

Customising Collection Storage for Research Access

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Abstract

In 2005 the Historic Houses Trust moved their extensive research collection of soft furnishings to a new custom designed Research Centre and a separate store room. The collection is a popular research resource not only for Trust staff, but the public as well. The relocation project gave the Trust the opportunity to radically revisit storage and access concerns. This paper discusses some of the factors of successful relocation projects; how early and detailed planning ensures a successful outcome and how strong teamwork is imperative to make certain all project objectives are met. In this particular case, that each item received appropriate care, and was rehoused to enable simple access without jeopardising long-term storage needs: an issue that many cultural collections continue to struggle with.

Introduction

The Historic Houses Trust is responsible for the care and management of 13 historic buildings and sites across NSW. The Trust holds extensive heritage collections in each of its properties as well as in Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection (CSL&RC), formally known as the Conservation Resource Centre. The CSL&RC was developed to 'support research into building conservation and the history of Australian houses, their interiors and gardens'. The research collection is constantly used by staff, researchers and the public.

In 2003, the CSL&RC's staff began planning how the research collection would fit into the Mint, its new home on Macquarie Street, Sydney. The CSL&RC was to be a key feature in The Mint, and in its new central city location, the Trust predicted a greater demand to see and use the collection than ever before.

The move to the Mint gave the Trust the opportunity to revisit the way the collections were stored and accessed. The vision of this project was to create state of the art storage facilities

that enabled greater and safer access to the collection.

Although the overall process of the move involved relocating the entire research collection into the Mint, this paper describes the process the Trust went through to move the soft furnishing and textile items. This was the process in which we, the textile conservators at International Conservation Services (ICS), were involved.

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The Collection

The soft furnishing collection comprises of approximately 2,150 items, nearly 20% of the whole Research Collection. This part of the col-

lection includes window treatments (curtains, valances, swags, tails etc), cushions, lampshades, wall hangings, bed linens, printed fabrics, hanging wardrobes, chair covers, tassels and fringes, fabric and textile samples, blinds, and table linens.

The Project

There were several fundamental objectives to the project, including:

- Relocating the items to new storage spaces in the refurbished Mint.
 - Assessing the long term storage needs of each item.
 - Rehousing the collection using best-practice methodology and materials.
 - Identifying how frequently items would be accessed (with an understanding of which areas or elements of the textiles are of prime interest to researchers).
 - Designing storage enclosures that allowed adequate access to whole or parts of textiles, without compromising storage needs.
- Conserving items that were of prime significance to the collection and required treatment.

The Team

The team was comprised of

- The CSL&RC's **Curator**, responsible for the overall project coordination and budget, identifying the significance of each item (and therefore how much time and what resources were committed), determining how frequently items would be accessed, identifying particular aspects of each item that were of interest to researchers.
- The Trust's **Collection Manager**, to support the Curator and assist in logistical and conservation decisions.
- The Trust's **Preventive Conservator**, responsible for researching and implementing textile storage techniques and materials (in collaboration with textile conservators), procuring storage materials, coordinating movement and conservation of the collection.
- The Trust's **Preparator**, responsible for assisting the Preventive Conservator in preparing storage rolls, boxes and preparing covered boards and storage supports.
- **Textile conservators** from International Conservation Services (ICS), responsible for providing advice on which items required treatment, undertaking treatments, advising how

items should be stored, as well as the design and construction of storage supports.

Project Overview

As for all projects, the more time spent planning at the start, the less time spent reacting to unforeseen problems during the process! The Trust began planning the move and rehousing project over 2 years before the items were physically relocated. With little under 2 years before the move, the Trust approached us to help with the soft furnishings and textile section of the project.

Stage 1: Identifying and prioritising conservation requirements

The first phase of the project involved the whole team. As a group, we reviewed and prioritised every item, from an access and a conservation perspective.

Access priorities were based on:

- Research value
- Significance
- Prior access frequency
- Predicted access frequency

Conservation priorities were based on:

- Condition of the item
- Whether the item would significantly benefit from conservation
- How the item was to be accessed/used

The collection was initially grouped into priorities of high, medium or low, using the matrix below:

	Poor Condition	Fair Condition	Good Condition
High Access	high	medium	N/A
Medium Access	medium	low	N/A
Low Access	low	low	N/A

Figure 1 Matrix showing prioritisation of items based on access and condition

This was far from a clinical exercise! The team worked closely, discussing ideas, and shuffled particular items between priorities where necessary. For example, if ICS indicated that a medium-access item in fair condition would not ben-

efit significantly from treatment, it was downgraded from medium to low priority. Adversely, if a high-access item in fair condition would benefit tremendously from treatment allowing it to be accessed much more frequently, it was upgraded from medium to high priority.

