

THE HISTORY OF PICA'S BUILDING FROM 1896 TO NOW

EDUCATION TO



At PICA we recognise that we are situated on the lands of the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation and pay our respects to Elders past, present and those emerging in community. We acknowledge all First Nations people and the importance of their care and continued connection to culture, community and Country.

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Authors/Contributors: Jenn Garland, Lisa Liebetrau, Vaughn McGuire, Hannah Mathews

Research and Essay: Lisa Liebetrau, Jenn Garland

Editor: Sam Leung

Design: Manda Campbell

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YANDILUP AND GOOLOOGLOOLUP

The Aboriginal land on which PICA's building stands is Whadjuk Noongar boodja. Noongar Country stretches across the entire southwest of Western Australia, encompassing 14 language groups, including that of the Whadjuk people on whose land Perth is situated.

The area of the Perth Cultural Centre was, and still is, known as Yandilup – a name passed on by Noongar leaders of the past, including Yellagonga, Midgegooroo, Yagan and Munday. Meaning “the reeds are on and by this place”¹, Yandilup spans from the Cultural Centre down across Roe Street to St Mary's Cathedral at Victoria Square². The area, where the Perth Railway Station now resides, was once a low-lying wetland called Gooloo-goolup³. Renamed Lake Kingsford by European settlers and later drained for urban infill, Gooloogoolup was originally part of a large system of 12 lakes now reduced to Lake Monger, Lake Gwelup and Hyde Park⁴.

Waterways such as these were home to the Waugyl – the giant rainbow snake of the Nyitting (Noongar Dreaming). Tiger snakes, turtles, gilgies, fish and water birds could be found in this area. The draining of the wetlands and clearing of the land caused great sorrow to the

Whadjuk people. Boort (trees) that housed ancestral spirits and marked the boundaries of areas were felled, making the lands dangerous for Noongar people.

Yandilup was a place where people would come to meet and trade, sharing stories and songs. Red ochre extracted from the ground was used in ceremonial practices. Spearheads, mined from the Perth Hills escarpment, were traded, among other implements and tools that could not be made here. Families would travel to find new partners, with people from Yued Country in the north, Ballar-dong Country in the east, Wang-katha Country of the Goldfields and Pinjarup Country in the south meeting to marry and form new connections to Country and people.

Dispossessed from their traditional homelands in 1829, Yandilup – a place of meeting for Noongar people – became a place of separation. Fanny Balbuk Yooreel (c.1840–1907), a well-known figure of Noongar resistance, famously walked though this area along traditional bidi (track), protesting the occupation of her home. Noongar people were restricted from accessing the Perth Cultural Centre area between 1927 and 1954⁵.

The above text was written in collaboration with Whadjuk Noongar Elder, Vaughn McGuire, except where specifically referenced.

1896

The Education Department begins construction on the new Government School



1897–1936

The Government School officially opens as part of the Perth Central School complex and boys and girls move in from neighbouring schools

1936

Population growth and overcrowding sees female students move to the new Perth Girls' School in East Perth

1936–1947

The Government School now operates solely as the Perth Boys' School

1942

Concerns over WWII air attacks see the school close for almost a year

1947–1958

The Perth Boys' School becomes the Perth Boys' High School

1958–1988

A forerunner to TAFE, Perth Technical College moves in, opening a new branch to expand their main campus on St Georges Terrace

1988–1990

Arts collective Praxis moves in from their Fremantle site and the building begins its new life as an exhibiting space

1991–current

Following a refurbishment, the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) is officially opened by Deputy Premier, The Honorary Ian Taylor (MLA)

2000

The building joins the State Register of Heritage Places

FROM EDUCATION TO ARTS AND CULTURE

It's difficult to miss the notorious 'red brick' building at number 51 James Street, Northbridge. With its iconic clock tower and bricks 'n' mortar presence, the home of the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) sits somewhat apart from the contemporary and Brutalist architecture of its neighbours in Perth's bustling and creative Cultural Centre. Co-located with the Art Gallery of WA, WA Museum Boola Bardip, State Library of WA and State Theatre Centre of WA, the landmark buildings of PICA and The Blue Room Theatre are all that remains of the several schools that once stood in the area.

