



Threads of Conservation

Social fabric • Fabric and place • Conserving fabric

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Natica Schmeder

Natica Schmeder is an architectural historian and buildings conservator, trained in the United States and Scotland. She is an Associate at heritage consultancy Context in Melbourne, and an Honorary Fellow at the University of Melbourne where she helps deliver subjects on the conservation of architectural materials and finishes.

Natica is particularly interested in the physical analysis of buildings to determine their original character and evolution, using tools such as finishes analysis. She is also investigating the Australian use of faience and terracotta, following on her honours thesis on the history of its use in the United States.

Fooling the Eye: Investigation of finishes at the Boyd House II

Paper Abstract

Natica undertook an analysis of the external and internal finishes of Robin Boyd's former home of 1958 at 290 Walsh Street, South Yarra. The brief from the Robin Boyd Foundation was to determine the original external and internal finishes (colours and chemical compositions), identify original finishes that have survived un-recoated, and determine if certain natural-looking timber elements do in fact have an applied coating. Methodology included historical research, in-situ examination with a hand-held microscope, removal and mounting of micro-samples to create cross-sections examined by reflected light microscopy, and instrumental analysis (XRF and FTIR).

Among the results of the investigation, it was learned that Boyd had used subtle, hand-mixed paint mixtures to achieve an unsaturated palette, which appears natural at first glance, including:

- Silver-grey surface of Oregon timber mullions in the courtyard. Previously thought to either be a natural weathered appearance, or due to aged chromated copper arsenate treatment. XRF analysis revealed a purposeful paint layer of limewash plus a modern grey paint (containing zinc and titanium white and Mars black).
- Silver-grey colour on framing timbers of the two residential wings was created by a traditional lead + linseed oil paint, with white and black pigments (the same used for the courtyard mullions), which appears to have been thinned before application to create a sheer and 'unpaint-like' finish.
- The mountain ash joinery was limed: a layer of white paint applied and rubbed away, followed by varnish.
- Areas of original paint on render were also identified, both externally and internally, indicating that Boyd's original colours had been warmer (a brown-grey used externally, and a purple-grey inside), than monochrome repainting colours.

While some surfaces and elements have been repainted, the investigation also revealed that the house retains many original finishes from 1958. These have been identified and catalogued so they can be appropriately protected.