A HUSHED PLACE

The best courtrooms provide heavenly light and gracious space and exude a quiet majesty.

The Cour de Casstion of the Palais du Justice in Paris, France and the Thirteenth Court of the Supreme Court of Victoria, Melbourne, Australian, create such aura.

Both courtrooms are reached after a journey from a busy street into an iconic sandstone building, past security and a climb up old, well-worn stairs and are entered from old, quiet corridors. There is a feeling of anticipation. The smell of advocates and witnesses' nervousness and the anxiety of litigants is in the air.

A heavy door is pushed to achieve entry, Suddenly, the entrant steps into a different environment – a hushed place.

The Paris courtroom is awash with morning light streaming through a side wall of huge windows. Light is also reflected though the windows from the glistening rooftop and the shimmering sandstone of the

building opposite. Advocates' desks are lined along both sides. I wonder – do the advocates seated under the panelled wall feel blinded by the morning brilliance illuminating their opponents under the wall of windows, or, do the illuminated feel intimidated by the majestic backdrop setting their opponents' stage?

The Melbourne courtroom exudes an experience of glowing light. Warmth radiates from the gentle yellow walls reflecting the brilliant, large chandelier hanging under a recessed dome of pastel colours flanked by carefully highlighted classical columns and cornices. There is a sensation of being uplifted into a different place, up from the regal red carpet and the long cedar and leather in-laid benches and the heavy cedar of the judge's bench.

The sense of location and movement in each courtroom is palpable. It results in a formalised, staged setting. In the Paris courtroom the Court of Appeal sits on a slightly raised platform. The Court presides over the ample space of the room flanked by the advocates' benches and closed off by the litigant's bench. A quadrangle is created above which the court floats. The judges are close to those in the courtroom, but simultaneously distant. There is an intangible barrier: the judges are untouchable; they are not to be approached.

The location of each courtroom participant in the setting of the formal quadrangle formed by the natural elements of wood and glass creates a hushed space where the law listens and the law speaks.

With a different symmetry, the Melbourne courtroom (originally built as a judges' library) creates a hushed place also,. Rather than a quadrangle the courtroom setting is wide. The judge or judges sit at a very elevated cedar bench looming over the stations where court officials sit and, most importantly, the witness box. The judges look out at the advocates who are placed at a single wide table immediately in front of an identical wide table. Justice is played out in rows. There are special, large lecterns for advocates when addressing the court, emphasising that each word spoken is important.

In both courtrooms amplification exists; strategically located, fixed microphones at the pre-determined location of each participant – the advocate, the witness, the judge. No-one else may speak these courtrooms unless situated at a special location with a microphone. The acoustics are imperfect and the judge might need to lean forward to hear. All of this contributes to a sense of a hushed place where the law listens and the law speaks.

The courtrooms in Paris and Melbourne are not places of people; they are places of justice. They are not regional or magistrates' courts. They do not provide lower level justice, rather, superior level justice. Their status is mirrored by the reliance on strong use of light and wood and formalised location arrangements and control of sound. These elements unite to intimidate the individual with the power of the law.