Now the home of contemporary arts in WA, the building was originally designed to be part of a large education complex of separate schools collectively known as Perth Central School. Visitors standing at its main entrance, marked by three arches, can look up and observe a decorative frieze panel with the words, 'Government School' on the building's exterior. Closer inspection of the brickwork reveals etched dates and initials from past students who attended one of the many schools the building housed from 1897 to 1988 – almost a century!





1829 TO 1890s

COLONIAL HISTORY AND EDUCATION

Captain James Stirling founded Perth as the capital of the Swan River Colony in Boorloo on Whadjuk Noongar Country in 1829. It was Australia's first non-penal settlement. In the decades that followed, the State requested convicts from Britain to build infrastructure and provide agricultural labour. Almost 10,000 convicts arrived at the colony between 1850 and 1868 to begin work on the City of Perth as we now know it⁶.

The construction of the school building that now houses PICA began in 1896, at a time when Perth's population was growing rapidly thanks to the discovery of gold deposits in Marble Bar and Kalgoorlie. As a result, Perth had the greatest internal migration yet seen in Australia's history. In the decade between 1891 to 1901⁷, the population of the Perth area quadrupled from 9,617 to 43,798. The gold rush created a flurry of activity, with the government attaining the essential resources to begin major infrastructure projects, focusing on transport and education.

The first attempts at formal education in Western Australia began in the 1830s in churches and old courthouse buildings but were hampered by poor attendance rates (due to various epidemics and children working from a young age), the absence of government funding, scarcity of books and lack of teachers. The first dedicated building for education opened its doors in 1854 – the Perth Boys' School on St Georges Terrace. It was not until 1893 that the Western Australia Department of Education was established to provide free, compulsory secular education for children aged six to 14. Aboriginal children, however, were excluded from these provisions and were not admitted to state schools until the 1950s as part of the government's assimilation policy⁸.

Prior to the gold rush, Perth lacked a defining architectural style but once Western Australia struck gold, buildings were “dipped bodily into a bucket of pure Victoriana and taken out, dripping with plaster and spiked with towers and cupolas in a bewildering variety of shapes, to dry”⁹. These classical Victorian buildings were designed to foster a sense of community.

During the end of the 19th century, the number of architects in Perth grew along with the population, notably Richard Roach Jewel, Henry Lawson and George Temple Poole. Poole, the Principal Architect of Western Australia from 1891 to 1897, was responsible for delivering state government buildings, including the primary design of the Government School on James Street, which now houses PICA. His work can be seen from the tall windows of the PICA building, including the Perth Railway Station and Jubilee Building of the WA Museum. Although he was influenced by the British movements of the time, Poole created a unifying Western Australian-style by responding to local conditions, incorporating verandas and using locally quarried stone.

It’s fitting that a building now dedicated to the arts was designed by a man who was himself an artist. Poole was known as a talented painter and founding member of the Wilgi Sketching Club, a precursor to the West Australian Society of Arts. *Wilgii* is the Wajarri word for the red ochre of the midwest and the red bricks that characterise Poole’s public buildings take their colour from the iron-rich clays found in Western Australia.

PICA’s architecture is Federation Free Classical Style, with decorative wrought iron, moulded stucco, slated eaves, columns and arches. This style incorporates the modern simplicity of the Federation Free Style with more Classical revival elements, reminiscent of Greek and Roman architecture. The influence of Neoclassicism – a style that was a major force in European academies at the time – can be seen in Poole’s design approach throughout Perth, with columns and arches reflected in his Jubilee and Perth Mint buildings.

