doorway that connects the living area to the bedroom corridor.

While the interventions south of the Hotel established the material palette and atmosphere for the redevelopment, these new cottages allowed him to fully articulate his vision. The cottages, nestled into the steep dunes, step back and forward against the line of the coast, the orange and white shimmering against the blue of the water and sky, the green of the trees, punctuated by the stubby vertical chimneys. Between unit clusters are a series of arched tunnels, with steep steps leading down from the foreshore road, providing pedestrian beach access through the sea wall.

Following the redevelopment at Thomson Bay, work commenced on the settlement at Geordie and Longreach Bays, located almost two kilometres to the north-west of the main settlement. This new development had been designed in years previously by another practice, and earth works on site had been carried out in 1970 in preparation, but was quickly abandoned to focus on the Thomson Bay settlement. The site had since been suffering significant erosion of the sand dunes that had been cleared. On the back of the popularity in the Thomson Bay development, it was decided to expand accommodation, and the first plan for the new settlement was drawn up by Ferguson in 1976, comprising a 100 unit village with a centrally located hotel and shops. In order to prevent further erosion of the dune, the development was planned around a series of retaining walls anchored deep into the sandbanks. The development began construction in 1976, and completed by 1978.

The Geordie and Longreach settlement is more economically restrained than at Thomson Bay, but the planning is almost identical, with chimneys located at either end of a cluster, and a mix of high and low courtyard walls to the street. Due to the increased concentration of development and the extra height gained from the retaining walls, the effect of this new settlement is visually arresting. When viewed from the water, the development presents as a staggered, shifting mass, gently cascading down the dunes. Despite their economic planning and extremely rational and repetitive layouts, the complex presents a complex, dynamic and variegated whole, evoking clearly the Mediterranean hillside villages Ferguson advocated for in his newspaper columns.

With the completion of these two major settlements, the transformation from a piecemeal, haphazardly planned hideaway to a unified, romantic escape was complete. With his interventions on the island Ferguson was able to skillfully return architectural decorum to the island, and unify all periods of development into a cohesive experience. When George Seddon describes the experience of the original settlement, the parallels to the new settlement become apparent:

The old settlement is compact, and the houses are close together, but the boundaries between private space and public space are sharp. The stone cottages mark boundaries with stone walls and fences... People feel quite confident about walking close to the cottages, because there is no sense of intrusion, and so a pedestrian scale is maintained.

The Construction of the Mediterranean

The aesthetic links between the Mediterranean and Australian landscapes have been made before, and the vegetation on Rottnest - sparse and scrubby bush, with rocky sandy outcrops spilling into the Indian Ocean - makes for a compelling comparison. But Rottnest is not in the Mediterranean. It is
Ferguson that makes this connection, translating his recent travels through Greece, Dubrovnik and Italy into an architectural response. Drawing out latent qualities in both the early Vincent buildings and the landscape, Ferguson creates his own version of a Mediterranean island; the Vincent buildings and the memories of the Mediterranean elided into architectural form.

But how was a sense of the Mediterranean constructed at Rottnest? Unlike earlier versions of the Mediterranean explored in Australian, in the work of Leslie Wilkinson, Marshall Clifton and Reginald Summerhayes, executed mainly in single projects, relying on scenographic devices (shuttered windows, terracotta tiling and loggias), Ferguson’s version engages with the theatre and atmosphere of the Mediterranean. Translating this into built form is primarily done through using two main strategies: The assembly of the units, and the reconfiguration of the urban experience.

At a micro level the buildings on Rottnest display little of the architecture experienced on his travels, what one might readily associate with the Mediterranean. The only concession is the occasional arched doorway and the use of lime-wash render. Rather, it is at the large scale where the relationship becomes apparent, the assemblage of the parts. Ferguson says of the Greek Islands: “Even though individual buildings are just sheds, it’s such a powerful organisation - It’s always stunned me”.30 And as quoted in the local paper he “visualises buildings like those in the Greek islands... made of stone, they are an integral part of the landscape”.31 Combing these two ideas, Ferguson is able to provide a powerful image of the Mediterranean at Rottnest. Although not built of stone, the copperas lime-wash and ochre paint turns the units into a cohesive group, an assemblage of anonymous units nestled in the dunes. Staggered along the shoreline, the units respond to the dunes and the contours of the site, regularly punctuated by trees and scrub. The straightforward detailing and massing lends a “vernacular” quality to the settlement, reading as a series of squat columns and pitched roofs; little individual character of the units evident.

Adding to this assemblage is the use of large front courtyards that extend the cottage space out on to the street. Demarcated by low walls that form a continuous serpentine line, the courtyard walls follow the road and link the units together. These courtyards spaces are key to the construction of the Mediterranean at Rottnest, providing both a unifying formal element, but also introducing a social, urban atmosphere to the island; something that was lost in the 1960s brick Henderson cottages.

