

**Remarks by the
Hon. the Chief Justice Marilyn Warren
Reception for the Court Architecture Conference
Supreme Court of Victoria Library
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Each person bears a connection to their environment.

Further to this each individual reacts to the built

environment in a different way. This in turn forms a link

between people's perceptions and reactions to certain

aesthetic stimuli. One need only look at some of Melbourne's

great historic buildings to see the majesty and awe which

their design was aimed to exude. No other building displays

this more eloquently than the Supreme Court building. The

Supreme Court of Victoria has been described as a 'temple of

justice, which is indeed, monumentally, worthy of the

sanctity of law'. This is indeed high praise for a building

which had been at the forefront of political debate for

decades prior to its completion in 1884. The building was to

be an example of what the colony of Victoria was aspiring to encapsulate. It was to be the centre of justice within the colony, a civic building designed to signify our forefathers' enthusiasm and absolute confidence in the state which they were building. To this extent they achieved quite a feat. The Supreme Court is an imposing building, one which over 120 years ago dominated the Melbourne skyline. It was a statement that Victoria was at the forefront of modernity and was made up of people which highly regarded the sanctity of law and democracy.

Today however our ideals have changed. No longer is it desirable to look to the court to impose such politically motivated expressions. These factors hinder the effectiveness of a legal system. We understand how architecture can provide accessibility to justice and can break down the

barriers of the past. By stripping away the unnecessary grandeur and historically imposing form of legal buildings and updating them for the benefit of the user, a fairer and more just system can come to fruition.

A level of authority is paramount to the effectiveness of trials and this is achieved through actively designing courts that are reactive to the needs of the public. In contemporary court design features there is an emphasis on the need for natural light and surrounds. The Manchester Law Courts for example, provide an apt illustration of this. Each public area within the court has external views. This not only provides environmental benefits, but to a great extent it addresses the psychological issues many who have had experience with a court have felt. To the court user there is a sense of segregation from the judiciary whose workings are largely

elevated and separated through design. Manchester's design has incorporated features which would never have been considered when some of the world great courthouses were built. To one side, the public areas and meeting spaces, a wall of glass brings the world from outside the court in. It creates a sense of cohesion between the user and law court.

Possibly no where do people feel more vulnerable then when they step into a court, as a defendant, a witness or a victim. Each participant in a case has their designated position. The judge sits in a commanding centre position above the court, their associate immediately below. The bar table faces the judge, on ground level. Immediately one knows how the power is dispersed within the courtroom. Authority is immediate. The witness box sits to one side, the defendant at the back of the court is in full view of the judge

at all times. Such design has been a feature of courtrooms around the world. Our Court 13 in 1951 was reviewed in the *Australian Builder* after a recent renovation. The publication, marketed at the building and architectural trade, praised the court for being at the pinnacle of courtroom room design. The courtroom is still host to the fundamental design characteristics of the era, yet it is our changing perspective which now appreciates how such a formal built environment can in fact hinder the effectiveness of a modern trial.

People of a city share a deep connectedness with the built form and its cohesion with the social and governmental structures which they represent. Yet it is often such associations which lead to barriers being formed both physical and psychological. Once inside a particular

building the manner, in which people interact, behave and respond can be vastly altered. Buildings, such as courts, places of worship or other civic buildings all have their own psychological effects on the visitor. The width of the hallways, the height of the ceilings, the materials used in its construction all lead to this altered level of consciousness.

Looking then on a building such as this court or even the Palais du Justice in Paris, one cannot escape the overwhelming foreignness of the environment. The intricacy of detail, the imposing figures in the carved stonework and the grand facades create a feeling of authority and, to an extent, a disconnectedness to the outside world. Obviously each person's association and perception of the court will differ depending on their use for it. It cannot be denied however, that the built form of a court lends greatly to an

individual's perception of power and their position within the hierarchy.

It is then, a difficult balancing act. The considerations for court architects today need to accommodate for the psychological as well as the physical, the aesthetic and function, the sustainability and its adequateness and the need to exude, in a modern context, the level of authority which the judiciary needs to retain. Without equal consideration being given to these factors courts will be unable to evolve and would appear to be unresponsive to the general population.

An example of this is with the design of the Children's Court of Victoria. The architects had to deal with all of these constraints as well as factor in the primary users of the court.

The very nature of the matters heard in the Children's Court and more importantly the participants, requires a more delicate approach to the court environment and design.

Therefore out of any other court, this court needed to be a place of relative calm. This was exuded in the colour scheme, the use of external light and the less formal courtroom configurations. As much as the building needed to achieve such objectives, it still maintains a level of formality. There is a feeling of spaciousness to the building notwithstanding its relatively small scale. This is achieved though the use of outdoor spaces, only accessible from inside the court and the use of glass on the western face. The effect is quite wonderful. The facade is unobtrusive and understated, which alleviates the feeling of isolation.

The Victorian County Court provides another example of modern court architecture achieving this delicate balance, particularly with the interior foyers and waiting areas. The entrance and foyer of the court is flooded with natural light.

An internal square is surrounded by waiting areas with small meeting alcoves differentiated by the use of alternative flooring material and seating and lighting configurations.

The use of wood paneling throughout the building creates an organic environment, one which draws on the external environment to create a most unique and calming atmosphere.

A common thread throughout such modern examples of court architecture is the use of natural light. Such intelligent use of light helps breakdown the psychological barriers of a court. No longer is there the labyrinth of internal corridors

intertwining themselves through a court, where each passage is undistinguishable from the next, where the feeling of segregation and isolation from the outside world is so profound. It is through such considered design that these courts are able to function, evolve and respond to the forever changing society in which they serve. With continued theoretical and practical research into societal responses to court environments we may one day clearly see buildings which adequately represent the modern forward thinking changes in the judiciary itself.

Then there is the sense of place. The Supreme Court of Victoria presently sits at the axis of justice in this state. Lawyers and litigants cross at the intersection as Justitia looks down from the Supreme and County Courts, but do the buildings connect with the community? Do they convey a sense of justice? I invite you to be the judge.