While flower and sea-dragon motifs adorn the frieze above PICA’s main entrance, the building has less decorative elements in its exterior mouldings than others of the same period and by the same architect. This was intentional, following the belief that a pared-back approach suited a school’s purpose. The building’s design was celebrated at the time, with the Perth Girls’ School Headmistress noting in 1947 that, “It was the last word in school architecture of the day”¹⁰.

BOYS' AND GIRLS' SCHOOL

1897 TO 1936

With growing migration, the need for schools in Perth became a priority as enrolments rose rapidly. In one year alone, from 1895 to 1896, enrolments jumped from 6,451 pupils to 9,086¹¹. In 1896, construction began on the new Government School on James Street to provide free and secular education. This school would eventually house PICA, and was officially opened on 18 January 1897 by Edward Wittenoom, the Minister for Education¹².

The school was part of a new complex of buildings collectively called Perth Central School – the first of its type in the state. Unusually large for the time, the complex was designed to be a complete educational facility, incorporating separate schools for young children (4–7 years) and older boys and girls all on one site, as well as purpose-built facilities for vocational education. Central schools provided pathways for students leaving primary school and offered commercial, industrial and domestic courses leading to admission into a technical school or training college.

The Government School housed separate schools for boys and girls who were kept strictly apart. Perth Boy's School, which had outgrown its premises on St. Georges Terrace, occupied the bottom floor, while the girls on the upper story had moved from another building in the complex¹³. During this time, girls would enter through the main entrance used today under the clock tower, and boys from the western portico side, now PICA's Performance Space. The original Boy's Headmaster's room, Hat Room and classroom were eventually converted to create PICA's Performance Space. The carpark at the rear of PICA's building once provided a playground for the boys of the Government School, while the water fountain and wash basins by the single storey veranda still remain.

During World War I, many government schools produced vast quantities of goods for war funds during manual training and household management classes. Perth's Government School was no different and the girls' and boys' assembly halls (now PICA's gallery spaces) were a hive of activity, with students packing support parcels to be sent to soldiers and hospitals between 1914–18.

In 1936, the Government School's tenure of educating both girls and boys, albeit separately, ended. Overcrowding during the Great Depression years following the war saw all female students (approximately 500) moved to the new Perth Girls' School in East Perth, which would run until 1962.

GENDER AND CO-EDUCATION

During the 19th century, co-education of boys and girls together was not yet widely adopted and schooling differed greatly, based on students' gender. When Perth Modern School opened in 1911 in Subiaco it was the first and only co-educational high school in the state – part of the 'modern' philosophy that it took its name from. Girls at the Perth Central School complex learnt laundry, cookery, housewifery, dressmaking, first aid and infant welfare. It was not until 1912 that Perth Central School began offering girls alternative courses of study, such as languages and natural sciences. In contrast, boys engaged in manual training, music and sport, such as boxing, soccer and cricket.

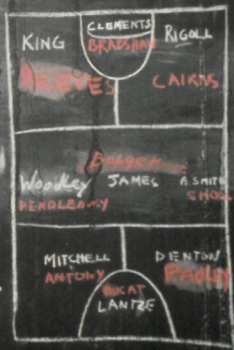




Upper Case sheet to be completed
in ALL RESPECTS FOR
Thursday 5th July.

HISTORY ASSIGNMENT: (To be handed in
next Tuesday 29th June)

Give reasons for the jealousy that
developed between the people of the Port Phillip
district and the people of Sydney from 1840 onwards.





