



Heritage Advisory Service

HSPN 03. HERITAGE COLOUR SCHEMES

- A planning permit is required within a Heritage Overlay to "externally paint a building" where external paint controls apply;
- The objective of the control is to conserve and enhance the individual place and thus the area as a whole. Colour can play an important role in this;
- Heritage colour schemes were based on the identification of various parts and elements of the building's structure and decoration. They employed a limited range of external colours up to WW 2, because permanent pigments were few until the post war period. Although new colours became available in the Interwar years, tradition resulted in the early colours still being commonly used. It should be remembered that traditional schemes were quite colourful given their limited range. They relied mainly of tonal contrasts rather than changes of hue. If owners are interested, original colours can be analysed from paint scrapes. Brickwork, stone and render were intended to be naturally finished and never should be painted;
- Council does not support painting of unpainted masonry surfaces, sandblasting of any surfaces, the use of white, grey blue and black on large surfaces. (These colours were rarely, if ever, used historically. Pure white did not exist however lime white did) and the use of deep reds and deep greens together, a very common fault;
- Frequently buildings combine styles. Because similar colours were traditionally employed, this raises few issues. Where an accurate scheme is to be used, it should be based on the latest addition or the dominant style, depending on the relative scale and type of addition.

ANALYSING ORIGINAL COLOURS

On site analysis is best done using a very sharp curved blade (a scalpel is best) to scrape away the layers of paint at a relevant point where the paint layers appear to be intact. This produces a sort of contour map of colours with the earliest at the middle/lowest point. By going down to the original material the layers of paint can be counted so that similar positions and their colour can be identified as probably of the same paint scheme. Theoretically any colour scheme applied to the building can be recognised. It should be noted that primers and undercoats were used in three and four coat schemes. Primer on timber was usually orange. Undercoats were frequently tinted with the final colour. More recent primers will be pink with grey, white or tinted undercoats.

Determining the locations of paint scrapes is best achieved by using the sequence shown on the Advice Sheets for the type of house. Beware with block fronted timber houses that the recessed joints and quoins were frequently a different colour.

PREPARATION AND PAINTING HINTS.

- Always follow the paint manufacturer's directions.
- Repairs should always be completed before painting. In particular, any horizontal surfaces and ledges on masonry buildings should be resurfaced.

- Cracks in masonry will reappear unless the cause is dealt with. Filling large cracks may make the problem worse as seasonal pressure is applied to the filling.
- Paint removal (chemical means only, see Paint Removal below) will work on brickwork and stone, but on render where cracking will be revealed it is less successful. It is necessary if the render is to be resurfaced.
- Resurfacing of render is the best long term solution. This is done with an additional skin trowelled on to the existing surface (see the South Melbourne Town Hall). Expert tradespeople should be used so that the definition and profiles of mouldings are not lost or altered. **DO NOT USE ACRYLIC RENDERS ON HISTORIC BUILDINGS.**
- Colour schemes can be compromised by missing elements, particularly the capitals/neck moulds of verandah posts, which define a change in colour. These should be reinstated if possible.

Complete removal of existing paint is not necessary. Firmly adhered paint should simply be sanded with the edges to missing areas feathered out. The missing paint should then be replaced with primer and undercoats as necessary. Where the difference between the surfaces is great, it is best to use less glossy paints that are less reflective. It is often best to completely remove paint from mouldings because their profile is impaired by paint build-up and the paint skin is frequently free of the surface with air bubbles behind.

Paint removal and sanding should be done with care. The use of circular sanders is not advised, as in inexperienced hands they can leave circular patterns on plain surfaces. Paint removal is best achieved with heat guns and scrapers. Care should always be taken with mouldings to avoid lifting wood grain and other damage. Lifted wood should always be glued back in place. **NOTE; EARLY PAINTS WERE FREQUENTLY LEAD BASED. APPROPRIATE PROTECTIVE STEPS SHOULD BE TAKEN WHEN WORKING WITH SUCH SURFACES.**

On timber buildings, acrylic gloss is good for general wall surfaces, but gloss enamel should be used on details.

CHOOSING AND MANIPULATING COLOURS.

Modern paints colours are usually achieved by adding pigment to a standard base. Each colour card colour has a formula to ensure consistency. These formulae can be manipulated to achieve variations to the advertised colour. This can usually be done at the point of purchase.


Any manufacturer's colour can be replicated in another product.

Some deep colours are made independent of a base and can be added to, but not reduced in strength.

Changing the strength of colours can assist in achieving a desired effect, especially where variations of the same colour are desired.

Paint suppliers can make a very close approximation of any colour for which a sample is provided, but it is recommended never to try patching paintwork as the surface of old paint will always differ from the new in gloss and texture (weathering).

Whole panels in different planes do not require absolute accuracy in matching because light reflections always differ by orientation.



In heritage colour schemes, there are only two basic ranges – red/brown and green. The following sequence of decision making is suggested. The approach should be generic and never fix on any individual colour until the concept is agreed. Actual colours are less important than their general character.

Choose the **Deep** colour. Each scheme will typically use one (only one, avoid use of red and green together) of a red/brown/purple or green for the **Deep** colour (of which there is relatively little).

Choose the colour for the **Body** of the building. This would normally be a version of pale to deep stone (sandstone). This will suit either green or red/brown schemes. There are two basic variations possible. For red/brown schemes, salmon pinks are suitable for the body. For green schemes, light to mid grey-greens are suitable.

Choose the **Mid** colour as either a lighter variety of the Deep colour or a deeper version of the Body colour. In all the above combinations either approach is effective.

Choose the **Light** colour. This is the least important providing it is very light, for example, off whites to creams.

The important thing to remember in choosing the colours is to ensure that the tone variation between adjacent colours - Light, Body, Mid, Dark – is sufficient to distinguish them in the locations appropriate to the particular building.

Within this framework, it is possible to achieve a relatively subtle scheme by compressing the differences. The opposite is to have a highly contrasting scheme by expanding the differences between Light and Dark or between any adjacent pair.

WOOD GRAINING AND OTHER TECHNIQUES.

Pre-war specialist painters were extremely gifted in techniques designed to replicate other materials, such as wood graining, marbling, and replication of coarse grained stone such as granite. They even incorporated fine sand in the paint to give the texture of stone. Wood graining was devised to represent many types and colours of wood. Marbling was used on both timber and slate. For example marbled paint over slate fire surrounds is often difficult to distinguish from the real thing as it feels just the same. Colours varied from white to black marble.

In external use, wood graining is the most relevant. Occasionally in Victorian and Federation style houses, the external windows (often only at the front) were wood grained instead of coloured. This is mostly a characteristic of grander houses and is rarely found on timber dwellings.

Wood graining is actually a paint finish usually with a deeper colour rubber combed and otherwise manipulated over a lighter base colour. Previous existence of such finishes can be determined by scrapes and will be a condition of permit for contemporary use.



Recommended Reading:-

Ian Evans, Clive Lucas and Ian Stapleton. *Colour Schemes for Old Australian Houses*. Flannel Flower Press, Sydney 1984.