



Roscommon House by Neil Cownie Architect. Image: Robert Frith, Acorn Photography.

roscommon house

Author **Neil Cownie**

Conversations with context: past, present & future.

As an architect who was raised and educated in Perth my first experience of feeling a 'sense of belonging' occurred as a graduate during a visit to the former home, and later museum, of neo-classical architect Sir John Soane in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. Soane rebuilt, remodelled and extended three townhouses between 1794 to 1824 to display his collection of artworks and artefacts.

The first time I walked through his house, and I've been back on a number of occasions, several rooms evoked this feeling of belonging through the manipulation of space, proportion, texture, access and detail. The room that resonated most strongly with me was the breakfast room — a centrally located 'inward' room where the manipulation of its square form, slightly domed ceiling, richly layered wall treatments and outlook to an internal courtyard created a living space in what is essentially a circulation space in the plan. That experience with interior spaces and how they affect an external built form which is also informed by, and relates to its context, is something that has influenced the way I consider design to this day. Furthermore it is the holistic combination of architecture and interior design with these aspirations that drives my studio.

Fast forward to 2015, when I received a client brief for a new family home with an underlying appreciation of this 'sense of belonging', the Roscommon House. In my search for the unique attributes of the site in Floreat I looked to the history of the suburb and surrounding areas — their town planning, architecture and ideals of the original subdivision.

It was one of several places that benefited from the shared vision and passion for the 'Garden Suburb Movement' of then Perth Town Clerk, William E Bold and surveyor Carl Klem. They implemented this progressive approach in Dalkeith (1913), Lathlain (1920), Menora and Coolbinia (1922), and Floreat and City Beach (1925). However, the Floreat and City Beach subdivisions were sparsely populated with new houses until the 1950s and 1960s, until the 1962 British Empire Games called for the construction of the new athletic stadium and 150 new modernist houses to accommodate the athletes. At that time, Australian Home Beautiful magazine boasted of the Games Village: "It is an experiment in living that will rank with Burley Griffin's development of Canberra, and Castlecrag in Sydney, and Eaglemont in Melbourne".¹ In Floreat you find the trace of many modernist architects.²

With a significant legacy of modernist and brutalist buildings still remaining in Floreat and City Beach I felt a responsibility to produce a design for this new house that not only served the needs and desires of my clients, but was also in conversation with the ethos of the suburb without mimicking or replicating the past.

As I began the design process, the iconic Brutalist concrete shell roof structure of the City Beach Surf Lifesaving building was demolished and the Town of Cambridge threatened to demolish the much-loved Brutalist concrete South City Beach kiosk. This is a blatant disregard and misunderstanding of our unique architectural heritage's importance by the local authority. It led me to take particular inspiration from those two buildings, and to promote the long-term appreciation of the suburb's built history to the local authority and the general public.

Other primary drivers of Roscommon House included passive solar design principles and cross ventilation, harking back to the ideals of the original modernist architecture of the suburb, where: "Faith in science and technology, aided by a resurgence of rational interest in climate as a determining factor, was seen as central to optimising modern housing

design³. The first and ongoing series of 'Notes on the Science of Building' and 'Sunshine and Shade in Australia' by the Commonwealth Experimental Building station were published in the 1950s and were influential new 'tools' for early modernist architects.

The Roscommon House was opened up to allow winter sun and ventilation to penetrate the 'pocket courtyards' of the building mass. These 'pocket courtyards' reinforce the 'Garden Suburb' ethos by bringing the feel of the garden into the home. Furthermore, the essentially single-storey house doubled the usable garden area by introducing an accessible roof garden.⁴

It's worth noting that the South City Beach Kiosk — which had been threatened with demolition by Council — was saved as a result of overwhelming public support around the time Roscommon House neared completion. Last year, Council undertook a community survey which generated 1,300 responses, 95% of them

in favour of repairing and retaining the iconic building. That result indicates that people see the value in preserving buildings from our shared past. Interestingly, the kiosk has been a popular spot for skateboarders, who access its kidney-shaped bowl-type roof and perform their moves for all to admire. It was therefore a special experience to witness local skateboarders on the roof of the Roscommon House as we conducted our first photo shoot earlier this year. It gave me the sense that the project had come full circle: it was inspired by its surroundings and is now being embraced by locals as an intrinsic part of the neighbourhood.

And that's an outcome that gives me great joy. ■

1. London, Geoffrey, Philip Goad, and Conrad Hamann. 150: An Unfinished Experiment in Living: Australian Houses 1950-65. Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing, 2017.
2. There were many architects who contributed to the modernist movement in Perth at the time including Iwan Iwanoff who, like Jeffrey Howlett, brought his interests from abroad, and Raymond Jones, who was educated by Robin Boyd; John White, Tony Brand, Geoff Summerhayes and Jim Johnson who were all educated in Perth. Some local architects had travelled abroad and experienced firsthand the works of the French architect Le Corbusier, and European-Americans including Richard Neutra, Raphael Soriano, Phillip Johnson, Eero Saarinen, Ray and Charles Eames and others. (Western Towns & Buildings by Margaret Pitt Morison and John White.) According to local architects and writers Margaret Pitt Morison and John White, Le Corbusier was probably the most influential international architect in relation to the early use of concrete in Western Australia (Pitt Morison, Margaret, and John White, eds. Western Towns and Buildings. Nedlands, 1979.) and his work has certainly influenced the use of concrete and its forms — as well as the interior colour palette — at Roscommon House. Outside influences aside, Western Australian architecture of the period 'led to a regionally distinctive form of architectural modernism, independent from the rest of Australia'. (London, Geoffrey, and Duncan Richards. Modern Houses: Architect-designed Houses in Western Australia from 1950 to 1960. Nedlands, W.A.: School of Architecture and Fine Arts, 1997.) The Brutalist architectural style is also represented in these suburbs, starting with the concrete structure of the Hale School Memorial hall by Marshall Clifton and Anthony Brand, with Brand Ferguson and Solarski in association, completed in 1961. That project appears on the RAIA WA Chapter's list of 'Significant Twentieth Century Architecture' and was the winner of RIBA's Bronze Medal in the 1960s (1961, 1962 or 1965 depending on your source: The Architect (1962), Molyneux, Ian. Looking around Perth: A Guide to the Architecture of Perth and Surrounding Towns. East Fremantle, W.A.: Wescolour Press, 1981, or Pitt Morison and White (Nedlands, 1979) respectively)
3. Pitt Morison, Margaret, and John White, eds. Western Towns and Buildings. Nedlands, 1979.
4. Interestingly this connection to landscape was identified in earlier examples of Western Australian architecture as 'bringing the outside in' (London, Geoffrey, Philip Goad, and Conrad Hamann. 150: An Unfinished Experiment in Living: Australian Houses 1950-65. Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing, 2017.)



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