ARM

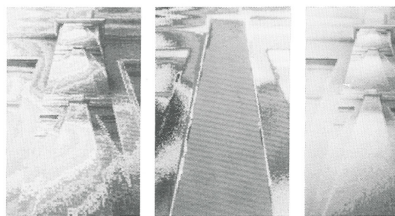
Art Reading Material

Feb/March 1991 Issue 1



PERTH INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS NEWSLETTER NO. 2, N

PICA



PILASTER



A Contemporary Concept for the Cultural Centre



CONTEMPORARY ARTS

1936 TO 1988

PERTH BOYS' SCHOOL TO TECHNICAL COLLEGE

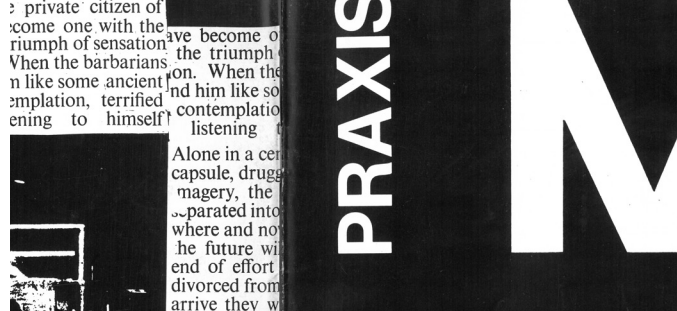
In the years that followed, what was originally known as the Government School on James Street changed names and direction as new schools were erected to accommodate the growing population. From 1936–47, Perth Boys' School occupied the whole building. Enrolment figures reached 1,004 boys by 1941, from just 65 boys in 1847 when the school was first established in different premises¹⁴.

In 1942, during World War II, the school closed for much of the year as its proximity to the Perth Railway Station and army barracks made it a potential target for air attacks. In 1947 the building was upgraded, becoming the Perth Boys' High School, before closing its doors in 1958 due to the growing commercialisation of the surrounding area, which saw residents pushed further from the city and an accompanying decrease in student numbers. Former students from the Perth Boys' High School still visit PICA today and recall memories of their formative years.

In 1958, PICA's building undertook its final iteration as an educational facility, housing a business school known as the James Street Branch of Perth Technical College – a forerunner to TAFE. The main campus of Perth Technical College was established in 1910 on St Georges Terrace and offered courses in chemistry, assaying, engineering, art and design, woodwork, metalwork and minerology. It also offered courses licensed from The University of Adelaide before the state's first university – The University of Western Australia – admitted students in 1913. In 1987, the staff and education resources of Perth Technical College were absorbed into Curtin University of Technology as it transitioned from being Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) into a university.



1975 TO 1988
PRAXIS



AND PERTH'S BURGEONING CONTEMPORARY ART COMMUNITY

In the mid-1970s, artists and arts organisations began advocating for a contemporary art space. In March 1975, a collective of visual artists founded Praxis to promote contemporary art in Western Australia through exhibitions, forums, workshops, publications and advocacy. Beginning with a meeting at Western Australian artist Guy Grey-Smith's residence at Quinn's Rocks, Praxis opened its first gallery in central Perth, between Hay and Murray Street in May of that same year, before eventually relocating to Packerham Street, Fremantle in 1981.

Praxis and other art collectives, including Media-Space, continued to advocate for a larger, more central city space. In 1985 they proposed the old Perth Boys' School on James Street as a site to the State Government. On 29 September 1986, the then-Minister for the Arts and State Treasurer, the Honourable David Parker (MLA) announced a new contemporary institute for art. The Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts would be "a centre of excellence, experimentation and innovation"¹⁵, supported by both the State and Commonwealth governments. Several prominent Western Australian arts advocates were key to this achievement, including Bob Poolman, Janet Holmes à Court, Brian McKay and Alan Vizents.

In late 1987, in anticipation of a new city home and with incoming government funding, artist-run-initiative Praxis transitioned into the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts. In 1988, the newly created PICA moved into 51 James Street and the building's new life began. PICA was incorporated as a company 1989.

1988 TO 1990

THE FIRST EXHIBITIONS

On 10 September 1988, the first exhibition at the old Perth Boys' School opened in collaboration with PICA and ARTRAGE. Titled *A New A Gender*, the exhibition focused on gender, sexuality and politics and was led by ARTEMIS Women's Art Inc., an artist collective who fought for better representation of women's contemporary art practice in Western Australia.