This initial stage also involved the first of many discussions on how each item should be stored, ie. hanging, flat, rolled or boxed. As part of each treatment proposal, we recommended the best way to store the item. This enabled the Trust to work out overall storage requirements for the whole collection. These discussions continued for several months over the next few stages of the project.

Stage 2: Researching textile storage options

The Trust's Preventive Conservator began a research project to review current methods used to store textiles and soft furnishings. This also included research into materials available and used around the world.

Research confirmed the standard techniques of flat, boxed or hanging were viable for long-term storage. Research and interviews with conservators responsible for large textile collections found rolled storage was sometimes problematic in the long-term, especially for heavier textiles.

It was known at the beginning of the project that the collection would be housed in two spaces:

1. Inside the CSL&RC, and
2. A large room (to be fitted out to suit the collection) in an adjacent building

This enabled the Preventive Conservator to pursue research on all potential options for textile storage. Options were discussed with the Curator (for access viability), with the textile conservators (for preservation concerns) and with the Designer (for space viability).

Stage 3: Undertaking conservation treatments

Running simultaneously with all other stages of the project, conservation treatments began, first on the high priority items, then the medium pri-

ority items.

As the volume of work to be done was known in advance, the treatments could be programmed. Conservation costs and treatment times could be streamlined due to the ability to treat 'like' items at the same time.

ICS built shelves and a temporary hanging store room to store items once treated, as the new store at the Mint would not be completed for some months.

Stage 4: Identifying storage requirements

As stage 2 research was progressing and the treatments were being completed, it became easier to work out the final requirements of storage and from there, the new store room. A final decision was then made on how each item would be stored, either:

- Flat on padded boards
- Boxed
- Rolled
- Hanging

This stage was crucial in enabling the Trust to design and fit out the storage room. Once it was known how many items required flat, rolled or hanging storage systems, space requirements could be calculated.

The Trust made a decision early on to try and stick to a range of standard sizes for each storage method. That is, a small and large length roll, small, medium and large archive box size, and small and large flat boards. All but a few items could be catered for using this approach. The items that could not be stored safely in this way, had customised storage boxes made.

From experience, the team knew that the process of rehousing such a large number of items had to be flexible and had to have contingencies. The process of finding the most appropriate storage system for a few items involved 'trial and error'. The Trust always maintained a long-term perspective when it came to deciding upon storage options. All decisions on the final storage methods were made with the understanding that they would be practical for many years to come.

Stage 5: Designing storage supports and housing the items

In close consultation with the Curator, we began designing the storage supports. It was important for us to understand how the textiles would be used by researchers, that is, what elements of each item would need to be clearly seen.

As the Trust had a policy of supervised access; where only staff handle and unpack items, we didn't need to design systems to be novice-proof! Designs were still however, kept as simple as possible. A fundamental concept for all items was to use permanent rather than disposable storage materials, for example, purpose designed padded shapes instead of tissue.

Flat storage

Items that were highly fragile or more three-dimensional were stored flat on large boards that were cut to fit into custom made, large-format plan drawers.

These included large full length curtains and their swags that were not stable enough to hang. Elements were laid flat on the boards, and customised supports made where necessary, such as padding out pleats and sections of draping.

The boards were made from Tycore™, padded and covered with washed cotton. The cotton completely covered both sides of the board and was stitched together, to avoid any use of adhesives. These boards are over 2 x 1 metres, allowing large textiles such as curtain swags to be laid flat. Although a few very long items needed to be folded once.

The items are not attached to the boards, but are held gently by the nap of the fabric. The boards are rarely removed from the plan cabinet, the drawers are simply opened for visitors to view. If closer access is required, the boards can be lifted out and placed on large tables.

