

Two Buildings, Two Islands, One Trip

The Shared Architectural Journey of Michael Neylan and Ronald Jack Ferguson

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Two Buildings, Two Islands, One Trip

The Shared Architectural Journey of Michael Neylan and Ronald Jack Ferguson

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In 1959, six people from the office of architectural practice Chamberlin, Powell and Bon (CPB) embarked on a seven-month journey driving from London to Perth, Western Australia, in a nine-seat Volkswagen Microbus. Ronald Ferguson, Clare Ferguson, Michael Neylan, Eugene Mapp, Peter Deakins, and Elizabeth Vercoe had become friends while working in the office during the previous few years, a time mostly spent working together on the 1959 redevelopment project of the Barbican Estate. The impetus for the trip was Ronald and Clare Ferguson's need to return home, but the opportunity for adventure was quickly seized upon by the others. It was meticulously planned to take in as much architecture and culture as they could, with part of the route planned to partially retrace an expedition across Iran and Afghanistan made by author Robert Byron and recorded in his popular travelogue, *The Road to Oxiana* (1937).¹ The journey began in earnest from Dieppe, France, on August 25, 1959, and the six travelled quickly across Europe, through Switzerland and Italy, making their way down to Turkey. They then headed to Iran, where they spent three months exploring the country. Neylan left the group in Mashhad, making his way back to London via boat and train, while the

others continued through Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, where they finally caught a boat to Fremantle harbour.

This adventure would prove to be formative for all, but for Ronald Ferguson (1931–2024) and Michael Neylan (1931–2012), it would act as a touchstone for much of their future careers, and they would regularly reference its significance in the development of their architectural practice.² Shortly after completing the journey, both Ferguson and Neylan established their respective practices. Having won the competition for a new housing development at Harlow new town in 1961, Neylan joined up with fellow CPB employee Bill Ungless to form Neylan and Ungless, based in central London. Ferguson, after several short-lived joint practices, established R. J. Ferguson Architects in 1964, based in Perth, Western Australia. The works of both Ferguson and Neylan would draw heavily on their experiences on the trip, and their early projects demonstrate a closely aligned architectural expression and interest.

That a single journey directly informed two architectural practices on opposite

1.

Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1937).

2.

See for example: "Bishopsfield Estate, Harlow and Excalibur Estate prefabs," *Twentieth Century Society*, September 3, 2009, <https://c20society.org.uk/casework/an-invitation-to-pry-behind-closed-doors>.

sides of the world provides a unique lens through which to examine and challenge established notions of influence, translation, exchange, regionalism, and the siloes of architectural history. This paper looks primarily at two key housing projects by Neylan and Ferguson from the beginning of their careers, which both drew heavily on this single remarkable journey. The first is the Bishopsfield Estate in Harlow new town, designed by Neylan and Ungless and completed in 1967. A sprawling estate of 256 dwelling units, the project was designed immediately upon Neylan's return to London. The second is the redevelopment of Rottneest Island off the coast of Western Australia by R. J. Ferguson and Associates, the first stage of which was designed in 1971.

The research centres on two recently acquired private sources that provide compelling insight into the nature of this journey, and the impact it had on the travellers. Neylan's travel notes and letters home to his family, along with a vast collection of photographs and slides from the trip, were recently discovered in London, held in the personal archive of his widow, Catherine Neylan.³ Ronald Ferguson, shortly before his death, wrote down his recollection of the journey as

part of a memoir project to be published in an upcoming book, and shared them privately with the author.⁴ Ferguson has also published a series of photo books that document the trip.⁵ These sources reveal the ambitions, the scope, and the very personal and sociable nature of the journey, which would inform much of their respective careers.

3.

Catherine Neylan, private collection, London.

4.

Ronald Jack Ferguson, unpublished memoirs, 2024, collection of the author.

5.

Ronald Jack Ferguson, *Architectural Images* (West Perth, WA: R. J. Ferguson, 1996); Ronald Jack Ferguson, *Iran* (West Perth, WA: R. J. Ferguson, 2016); Ronald Jack Ferguson, *Istanbul* (West Perth, WA: R. J. Ferguson, 2016); Ronald Jack Ferguson, *Influences* (West Perth, WA: R. J. Ferguson, 2016).