

Peter Parkinson

(SLWA 325911PD 1983; 'Peter Parkinson Theatre Architecture', 1987, p.3; RAI A c.1990)

Peter Shaw Parkinson (1925-2014) was born 15 November 1925 at Tooting in London, the only child of Arthur and Agnes Parkinson. Peter attended Hackney Technical School 1938-41, and then undertook first year architecture studies within the South West Essex Technical College at Walthamstow, north-east London until 1943. He enlisted for Second World War service with the Royal Engineers during 1943-47. Parkinson was able to complete his architectural education with the assistance of a demobilisation grant, and studied at the Architectural Association (AA) School, London in 1947-50. Peter noted that his year group at the AA included Jeffrey Howlett (1928-2005), later to be an influential architect in Australia.

Parkinson's first architectural employment in the United Kingdom was at Ward & Austin on 1951 Festival of Britain pavilions; then at Westwood, Sons & Harrison and Devereux & Davies through 1951-52. Arriving in WA during March of 1952, Peter later stated that he had just 'two pounds ten shillings in pocket'. He eventually found work at Hawkins & Sands architects, where he was to remain for 13 years - including time as Chief Assistant (1960-65). At Hawkins & Sands Parkinson shared his streak of off-beat humour, often entertaining other staff as a comedic duo with fellow architect Bob Stafford. Peter worked briefly at Howlett & Bailey in 1965, before forming a practice with Alexander (Lex) W. Hill that carried through until 1979, when Ian G. Harris was taken into partnership and the company name changed to Hill Parkinson & Harris.

Peter's long time interest in theatre with involvement both as a participant and designer was to lead to a fine progression of innovative built works in WA. He

played his part in productions at the AA, and had produced a final year student thesis based on the potential of a hexagonal theatre to provide multiple and variable performance areas. After graduating, he assisted theatre expert Henry Elder in a national survey of British theatre. At Hawkins & Sands he had designed the Subiaco City Hall and the Northam Repertory Theatre. After his many well-received amateur productions in Perth during the late 1950s and early 1960s, theatrical colleagues of Parkinson recognised him 'as an architect whose experience of theatre causes him to view the design problem from the stage outwards, rather than from the auditorium'.

With the support of much lobbying from Parkinson's co-thespian admirers, the University of Western Australia (UWA) announced in 1965 that he had won the commission to design their new lecture theatre, and his parallel vocation helped set him on a further career as a theatre architect.

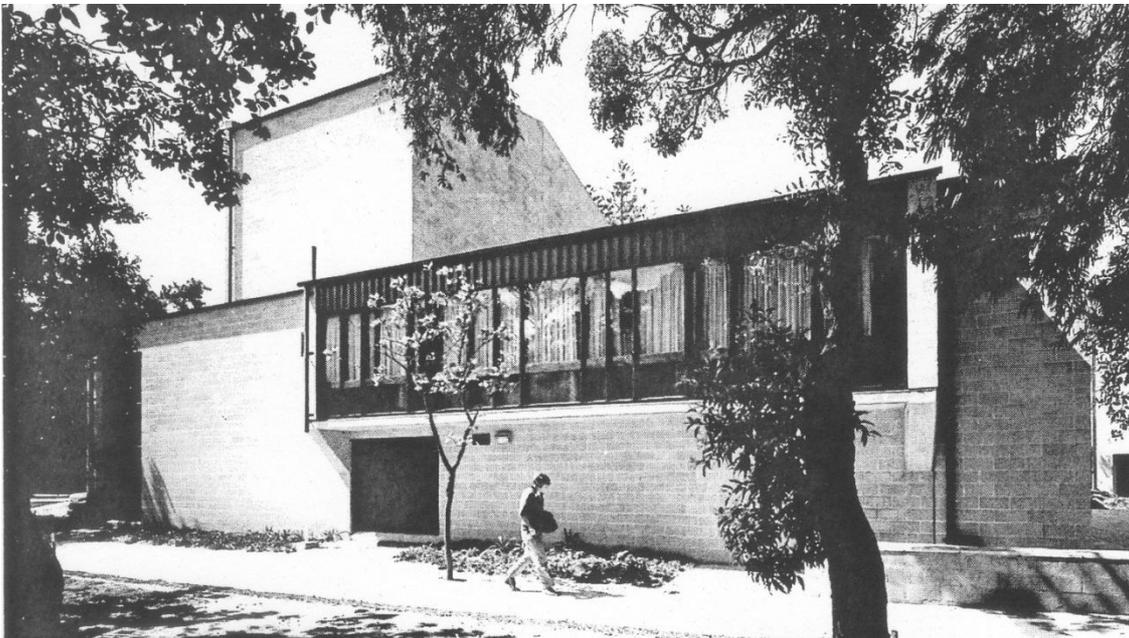


*"The most exciting new theatre building in Australia."
Katherine Brisbane. The Australian, 6.2.69.*