Many exhibitions and events were to follow, including Gotham Dance Party to raise money to improve building conditions (November 1989); *Pilasters*, curated by Ted Snell, in which 12 artists responded to PICA's pilasters, or rectangular columns (February 1989); and *A Spacious Central Location: installations for PICA and the Cultural Centre*, curated by John Barrett-Lennard, which explored evolutions of contemporary art, the ambitions underlying PICA and the complex dynamics of 'cultural centres' (March – April 1990).

During this time, PICA engaged with its international counterparts, co-hosting *Metro Mania*, the *2nd Australia & Regional Artists' Exchange* (ARX), which brought together artists from Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. PICA continued to host ARX programs until the end of the program's run in 1999.



1991 TO NOW

BUILDING REFURBISHMENT AND PICA IS BORN

After a year's refurbishment, overseen by Donaldson and Warn Architecture, the revamped building – by then part of the Perth Cultural Centre – had its official opening in November 1991. The building was not listed on the State Register of Heritage Places until 2000 and many of its original internal fittings were removed. It is still possible to view several original period details, including the semi-circular stained-glass fanlights over the entrances to the West End Gallery on the first floor (formerly the Girls' Assembly Hall) and the panelled decorative glazed sections of the ceiling over the Central Gallery (once the Boys' Assembly Hall). Although the original timber mantelpieces in the classrooms (now artist studios and offices) have been bricked up, the picture rails and some blackboards remain. It's possible to imagine maps and other teaching materials hanging from them as they once did.

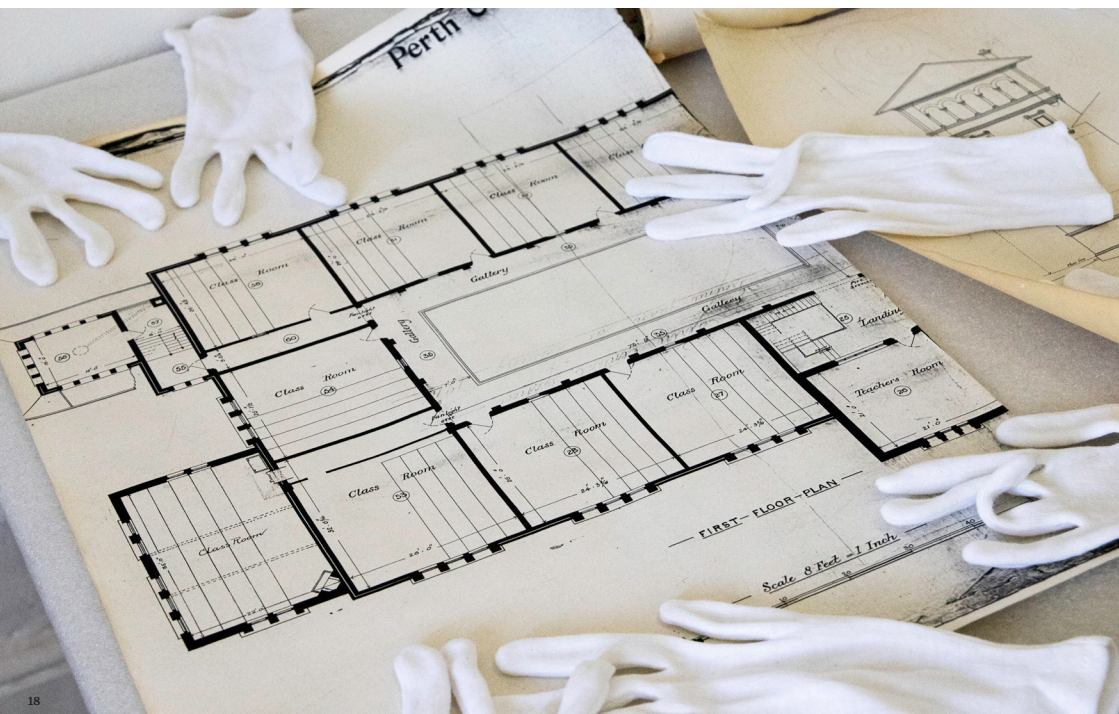
On 8 November 1991, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts was officially opened by the Deputy Premier, the Honourable Ian Taylor (MLA). John Barrett-Lennard continued as PICA's Acting Director until March 1989 when Noel Sheridan commenced as the inaugural Director, overseeing the program and building revisions. To celebrate the opening of its newly refurbished home, PICA launched a new publication, *ARM (Art Reading Material)*, which was circulated at the official opening.

