



John Oldham (Jan Oldham, *The Architect*, Spring 1999, p.15)

John Bramston Russell Oldham (1907–1999) was born 19 December 1907 at Mount Street in Perth. His parents were Charles Lancelot (1865-1920) and Susan Hoyle (nee Russell, 1876-1960) Oldham, who had married at St John's Church Fremantle in November of 1901. The couple had nine children between 1902 and 1918, although two died as infants - Dorothy Russell b.1902, Charles Russell b.1904 (d.1905), Mollie Russell b.1905, John Bramston Russell b.1907, Robert Russell b.1910, Alban Russell b.1912 (d.1917), Richard Russell b.1914, Charles Lancelot Russell b.1915, and Patricia Suzanne b.1918.

Born in Ballarat and moving from Victoria to gold-boom Western Australia in the mid-1890s, John's father Charles was a prominent architect. In 1897, he had commenced practice in Fremantle with J. Herbert Eales (1864-1957). The climax of Oldham's WA buildings came in 1912 when he was commissioned (with Alfred Cox, 1869-1942) for the design of new AMP offices on the corner of St George's Terrace and William Street. The seven-level building, completed 1915, was one of Perth's most impressive landmarks until its demolition in 1972. John's mother, Susan ('Dolly'), was an accomplished artist. Both of Oldham's maternal grandparents were also artists, and his paternal grandfather James, headmaster of the Central Training School in Ballarat, established the Ballarat Art Gallery.

John Oldham was educated at Christ Church Grammar School and as a boarder at Guildford Grammar School. From 1924 he served an architectural apprenticeship to the firm Oldham Boas & Ednie-Brown in Perth. After the death of Charles Oldham in 1920 at just 54 years of age, his practice had been taken over by Harold Boas (1883-1980) on the condition that the Oldham name was retained, and the firm became Oldham Boas & Ednie-Brown in 1923, when Colin Ednie-Brown, who had been articled to Oldham from 1919, became a partner.

In 1928 John joined the staff of Rodney Alsop (1881-1932), where he worked on designs for the new University of Western Australia buildings at Crawley, he then went for a year of study at the Architecture Atelier at the University of Melbourne. Oldham returned to Perth in 1930, and capitalised on his graphic skills to set up the 'Poster Studio' with Harold Krantz (1906-1999), where, even during the Great Depression, they were able to make a living out of producing lino-cut poster prints. In the mid-1930s, Oldham established himself as an architectural designer, specialising in the rendering and presentation of architectural drawings.



Perspective of the Oldham Boas & Ednie-Brown designed Gledden Building, at the south-east corner of Hay and William Streets in Perth. The people shown are very similar to those drawn by John Oldham in other illustrations. (*The West Australian*, 11 September 1936, p.26).

In 1936 John met Ruby ('Ray') Gertrude McClintock, a journalist with *The West Australian* newspaper, and they were married the following year. In the late 1930s the couple joined the Communist Party and embraced its programmes – especially the Workers' Art Guild. Oldham contributed substantially to the design and production of posters and programmes. They moved to Sydney, where he joined the prominent architectural firm of Stephenson & Turner and, in 1939, was given the task of designing the Australian Pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair. Of frugal financial means at the time, with generous local hospitality the couple were able to enjoy an intellectually-rewarding American tour.