Boxed storage

Many of the items could be stored in acid free boxes. The majority of items to be boxed could not be folded using standard techniques (such as concertina folds) as the elements of interest to researchers were often in areas away from



Figure 2: Flat storage – curtain swag on board



Figure 3: :Flat storage – padded support for curtain swag

the edges. This resulted in combinations of storage methods being used, such as partially rolling and leaving certain areas flat. Also, some textiles that could normally be rolled were instead stored this way. Items that were flat, but too fragile to withstand unrolling and rolling, were stored in a box in a semi rolled/flat orientation, as below. This way, the interesting elements of the item could be viewed by simply taking the lid off the box.



Figure 3: : Boxed storage – textile stored partially unrolled to allow research access

Rolled storage

Smaller, flat textiles, such as lengths of sample upholstery fabric, were rolled. The Trust bought the appropriate materials in bulk and began a systematic program of preparing the storage tubes and rolling the textiles on.

The tubes are made from polyethylene. They are rolled in a layer of polyester wadding, then covered with cotton stretch knit. Tyvek™ is used as the dust cover.



Figure 5: Rolled storage



Figure 6: Rolled storage – close up of a roll

The final stage to tuck the stretch knit ends in using collars of card that are inserted inside the end of each tube is yet to occur.

Some items could not be rolled, were too bulky to safely fold and box and were not designed to hang, such as small quilts and rugs. These were draped over rolls and kept in the roll store section.



Figure 7: Rolled storage – textile draped over a roll

Hanging storage

Due to the nature of the collection, the Curator requested items such as the curtains hang whenever possible, to aid interpretation and reduce the excessive handling required if the item was to be boxed away. As many window treatments often include up to three layers, a gauze inner layer, the heavier curtain and a final swag or valance, the desire was to hang all components together copying as closely as possible the original ensemble. This was possible for a large proportion of the curtains. A hanging system was designed to enable multiple hangs from the one pull out cradle.



Figure 8 Hanging storage

Stage 6: Designing and fitting out the new store

As mentioned, the collection was to be divided between two spaces. The CSL& RC would hold smaller boxed items and the large room in the adjacent building, would be fitted out to store large and oversized soft furnishings (curtains, valances etc).

Based on information gathered to this point, the Trust calculated space requirements for flat boards, rolls, boxes and hanging items. They worked closely with their designer to maximise the use of space in the new large room. In the end the store room had a bank of shelving for boxed material and two banks of oversize plan drawers:

The Move

The large store room was fitted out and the storage furniture installed. The items could now be moved in.

The move happened in two stages:

1. All textile items, approximately 2,300 were moved to the Mint site, into a large room in an adjacent building, whilst the CSL&RC was being completed.



Figure 9: Flat storage – plan cabinets

2. Items that were in small boxes and more frequently accessed were then moved into shelves and compactus inside the Research Centre (approximately 880 items)



Figure 10: : Pull out hanging racks – close up



Figure 11: Pull out hanging racks

The Sign of Success

The CSL&RC within the Mint has been a great success. Visitation numbers are exceeding expectation and researchers and staff are now able to access a greater number of collection items than ever before. The increased and custom designed storage space allows the items to be viewed more comprehensively and with less risk of damage.

The Trust predicts that the rate of visitation and number of research requests will keep climbing. This goal can be achieved without concern of causing damage to the collection with minimal time demands on staff. Items can be quickly located, and promptly brought to viewing tables, or appointments made where the visitor is brought to the item.

This was an exciting project to be involved in from start to finish. We worked as part of a highly experienced team, where each collection item received attention from different collection specialists. Working together in this way, ensured each item was preserved and made accessible for as broader use as possible.

Endnotes

1 *Historic Houses Trust*, www.hht.net.au/home
accessed 16/6/2006

Materials

Tycore™
Zeta Florence

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About the Author

Fiona Tennant joined International Conservation Services (ICS) in 1993 as a Textile Conservator, after graduating from the University of Canberra with a B.App.Science in conservation of cultural Materials. In 1998 she began specialising in Preventive Conservation, undertaking preservation needs assessments, collection surveys, environmental monitoring surveys, and designing museum storage systems for a number of significant cultural collections. After 10 years as Head of Textile Conservation at ICS, she formed the Collection Management department at ICS and now specialises in both collections management and preventive conservation projects for both government and non-government clients. She has undertaken numerous collection assessments (preservation, risk and condition assessments), writing museum planning briefs for architects, disaster response plans and housekeeping plans. She has undertaken significant collection and conservation policy work for Antarctic collections. She has a particular interest in developing preventive conservation and collection management projects for Polar heritage and historic house collections.