Since 1988, PICA has been presenting experimental and innovative contemporary art across all art forms, including visual art, dance, performance and music, in its Northbridge home. Director Noel Sheridan returned to Ireland in 1993 after initiating what was to become the *Hatched: National Graduate Show* – Australia's only national graduate exhibition which continues today – and a major First Nations project that saw Fitzroy Crossing artists living and working in the building for a period. Sheridan was succeeded by Sarah Miller, who championed PICA's multidisciplinary remit and initiated programs still associated with PICA, including *Dancers are Space Eaters* and *Putting on Act*. In 2006, Amy Barrett-Lennard became PICA's third director, overseeing the organisation's growth and establishment of an award-winning donor program. In late 2022, PICA appointed its fourth director, Hannah Mathews, a curator with a specialisation in performance.

A CREATIVE FUTURE

PICA remains a pillar of Perth's contemporary arts scene. While it is not a collecting institution in a conventional sense, PICA holds history, whether that be in its impressive archive of more than three decades of programming material and ephemera; in its creaky floorboards and old classrooms; or in the memories of an estimated 1.5 million people who have visited the building since 1991.

PICA's building is a marker of time – both to the important First Nations gathering places below and around it; the consumptive nature of colonisation and its built environments; the experiences of the many children and teaching staff who knew the building as a place of education and institutionalisation; and more recently to the re-purposing and gentrification of heritage sites into cultural hubs. In 2023, PICA's approach to working with artists still parallels the very ethos of many schools: we work with artists across the various stages of their practices, providing multiple platforms for learning, development and engagement across art forms. In many ways, the building exists today as it was intended over a century ago, as a place of education and community.



ENDNOTES

1. Translated in 2014 by Noongar Elder, Len Collard, in *This city is Wadjuk Country: Aboriginal heritage in the City of Perth before 1829* cited in Gnarla Boodja Mili Mili (Our Country on Paper), Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Perth, 2019.
2. Aboriginal History Research Unit, Gnarla Boodja Mili Mili (Our Country on Paper), Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Perth, 2019.
3. Aboriginal History Research Unit, 2019.
4. Noel Nannup and Alison Nannup, 'Boorloo: The filling up and emptying of the Perth metropolitan lakes', in AGWA 1979 – A Brutalist Gallery in Perth, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 2019, pp. 24–25.
5. Under the Aborigines Act 1905 (WA) instigated by A.O. Neville, the City of Perth was proclaimed a Prohibited Area, making it unlawful for Aboriginal people to enter without a permit or 'Native Pass'.
6. National Museum of Australia, *Defining Moments: Founding of Perth*, accessed April 2023, <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/founding-of-perth>.
7. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Historical and Colonial Census Data Archive (HCCDA)*, 2019, accessed April 2023 https://hccda.abs.gov.au/Collated_Census_Tables/.
8. Nearby on William Street, the Perth Native School had operated from 1841 to 1845 before Aboriginal children were later sent to the Wanneroo Mission. The school's focus, however, was on 'civilising' and 'separating them from the bush' rather than education as we know it today.
9. Museum of Perth, *Railways, Weirs & the Goldrush (1881–1914)*, accessed March 2023, <https://www.museumofperth.com.au/railways-weirs-the-goldrush-18811914>.
10. Perth Girls' School: An Historical Retrospect 1847–1947, Government Printer, Perth, 1947, p. 25.
11. B. Haynes et al (ed.), *Documents on Western Australian education 1830 – 1973*, Claremont Teachers College, Claremont, 1976.
12. Following introduction of the Elementary Education Act 1871 by the WA Legislative Council, compulsory education for children as a fundamental human right was mandated. In 1899 the law was amended to introduce free education, abolishing fees for government schooling.
13. This school, later named Girdlestone High School after a former Headmistress, was demolished in 1979 to make way for the Art Gallery of Western Australia.
14. Marion Stewart, *The PICA Building's Journey*, publisher unknown, 2004.
15. New culture group to start in Perth', *The West Australian*, 29 September 1986, p. 20.