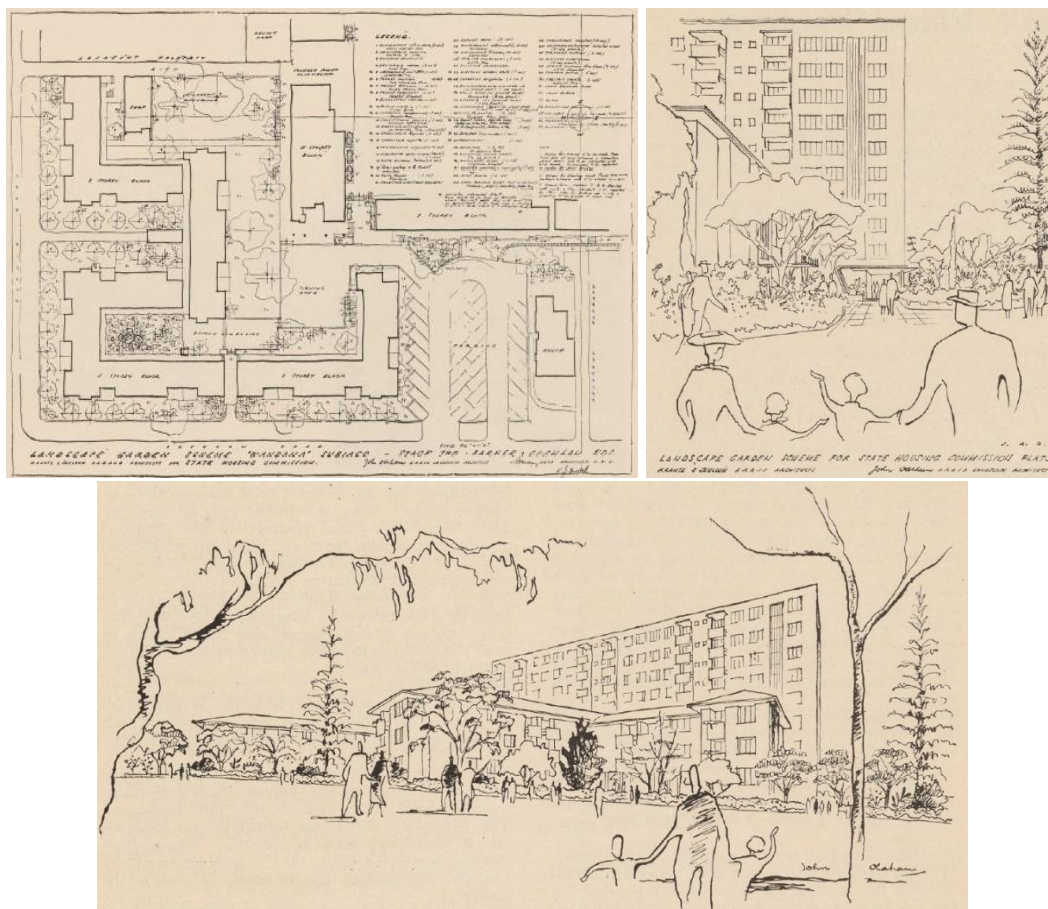
Axel Poignant's wedding portrait of John and Ray Oldham (*Fremantle Arts Review*, February 1987, p.18).

Prior to leaving for the USA, Oldham's first dedicated architectural partnership was formed in 1938–1939 while working in Sydney, when he collaborated with Kalgoorlie-born Arthur Baldwinson (1908-1969) to design a housing project near Coomaditchy Lagoon, Port Kembla. Baldwinson was on the organising committee for the formation of the Australian Modern Architecture Research Society (MARS), which during the Second World War (1939-1945) was to have a great influence on Oldham's design ethos.

Returning from America in September 1939, Ray became pregnant and the pair decided to return to Western Australia arriving in May 1940. John joined once more with Harold Krantz as a partner. The firm designed large blocks of modern flats and Oldham also did watercolour renditions for Oldham Boas Ednie-Brown and other architects. John was neglecting the architectural practice for work with the communist party, the war meant private work virtually ceased, and due to his and Ray's left-wing views, former friends often snubbed them. They were under observation by the Criminal Investigation Bureau, which was monitoring Communist sympathisers. John was considered a leading communist in Western Australia, as he was the Chairman of the Budget Protest Committee, an organisation that was a front for the party at the time of its illegality.

The family moved to Sydney in 1941 just before restriction orders on them were to be implemented, and where they worked actively for the Communist Party. Significantly they became enthusiastic gardeners at this time. During the war, Oldham worked for the Department of the Interior before going on to work for the Department of Post-War Reconstruction. He was the Exhibition Director of the Australian display at the 1947 British Empire Exhibition held in Sydney.

