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## The Como Approach

*Samantha Westbrooke, Conservation Architect*

The Como Approach is an initiative of the National Trust to develop heritage skills and improve the sustainability of conservation outcomes in works to its properties. The Trust is responding to the new reality of Australian heritage conservation—diminishing resources and a rapidly declining skills base.

Como House was the first National Trust property in Victoria and in every sense, it reflects both the achievements of the heritage conservation movement in Victoria and its mounting challenges. It is a supremely important place of high authenticity which is suffering the consequences of first generation heritage interventions and a loss of momentum in the development of skills and resources to manage its conservation values. Under the Como Approach it will become an example of best practice in heritage conservation.

The Trust recognises a critical need to address the ongoing issue of a diminishing pool of skilled conservation practitioners, as well as limited avenues for practitioners to develop skills in the traditional trades required to sustain built heritage values in Australia. It has felt the impact of this declining pool directly. However, with its diverse portfolio, the Trust sees the opportunity to provide an active forum where skilled and emerging conservation practitioners can collaborate in the acquisition of heritage conservation competencies. This initiative positions the National Trust as a leader in developing and promoting heritage conservation excellence, a core objective of the 2018-2022 Strategic Plan.

The Como Approach derives from a recent investigation by conservation specialist Donald Ellsmore into the exterior finishes at Como House. A key recommendation from this project was that a more considered approach should be taken in addressing the overall condition of the building's fabric and the appearance and presentation of Como House, and that training should be embedded in every aspect of the work in order to actively address the industry's decline in capacity to

undertake best practice conservation works. This proposal, to create a conservation skills legacy framework, using Como House as the initial case study, was supported by the Board of the Trust. The aim is to then apply the developed approach to all conservation projects undertaken at Trust properties.

When developed, and refined, it is also proposed to use this policy and framework as a resource for other organisations in their conservation works. The goal is to build a strong and committed network of skilled heritage conservationists by providing ongoing opportunities for them to meet, discuss, collaborate, share skills and work together on living conservation projects. The Como Approach will become a by-word denoting commitment to the ideals of an enduring heritage legacy.

A Como Approach Working Group was established in mid 2018 to promote the Como Approach. This group, led by Conservation Architect Samantha Westbrooke and the Trust Assets Team, includes practitioners in the heritage building industry as well as representatives from the International Specialised Skills Institute, Parks Victoria, and Working Heritage (Victoria). The Group has prepared a Como Approach policy and framework outline with four objectives:

1. to ensure that useful and high quality conservation works will be achieved
2. to build industry capacity and strengthened relationships across professional ranks, trades practitioners, custodians of heritage places and the community
3. to ensure that knowledge and skills are supported and enhanced in line with world's best practice
4. to build public awareness, encourage benefactors and facilitate career pathways for young or emerging practitioners

*Image: Bruce Hutton of Almond Glass training staff and volunteers*



The strategy incorporates several key principles.

- There is recognition and acceptance that at the start of projects there will be unknowns. Practical solutions will evolve through collaboration.
- Aims can be modified to ensure that sustainable outcomes will be achieved through high quality conservation works to major and minor parts. Poor heritage outcomes will be avoided through extended time frames to allow for high quality completion of component parts.
- Design of conservation methodologies will consider a broad palette of remedial options, including research planning in accordance with the Burra Charter principles.
- Projects will benefit from the direct involvement of professionals and contractors who will contribute to both the planning and execution of works, including skills development during works.
- Projects will become forums for practitioner exchange, including skills transfers.
- Practitioners will undertake investigations, decision-making and works in collaboration with wider groups and project teams.

Public awareness will be a key objective throughout. Recognising that educating the public will elevate their understanding of the complexity and challenges associated with heritage works will lead to increased support for the Trust's commitment to core objectives, from which the entire heritage sector will benefit.

In summary, works in accordance with the Como Approach will take a number of forms. In some situations individuals will work alongside experienced practitioners to develop skills and competencies in specific conservation areas in the time-honoured manner. In other situations, emerging practitioners will participate in workshops in specialised skills or conservation processes. The wider community will be invited to participate in information sessions based around certain conservation projects. Most projects will involve each of these skill-sharing opportunities.

Two pilot projects at Como House are demonstrative of the approach. They are the ongoing investigations into the exterior finishes and the repair of the two main windows on the tower.

A skill-sharing workshop held at Como House over two days in April focused on the external stucco and applied surface finishes at Como. Participants were introduced to the research processes and findings regarding the original finishes to historic buildings, including the processes of making and applying Victorian stucco and the modern-day challenges of conserving stucco. Issues from paint removal methods, to making and applying lime-based plasters and coloured surface finishes were demonstrated and participants were engaged in practical activities. This workshop, convened and presented by Donald Ellsmore (conservation specialist), Ray Wiltshire (lime and plaster practitioner), Simon Davies (heritage specialist contractor) and David Khan (specialist painter), involved mixing and applying plain and decorative stucco, mixing and applying tinted lime-based surface finishes, and paint removal techniques. The eighteen participants included heritage trades contractors, consultants, and conservators.

*Images: Architectural Finishes workshop at Como*



The practical benefits accruing to the Trust—whose key planning staff members attended the workshop—have included better understanding of the external stucco and paint finishes at Como House, as well as positive responses from the collaboration team and participants in the Como Approach. Another pleasing outcome has been a follow-up workshop at a significant heritage property in East Melbourne on lime repointing methods, to be planned and presented by attendees at the first Como workshop. Others are under active consideration.

Visitors at Como House will have noticed scaffolding around the tower at the rear of the mansion. This relates to the second pilot project—conservation works to the two main windows on the mansion tower. This project involves a smaller team and provides an opportunity to investigate and test methodologies for similar future projects. Conservation works on the two tower windows commenced in April with specialist heritage joiner Ian Goddard leading the project in association with specialist glazier Bruce Hutton. The project has involved careful removal and transportation of the windows to a joinery workshop for like-for-like repairs. The sashes were transported to the glazier, who has carefully removed the glass to undertake any glass conservation works required. Once fully restored, the windows will be reinstalled and any necessary plaster repairs and repainting to the interior and exterior of the windows will be undertaken. Trust maintenance coordinator Myron McMurray has been working with Ian Goddard and Bruce Hutton to assist in

the project and build on his knowledge in heritage joinery. This project has been an example of an individual emerging practitioner working alongside experienced practitioners to develop skills and competencies in the specific area of sash window restoration. A public forum focused on sash window repair to heritage buildings, based on this pilot project, is also in planning for presentation at Como House to both community and professional audiences. Meanwhile works to other windows and parts will continue in stages.

At this early stage, it can be confirmed that the Como Approach has the potential to address some of the core challenges in heritage conservation today, including the critical need to reverse the decline in heritage and traditional trades skills. If the Trust can bring a renewed focus to the challenges and begin to address them in a practical and positive way, whilst reigniting the community's appreciation of its heritage assets, it can make a major contribution to fulfilling its core aims and the aspirations of the committed practitioners who have and will continue to invest their energies in conservation.

The National Trust would like to thank the Working Group members for their continuing commitment and unstinting efforts to bring this initiative to fruition.

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