Editorial

In 1928 the then Royal Victorian Institute of Architects established a competition for new buildings. Entries were sought for the Street Architecture Medal, an award given to a building considered to have made a valuable contribution to the streets of Melbourne. It was of course for new, or relatively new, buildings - after all, who ever thought of restoring those old ones? In 1982 the by now Victorian Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects incorporated in its (by now much expanded) awards programme a category for Building Restoration. For the first time the architectural profession was recognising not only the relevance of building restoration, but the special discipline into which it had developed. The criteria for selection was set as compliance with the provisions of the Burra Charter, a document which in itself spoke for the level of professional discipline which had entered this field.

I was fortunate to be a member of the jury which judged that first group of merit awards (five of them). I don’t believe we found any one project which could be construed as an impeccable example of how to follow the Burra Charter, however all those gaining awards were seen to reach high standards in their pursuit of that document’s objectives. In 1983 the process was repeated and three awards were given. In 1984 the awards programme was scheduled to make the first ever William Pitt award; the ‘big gong’ for the best of the previous merit awards. Once again I joined the jury and was party to the assessment delivered on Awards Night by Warwick Forge and published as the lead article in this issue of Historic Environment.

The other articles describe the work undertaken in four of the eight candidates for that award. These articles clearly point out the particular difficulties in this work and the special techniques needed to produce good results. It is probably appropriate that the main actors in the award-winning Windsor Hotel job were not architects. For too long prominent and mainstream architects have treated old building stock with disdain, calling for demolition at the drop of a hat, or when given an old building to work with, doing it over with little or no sympathy for the building, little philosophy other than the need to brand something else with their own ego, and complete ignorance of the materials and building techniques that they are working with. Young inexperienced operators, on the other hand, have used old buildings to help make a name for themselves, often with mixed results.

Thankfully the William Pitt award candidates showed that the situation isn’t all bad. The cross section of practitioners represented in this issue includes one of Australia’s oldest, largest and most respected firms, a highly respected single practitioner, one of Australia’s leading architectural academics and a well-established smaller-scale practitioner.
All these people have made the effort to develop special skills and knowledge in the field of restoration and, most importantly, have applied those skills and knowledge to obtain good results for their clients.

Surely it is the application of this expertise that architectural institutes should be recognising in their awards programmes, just as that original Street Architecture Medal sought out the application of special expertise in a particular area.

RAY TONKIN

Note: The editorial committee is well aware that this issue solely represents the work of Victorian architects. We are only too anxious to recognise the work of practitioners throughout Australia, and case study articles from other states would be welcomed.