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Inside the painstaking restoration of North Sydney pool's prized heritage wall



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The stucco was riddled with cracks. Moulding had come loose. Bricks were broken. Peeling paint used to colour the decorative shell and bird motifs in the 1980s had been stripped back to reveal the crumbling plaster.

The grand art deco wall at North Sydney Olympic Pool had suffered a long decline accelerated by decades of exposure to seawater, corrosive harbour air and a controversial five-year rebuild since it opened in 1936.



Traditional Restoration Company managing director James Ginter inspects the restored art deco wall at the pool. SAM MOOY

Developer Icon [handed the overhauled pool back](#) to North Sydney Council in May, enabling the council to forge ahead with its mission to have skilled professionals painstakingly restore the famous wall to its former glory.

Traditional Restoration Company managing director James Ginter and his team of experts spent weeks securing the stucco decorations, filling in cracks, colouring bricks and repainting the decorative southern wall. Designed by architects Rudder & Grout, the complex is considered to be an outstanding example of a 1930s Olympic pool.

“It’s a unique survivor,” Ginter said. “It’s an iconic place for everyone in Sydney.”

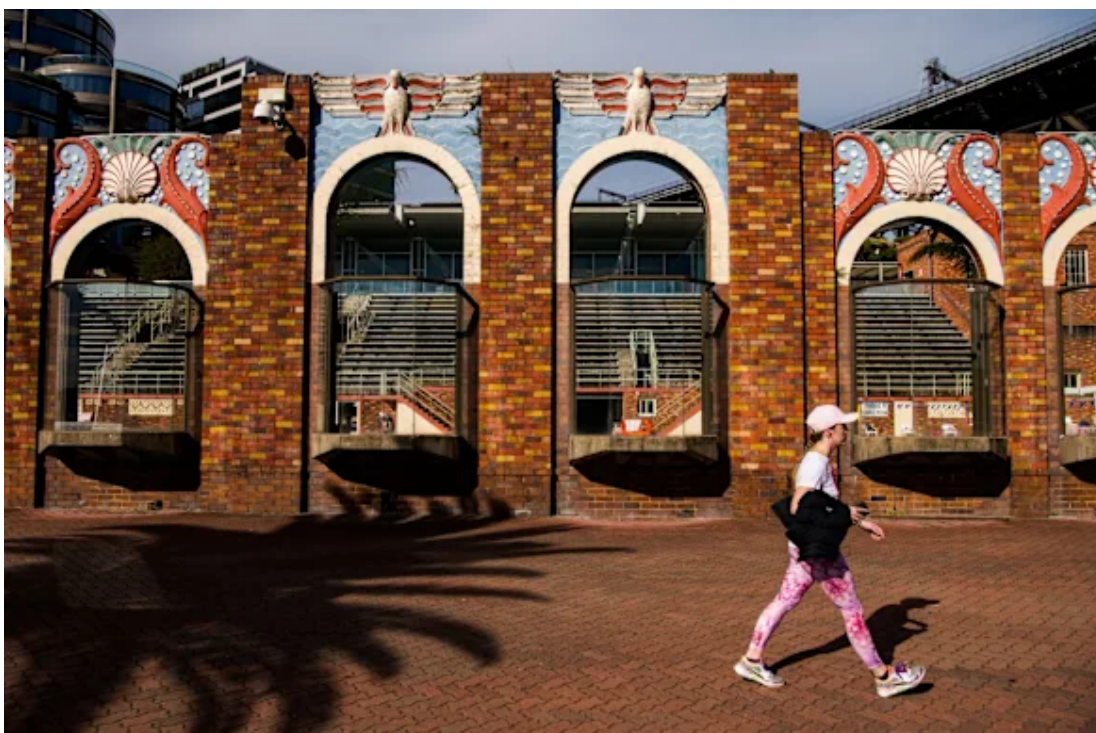
The restoration work has revived the pool’s harbourside wall, sundeck and eastern stair tower, which will be among the few original features still standing when the state heritage-listed site [reopens on Friday, August 7](#), after a notorious redevelopment plagued by cascading cost blowouts, scope creep and delays.

Finishing touches included repairs to the wall’s stucco motifs, plaster decorations, stained-glass windows and brickwork.

North Sydney Mayor Zoe Baker said one of the most noticeable changes was the famous multicoloured motifs depicting scallop shells, seabirds and fish had been painted over in the same shade of cream.

Baker said a Kirribilli resident had written to her a few months ago expressing his hopes the stucco decorations would be restored to their original pearly white, rather than reinstating the “cartoonish” colours added during a renovation 40 years ago. The bright paint was among changes introduced by architect Feiko Bouman in 1984.

The original light colour was confirmed by the project’s heritage consultant and council historian Ian Hoskins.



The bright colours were added to the stucco motifs on the southern wall, pictured in 2021, during a 1980s renovation. JAMES BRICKWOOD



The decorations have been repainted cream, reverting to the original 1930s colour scheme. SAM MOOY

“That’s why we’ve got the restored cream stucco,” Baker said.

Ginter said he was “actually quite pleased” the council had reverted to the original palette for the decorations.

“The [previous] colour scheme was a bit loud. The cream colour was the original. Things here were very understated in the 1920s: art deco is streamlined,” Ginter said.



Conservator Pawel Ptaszek adds the finishing touches to a brick wall at the state heritage-listed pool complex. SAM MOOY



Stonemason Kris Karwczyk is among workers who have painted thousands of bricks in shades of red, rust, yellow and green to match the original brickwork. SAM MOOY

“It’s quite a unique architectural design and type of construction for the time it was built.”

Art conservator Pawel Ptaszek said many of the old red bricks on the site were broken and had to be replaced. Workers hand-painted thousands of new bricks in shades of rust, red, green and yellow to ensure they blended in.

“The original colour does not exist any more, so we had to match the colour in a different way. We used a special paint,” Ptaszek said.



Traditional Restoration Company managing director James Ginter at the pool. Swimmers will be able to get back in the water from August 7. SAM MOOY

Baker said the heritage work had not been factored into the previous council's design brief for the revamp, but it was included in the estimated \$122 million cost.

"It is gratifying because the stucco work on the southern wall is the most intact part of the heritage of the pool that has been retained. Seeing it gives you a little thrill about the excitement that the pool will be back," she said.

"It's a beautiful, careful restoration. Swimmers and visitors will be able to enjoy it for generations."

Hundreds of people registered for preview tours of the pool before the official opening.

The new complex includes the 50-metre heated outdoor pool, a 25-metre indoor pool, a program pool, a new 970-seat grandstand, and a children's splash pad and water play area.

There is also a reformer Pilates studio, swim school, creche, spa, sauna, steam room, and a Ripples café and gelato bar.

The pool, located between the Harbour Bridge and Luna Park, closed for redevelopment in February 2021 and work began that March. It was originally forecast to reopen in November 2022. The initial estimated cost was \$58 million.

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