IMAGE CAPTIONS

- pg 1.** (Front cover) Remnants from Perth Technical College found in PICA building prior to renovations, 1989, courtesy of John Barrett-Lennard, photo: Chris Ha
- pg 4.** Perth Cultural Centre showing PICA and Blue Room Theatre (background), State Library of WA and WA Museum Boola Bardip (foreground), 1989, courtesy of John Barrett-Lennard, photo: Chris Ha
- pg 6.** James Street and Perth Boys' School, 1906, State Library of WA Image Archive, 010017PD, accessed April 2023, https://purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b1763551_1
- pg 9.** Laundry class at Perth Girls' School, 1920, State Library of WA Image Archive, 049231PD, accessed April 2023, https://purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b2003724_1
- A boxing lesson supervised by teacher Ern (Richard Ernest) Halliday at the Perth Boys' School, 1929, State Library of WA Image Archive, 049231PD, accessed April 2023, https://purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b2518150_1
- pg 10.** Original stairwell to PICA's first floor entrance prior to building modifications, 1989, courtesy of John Barrett-Lennard, photo: Chris Ha
- pg 11.** Chalkboard from Perth Boys' High School found intact behind a wall during PICA building modifications, 1990, photo: John Barrett-Lennard
- Partial removal of first floor during PICA building modifications, 1990, photo: John Barrett-Lennard
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- pg 13.** *ARM (Art Reading Material)* first edition, designed by Max Moore, edited by Noel Sheridan, published by PICA Press, 1991, PICA Ephemera Collection
- Metro Mania*, Australia and Regions Artists' Exchange (ARX) pamphlet, 1989, ARX, Perth, PICA Ephemera Collection
- National Graduate Show 93* Catalogue cover, designed by Craig Trivella, edited by Noel Sheridan, published by PICA Press, 1993, PICA Ephemera Collection
- PICA proposal for a contemporary concept for the cultural centre, 1985, PICA Ephemera Collection
- Promotional material for *Pilasters* exhibition, curated by Ted Snell in PICA Newsletter, no.2, 1989, PICA Ephemera Collection
- pg 14.** Perth Boys' School Magazine found during renovations, 1934, PICA Ephemera Collection
- pg 15.** *Praxis M* first edition front cover designed by Tim Betts, back cover by Brian McKay, edited by Merrill Findlay, Julian Goddard and Julie Prott, published by Praxis, 1983, PICA Ephemera Collection
- pg 16.** Audience on PICA balcony, 1989, courtesy of John Barrett-Lennard, photo: Chris Ha
- pg 18.** Lisa Liebetrau, *This is not a neutral space*, 2022, PICA Studio Residency. Perth Central School building plans. Photo taken by Paul Sutherland during Lisa Liebetrau, *This is not a neutral space*, PICA Studio Residency, 2022
- pg 20.** (Backcover) Alan Boyd roof pating on PICA roof, responding to Bond Tower behind, 1990, photo: John Barrett-Lennard



PICA