The Octagon Theatre at the University of Western Australia was opened in 1969.
(*Peter Parkinson Theatre Architecture*, p.6)

With the UWA commission secured, Parkinson left Howlett & Bailey and was able to join in practice with his long time friend and colleague Lex Hill. Peter

developed a thrust stage concept for the UWA project into the final form that was opened in 1969 as the Octagon Theatre, winning a Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) Bronze Medal Citation that year. The demand for theatre designs in WA is necessarily infrequent, and it was not until 1973 that Parkinson was asked by UWA to design a replacement for the old Dolphin Theatre. In the years between the Octagon and Dolphin schemes, Hill and Parkinson had established a reputation for quality residential designs. In 1971 they won a Clay Brick Award for the Little House at Applecross. The Dolphin Theatre, and the Music & Drama complex developed with the Public Works Department at the Churchlands campus of the Western Australian College of Advanced Education (WACAE) occupied the practice in 1974-76.



The New Dolphin Theatre at the University of Western Australia was opened in 1976.
(‘Peter Parkinson Theatre Architecture’, p.13)

The Hayman Theatre at the West Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) was completed early in 1978, and Parkinson then worked on an unrealised scheme for a campus theatre space at Murdoch University. He was commissioned in 1977 to design the Queens Park Theatre at Geraldton. Peter established the stage and auditorium philosophy, steered the project initially, and owing to a necessarily complete involvement with His Majesty's Theatre at Perth, it was then documented by Ian Harris. But the project for which Peter is best remembered was his work in recycling His Majesty's Theatre for the State Government during 1977-1980.



His Majesty's Theatre on the corner Hay and King Streets in Perth was first completed in 1904 to the design of William Wolf, and re-opened in May of 1980. (Wikipedia 2019)

His Majesty's is clearly the major work in Peter Parkinson's theatre portfolio. He noted that the original instructions to the commissioned architect were to "gut and rebuild the interior to produce a two tier modern theatre", and that a drawing was provided by the authorities as a "guide". Parkinson demurred, and wrote to Tom Brown (a theatre consultant appointed by the WA Government) suggesting a new approach, resulting in the retention of the essential magic of the Federation-era theatre. The adjoining hotel building, 'faded and shabby', was incorporated into the Theatre as ancillary space. Peter was entirely satisfied when he had finally overcome all the bureaucracy, and the curtain rose on 28 May 1980 'after three years of very satisfactory work'.

Following a flat period after the works on His Majesty's Theatre had been completed, the Hill Parkinson & Harris business was dissolved by mutual

agreement in January 1981. Parkinson then carried on as a sole practitioner, and in 1982 formed a separate theatre consultancy to work in conjunction with his architectural practice.

The completion of work at 'The Maj' coincided with a remarkable period of awards and recognition for Parkinson. He won an ACROD Award for the work at Churchlands WACAE in 1979, and in 1980 was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours for "Services to Architecture and the Theatre". His Majesty's Theatre won a 1980 RAIWA (WA) Architecture Award, and 1984 RAIWA (WA) Bronze Medal. He was a participant in the professional team involved in the design of the UWA Campus, awarded the WA Civic Design Award for 1986. An exhibition titled 'Peter Parkinson Theatre Architecture' was commissioned in 1986 by the York Theatre Festival, and mounted at His Majesty's Theatre for a period in early 1987. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition provides a broader description of Parkinson's theatrical times in Perth, and the accompanying people of consequence to his life and career.



His Majesty's Theatre, first completed in 1904, was re-opened in May of 1980.
(Perth Theatre Trust 2019, <https://www.ptt.wa.gov.au>)

Parkinson's often-scathing social commentaries over 25 years (1959-1984) were published regularly in the periodical *The Architect* under the by-line 'Caliban', as were his many criticisms in the professional journals up to the early 1990s. He noted in 1997 that "at this stage however architects became so thin skinned and publishers so timid all critical writing ceased, and only comic writing is now undertaken".

Peter was 'an influential and charismatic figure' in architectural education from 1965 to 1991, teaching and tutoring at the WA Schools of Architecture within Perth Technical College, WAIT / Curtin University and the University of Western Australia. He served the profession on the Chapter Council of the RAlA (WA) from 1987; was Vice President 1988-1990, and President 1991-1992. Parkinson was made a Life Fellow of the RAlA in 1989.

Peter Parkinson died at a nursing home in Wembley 24 April 2014 aged 88 years, and was cremated at Karrakatta. He had married Helen Jean Thomas in October 1956, and the couple had four children – Jane, Teresa, Robert and Martin. Helen died in September 2014 at 84 years of age. With an extensive archive of his personal papers and drawings kept at the State Library of Western Australia, the creative and humour-filled life works of Parkinson would provide extensive material for a detailed manuscript.

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