External Paint Controls – are they really necessary?

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Recent relocation to the suburb of Brookline in the Greater Boston Area has made me once again question the value of external paint controls for buildings within the Heritage Overlay. Is the regulation of colour selection for previously painted surfaces really necessary to protect the values for which a place is included in the Heritage Overlay?

Brookline is an independent town incorporated in 1705. It is surrounded on three sides by the City of Boston and has strong local historic preservation ordinances enacted across eight Local Historic Districts (which are analogous to precinct Heritage Overlays). The housing stock is typified by mid to late nineteenth century detached timber houses with a range of architectural styles including Victorian, Colonial Revival, Greek Revival and Shingle amongst others. Although the housing stock is relatively homogenous in scale, massing, form and relationship to the street, the individual houses are painted a variety of colours from whites through to deep purples. Like more famous counterparts, such as San Francisco’s Victorian ‘painted ladies’, the wide range of colour adds variety and interest to the streetscape and allows individual expression in an inherently reversible way.

Looking at the diversity of period and style in most Heritage Overlay precincts in Victoria it seems unnecessary, and indeed counter-productive, to limit the colour palette to a small range of colours – typically mid Brunswick green, red oxides, cream and off white. Even in more homogeneous precincts, a greater variety of colour can increase visual interest within a streetscape without diminishing its cultural heritage significance. It appears to be often forgotten in the interpretation of local government heritage policy and guidelines, and publications such as ‘What House Is That?’, that the examples given are just a small selection of the often wider range of paint colours that were freely available in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I contend that in many instances the range of colour schemes evident in these precincts was greater than we see today with the supposed ‘benefit’ of external paint colour controls. Indeed, colour choice often varied greatly over the history of a suburb as fashion changed, paint technology introduced new colours and economic factors influenced how and when homeowners maintained (and painted) their houses.

While our Heritage Overlay areas are not known for their expansive array of colours like the Art Deco buildings of Napier, New Zealand, Tobermory in Scotland or the UNESCO World Heritage-listed St Georges, Bermuda; perhaps this is in part due to the artificially homogenising effect of our external paint controls.

Although I agree we need the permit trigger that protects previously unpainted surfaces (such as render, brick or stone) from being painted without due consideration, I can think of few instances at a local precinct level where the application of colour controls contributes to the protection of cultural heritage values.

Is the regulation of colour selection for previously painted surfaces really necessary to protect the values for which a place is included in the Heritage Overlay?
Where, for instance, a precinct or terrace of houses is of such importance that it is necessary that the colour scheme from a particular phase in the area’s history is considered an essential element of their significance, I suggest that these properties are best managed through their inclusion on the Victorian Heritage Register – as has occurred with St Vincent Place, Albert Park or Royal Terrace, in Fitzroy.

To create increased freedom for homeowners while protecting locally significant colour schemes, I suggest amending Planning Practice Note 1 – Applying the Heritage Overlay to provide additional guidance under the section ‘Applying external painting controls’ to give advice similar to that for internal alteration controls. Such a provision could read:

*This provision should be applied sparingly and on a selective basis to external colour schemes of high significance. The statement of significance for the heritage place should explain what is significant about the colour palette used and why it is important.*

This would require external colour controls only when warranted by the significance of the place. Rather than the decision of colour choice being reliant on the received wisdom of existing heritage practice or the personal preference of individual heritage advisers, it would be based on an understanding of the cultural heritage significance of the place.

Such a policy change would also need to be accompanied by changes to local policy and guidance to allow the gradual increase of colour in precincts already included within the Heritage Overlay where the ‘external paint controls’ column is selected. I note also that the Brookline Preservation Commission’s guidance explicitly states “The Commission does not review paint colors.”

As well as reducing the burden on property owners and local council officers, changes to the PPN1 and local heritage policy would remove the ubiquity of cream, green and red colour schemes. But most importantly, removal of external paint controls would enable owners to reflect contemporary taste and their own personalities in what is the most reversible of all changes to a heritage place.

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1 Design Guidelines for the Local Historic Districts, Department of Planning and Community Development – Town of Brookline, 2006, p.8

St Georges, Bermuda

Painted houses in Brookline, Massachusetts.