A perspective on historic restoration in Victoria

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At the 1984 awards programme for the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Victorian Chapter, our jury – George Tibbits, Darien Cassidy, Kevin Makin, Ray Tonkin and Warwick Forge as chairman – approached with the utmost seriousness the task of selecting the inaugural winner of the William Pitt award. We found great difficulty in comparing the Spotswood pumping station with Werribee Park, and the denominational school at Maldon with, say, St. Hilda's in East Melbourne. In our attempts to compare these disparate buildings and works we found ourselves tracing the history of restoration principles and practices as they have unfolded in Victoria – and indeed in Australia – over the past fifteen years.

In the course of our enquiry, we felt it proper to record the debt that Australians owe to Dr. Miles Lewis for the development of today's restoration standards. This development has been both radical and profound over the past fifteen years, and much of the inspiration for change can be traced back directly to Miles Lewis's wisdom and relentless energy.

Nowhere is that evolution of restoration principles better illustrated than at Black Rock House in Melbourne's bayside suburbs which was built for Charles Edben in 1856. Painstaking research by Dr. Miles Lewis and others led to the development of a conservation policy for this building in 1975. This was a landmark, as was the decision to avoid conjectural restoration. These were the days, remember, when the National Trust still followed the maxim "if it moves, paint it white". Sandringham City Council has proved an exemplary client even to the extent of allowing radical changes in programmed works when new evidence was uncovered. The jury was greatly impressed by the rigour brought to bear upon this early project. There has been a careful cataloguing of evidence and a quite novel – for the time – interest in interior decoration. It was noted, however, that by today's standards certain works would have been handled differently. Reservations were expressed, for example, about the paving and the re-lining of the internal areas. It must be remembered that this project is still in progress and it remains to be seen how successful it will ultimately prove.

An enlightened approach was adopted by the national Trust at Maldon in restoring the Demoninational School. This stone, rubble and weatherboard building had deteriorated seriously. An historic structures report was commissioned independently and the principles of the Burra Charter were carefully followed. Weatherboards were removed, numbered and reinstated, and all original finishes identified and copied. We liked the dogged refusal to introduce new elements like spouting, and the decision to retain the roofline which sags appreciably. The building has been repaired and cared for, but it has not lost its nineteenth century patina.
Again we found careful research at the Geelong Customs House. This work, carried out by the Department of Housing and Construction and architect Alan Willingham, led to the reopening of disused quarries and documentation of the characteristics of the lovely Barrabool Hills freestone, of which the Customs House is built. Special on-site handling techniques were developed and the jury was full of praise for the restricted repairs carried out. The interior work, which is of great interest, was excluded from our deliberations.

At Werribee Park we found the pioneering research illustrated a fresh approach, in philosophical and methodological terms. Those involved were clearly filled with earnest intent and research on furniture and fabrics was exhaustive. The jury commended the in-house museum, but expressed some reservations on the application of so much gold leaf, and the reliance placed on oral testimony rather than physical investigation of the interior. Further, it was felt the project had suffered from its failure to adopt a clear conservation policy at the outset, and that standards had been inconsistent.

At the Spotswood Pumping Station the jury was delighted to find a conservative approach had been taken in restoring part of one of the greatest industrial engineering complexes in the country. New joinery and ceiling timbers were carefully matched to the original, and nothing has been done to detract from the significance of the site. The repairs undertaken represent a significant start for a project of such importance.

The successful restoration of the exterior of Collingwood Town Hall was claimed to be due largely to the tradesmen, particularly plasterer Larry Harrigan, although the jury felt this was yet another fine example of Peter Lovell's careful supervision. The only historical research required was to locate examples of the missing parapet urns. Chemical cure-alls were avoided in restoring the render, and the contrasting effect of the new cement against the old blackened original will, it is hoped, be countered by the use of a cement lime wash, designed to weather gradually. Some jury members felt a more conservative approach could have been pursued, and greater reliance placed on cleaning.

It seems that every few decades the famous architectural firm of Bates, Smart & McCutcheon changes direction dramatically. This was certainly achieved with complete success at St. Hilda's in East Melbourne, a Federation-style building sensitively adapted for use as BSM's offices. Building on their experience in restoring and refitting the National Trust's Tasma Terrace, the architects have carefully reinstated dados, fireplaces, mouldings and so on. Alteration of internal spaces has been minimal, and all internal features have been treated with respect, even to the extent of retaining some early bathroom and kitchen fittings. The jury warmly commended the architects for the harmonious relationship achieved between the old building and the drawing-office extension at the rear. While St. Hilda's integrity has been retained at all stages, the overall complex clearly illustrates a finely tuned approach towards spatial relationships, integrated decorative schemes and attention to detail. Reinstatement of the original picket fence only remains to complete this project.

When it sought to appraise the changes in restoration approaches over the past fifteen years, the jury found that a culmination had been reached in
the dining room of the Windsor Hotel, which accordingly wins the William Pitt Restoration Award. Here the standards of research, documentation and analysis have resulted in the restoration of a complete work of art. Early photographs were used, as was written material, exhaustive paint scrapings and microscopic analysis. Work carried out on stencilling, wood graining and gold leaf application was rejected time and again until the requisite standards were achieved. Design of the stained glass windows, glass domes, chandeliers, carpets, furniture necessarily involved some hypothetical reconstruction, but at all times this was achieved with conviction and artistic flair. Although an historic structures report was compiled, the jury felt there had been a failure to fully develop and adopt a clear restoration policy, which may have helped clarify the philosophical basis for the project. It noted with great satisfaction the quite extraordinary care taken with all the detailing, in particular with air conditioning vents and fire alarms. This has been a project of outstanding excellence.