By 1950 he worked for Van Dyke, builders of pre-fabricated houses, and later headed the architectural and town planning drawing office of the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Authority; designing construction towns, power stations and mobile housing. Ray had been researching English and American garden design and John became particularly interested in the work of F.L. Omstead, the designer of New York's Central Park. Both, although committed to socialist ideology, became less interested in 'the party' machine and channelled their energy into developing a new design discipline in Australia – called landscape architecture. John designed his first garden for their home at Baulkham Hills and discovered colonial gardens of the English School. In 1953 John finally had time to qualify as an architect in New South Wales. They returned to WA in August 1954, where in December 1954 John was registered with the Architects Board of Western Australia (no 278). He had been offered work by Oldham Boas & Ednie-Brown, but then had a nervous breakdown. He decided to specialize in landscape architecture and became a full-time landscape architect.



John Oldham's landscape design plan and sketches for 'Wandana' at Subiaco, a Krantz & Sheldon designed State Housing Commission complex (*The Architect*, March 1957, pp.29-31).

In 1956 Oldham worked for the State Housing Commission designing the gardens for the Wandana Flats at Subiaco, and undertook private commissions. In 1959 he joined the WA Public Works Department (PWD) with the proviso that he was allowed to undertake some private work. Most of his early work for the PWD was on schools and hospitals. Projects included; the landscaping of nine major dams including Serpentine and Wellington Dams, the Regional Environment Plan for the Ord River Scheme, the Peel-Harvey Inlet Study and the landscaping of the new freeway system and Narrows Interchange.

Historian Dr Dorothy Erickson notes that John: ‘was the first Government landscape architect for Western Australia and the first appointed to a Government Department in Australia. He received his first landscape architecture qualifications from the United Kingdom, becoming a licentiate of the British Institute of Landscape Architects by 1959. He held a position with the PWD until 1972, when he retired following a heart attack.’ He then undertook selected commissions, including landscape design for the St Louis Estate at Claremont.



Ray and John Oldham publications: *Western Heritage* (Lamb Paterson, Osborne Park, 1967); *Western Heritage Part 2*, George Temple-Poole (UWA Press, Nedlands, 1980); *Gardens In Time* (Lansdowne Press, Sydney, 1980).

John and Ray were very active in conservation matters. They were founding members of the National Trust (WA) and were prominent in the fight to save some of WA's heritage buildings during the 1960s and 1970s. One of John's favourite quotes was: "A city without its old buildings is like a man without a memory". He and Ray were a team in everything, and jointly published three books. Ray held a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Western Australia, and also worked as a journalist from the 1950s for *The West Australian* and *Sunday Times*, writing about emergent building design work under the pseudonym Jane Scott.

John Oldham spent a lot of time studying and promoting the discipline of landscape architecture. He developed many international contacts and travelled widely attending conferences and giving lectures, particularly after 1964 when he became a representative for Australia on the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA).

Oldham was a pioneer of landscape architecture in Australia. Among his many achievements were the landscaping of the Narrows Interchange, Parliament House, Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Serpentine and Wellington Dams, Western Australian Institute of Technology, Crestwood Estate and developing a master plan for Kings Park and the Swan River foreshores.

John's professional qualities were acknowledged by the conferring of the honorific titles Associate of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) in 1953, and Fellow of the RAIA in 1962. Internationally renowned as a landscape architect, Oldham was admitted as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1990. In 2000, Oldham Park at the Narrows Interchange was named in his honour.



Rear garden of Oldham Residence at 11 Saladin Street Swanbourne. The two-storey weatherboard-clad house had been built by 1906, was purchased by the Oldhams in 1957, and held by family until recent times (domain.com.au, 2025).

John Oldham died 9 August 1999 at Swanbourne aged 91 years, and Ray Oldham died 4 February 2005 at Claremont aged 93 years. They had two daughters, Patricia ('Tish') and Jan.

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