![Figure 4. Photo from Ferguson’s travels, an example of ‘texture,’ 1964. Source: Ferguson Architects](image)

The addition of these courtyard spaces can be seen as a direct translation of one of the qualities Ferguson most admired (and often photographed) during his travels through the Mediterranean that
he called “texture”. Texture describes the spaces between buildings, occupied by people, movement, sculpture and food stalls. These courtyards, with barbecue plates set out along the roadside and low walls to encourage sitting, heighten the urban experience of the island. They encourage interactions with neighbours and passers-by, promoting an outdoor, egalitarian, relaxed lifestyle, values that are increasingly lost on the mainland. Gaps are left between the unit groups, providing access to the beach and leaving space for landscape, playing, and casually parking bicycles. Simon Anderson describes this casual approach to planning, noting that the units: “let you live your life rather than ruling your life”.

Ferguson’s interest in the urban experience of Rottnest can be seen in the way he describes the early Vincent settlement: “The grouping of the buildings permits a density of living which is refreshing after the regimentation of the attempted family isolation of the suburbs”.

The insertion of the spaces completes the effect of an antipodean Mediterranean island, and creates mental distance from the mainland. Rather than relying on scenographic elements, this effect is created through replicating the theatre and drama of the Greek Islands. It is less about the ‘sheds’ than the organisation of them. The composition, from the small casual spaces to the assemblage of the settlement, works hard to conjure a powerful Mediterranean experience, without drawing attention to it. This aligns with what Kim Dovey expresses when he describes the general environment on the island: “the ‘Rottnest experience’ is not easily consumed; one cannot see it while trying to look at it.”

**Conclusion**

Rottnest comes at a time of renewed interest in Mediterranean forms in Australian architecture appearing in several isolated modern projects including Don Gazzard’s 1965 Wentworth Memorial Church in Sydney, Robin Boyd’s 1967 Simon House, and select works of John Dalton. Jennifer Taylor notes that the work of the ‘Sydney School’ often recalled a Mediterranean village or hill town, whilst in Perth, there was already a well-established tradition - including the work of Julius Elischer (his 1963 ‘Landall’s Mediterranean Village’ makes the connection easy), Neil Robertson and John Flower - which explored the use of cubic forms and white walls - which Alan Colquhoun calls “Mediterraneanism”. The emphasis on the urban experience and the “texture”, of the Mediterranean however sets Rottnest apart from these other projects. Later projects, like Harry Seidler’s 1982 Kooralbyn Resort explores a similar scale, yet without the density. The construction of the Mediterranean at Rottnest throws up a series of questions about how ideas can be brought home, and the use of overseas models in Australia.
For Ferguson, the architecture of the Mediterranean was powerful and memorable, and aligned with his personal search for postwar architectural identity and meaning. As he writes about the search for an Australian architectural idiom:

> It [Architecture] does refer to proportion, scale, the shaping of buildings according to climate (not just orientation and sun screening) and particularly, it refers to the enjoyment of man. It is this shaping for climate and enjoyment which will subconsciously tell an Australian story.\(^{38}\)

What Ferguson constructs at Rottnest, is a settlement that tells a particular West Australian story; one of imported and experienced overseas memories, of the outdoors, the beach, of gathering together, and yearning for a simpler, more authentic experience. Rottnest presents an architecture that is familiar, yet is distinctly not; full of tensions that allow a culture to construct those crucial identifying myths from it. Whilst clearly much of the reason Rottnest occupies a significant place in the West Australian collective conscious is due to the natural beauty, and its legibility as an ‘island’,\(^{39}\) I suggest that it is also the architecture, specifically the interventions by Ferguson, that have consolidated this position in recent years. The use of Mediterranean imagery is key to enabling this, and raises questions about the use of imported ‘styles’, and how they can contribute and enhance a local discourse of identity and place. The Mediterranean construction at Rottnest represents another world, a place to escape, and must certainly contribute to what George Seddon describes: “Rottnest too has a mythic quality as a simpler, better, truer world than we usually tread.”\(^{40}\)
Endnotes

4 “Rottnest Again”, *The West Australian*, November 24, 1945, 6.
8 Ferguson, *Rottnest Island*, 78.
9 Ferguson, *Rottnest Island*, 84.
15 Ron Ferguson, “Rottnest”, *The Architect WA*, 81,8 (September 1965): 42.
18 Athol Thomas, “Rot sets in on Rottnest”, *Canberra Times*, June 19, 1971, 12.
19 Ferguson, interview with author, November 2015.
20 This was to be the Geordie and Longreach Bay settlements.
21 Ferguson, “Rottnest”, 45.
22 Howard Tanner, *Australian Housing in the Seventies* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1976), 133.
23 Rottnest Island Board, “Managers Report to Board, December 13,1972”. State Records Office WA: AU WA A681. They note “The new cottages are first rate internally and Mr. Ferguson has chosen a very functional set of designs”.
27 Ferguson, *Rottnest Island*, 90.
30 Ferguson, interview with author, November 2015.
33 Ferguson, “Rottnest”, 45.
39 Seddon, “The Rottnest Experience”, 134