
Around the Nation: Tasmania

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HOBART'S SUPREME COURT BUILDINGS

Hobart's wonderful sandstone Supreme Court buildings opposite Parliament House in Salamanca are often admired but little has been written about them.

The Court separated into its respective criminal and civil functions when it left the original 1824 Court building on the corner of Murray and Macquarie Streets in 1860. The Court would not re-unite for 120 years when the second stage of the present buildings in Salamanca Place was completed in 1980.

Peter Hugh Partridge completed his architectural studies in 1964 in England at a time when there was a considerable amount of fine university architecture being built in Oxford and in Cambridge. Importantly, there were many buildings and extensions that had to sit in splendid precincts, places where tourists from all over the world would go and look in awe.

To succeed the new building had to be of its time and striking yet as elegant as its surroundings, usually relying on sensitively detailed concrete, glass and lead, sometimes stone. Always simple, often brutal, but always melding in perfectly with both site and neighbours. It was an architecture that did not seem to Partridge to be too abundant in Australia, let alone Tasmania, where the young architect arrived in 1969.

In 1971 Partridge had been in Tasmania for a little over two years, when a proposal for a six-storey Supreme Court building on the site of the present Criminal Court building was rejected due, he believes, to the weight of public objection when the proposal was before the Parliamentary Standing Committee for Public Works. To his surprise he was invited to a meeting with Attorney-General Mervyn Everett, and, it seemed to him, everybody who was anyone in the legal profession together with those who had voiced strong opposition to the original proposal. The outcome was a resolution for a low sandstone building, his brief.

At that time Partridge had never been in a court in his life. The challenge for him was to create the dignity that it was felt the Courts deserved, and yet make them inviting and not overpowering to the public. The location of course was perfect – St David's Park opposite Parliament House, the wharves and the adjacent old sandstone warehouses. A location deserving of a timeless building.

Key to Partridge's strategy was to create a building that would endure. He had seen too many carefully considered buildings extended or refurbished, with little or no sympathy for their original design concept. So, reasoning that the basic functionality of the Courts would not change fundamentally in his lifetime, Partridge set out to create a design that would be difficult to alter either externally or internally and to create a design where every internal space would be considered and detailed as a total design entity, including the circulation spaces.

Completion was required within the original timeframe for the rejected multi-storey concept. As the government only owned half of Partridge's proposed extended site, and as the most urgent need was for the Criminal Courts, they would be built as Phase One on the land already owned. The schema only took the young genius a day or so to produce; a simple solution two separate buildings linked below ground. Both buildings would have principal activities on the upper floor that would be expressed as a classical piano nobile.

In 1975, upon the completion of the first stage of the new buildings Partridge stated that one of his main design principles was that the buildings were to be a showpiece for local materials and for local craftsmanship. The team needed sandstone so they researched, visited, and finally found suitable stone in an old quarry near New Norfolk. They bulk cut and bought enough for both buildings. Partridge chose slate for the recessed base and paving for two reasons. In his opinion it is one of the few materials that looks better when wet and it is almost indestructible. It can be worked in much the same way as timber, and graffiti can be removed by simply applying a blow torch.

Partridge was aware that in the north-east of Tasmania near Bangor, and also Lefroy, there were old disused slate workings. At the turn of the century boats returned to England with holds full of Tasmanian

roofing slates destined for London and Bristol. When he visited the workings there were thousands of slates still stacked in the grass, in perfect condition, but it would prove not to be economic to re-open the workings so slate was imported from South Australia.

The roofscape was also important as the Courts are looked down upon and the brief required the provision of daylight in the courtrooms for security. The solution was a cluster of four hyperbolic parabolic roofs to each of the rooms clad in copper, another material that was produced in Tasmania, with glazing between. The external palette was completed with white sand blasted concrete over the entrances and the generous use of lead. Again materials produced in the State.

When it came to building materials in the 1970s, Tasmania was best known for its timbers, in particular for its specialty woods. As a result, internally, the building displays much Blackwood, Myrtle, Tasmanian Oak and Huon Pine, and even some Celery Top for courtroom light fittings. The interiors are a joiner's delight, superb workmanship, exacting detailing, not a cover mould in sight and every nail hand punched. The joinery is particularly special in the individual courts. Sir Stanley Burbury, Chief Justice at the time, had researched courtrooms in the United States and had specified that the Courts be "in the round". This demanded an additional level of skill and craftsmanship in such things as the hand cut mitres at the ends of the judge's Benches.

The courtrooms are circular, with furniture and fittings especially made to keep the round concept. The "round" concept has a history. It is a type of court layout favoured in the United States and Burbury had been impressed by its advantages and possibilities when he examined court buildings and procedures while on a world tour. The "round court" is said to make it easier to give, and receive a "square deal". In other words the advantages of the round court over the traditional layout are that it gives participants a clearer view of the room, and the acoustics are better.

As well as the landscaping and street works the commission also included all furnishings. Some were built as part of the joinery subcontract, some were refurbished from the vacated judges' Chambers but the majority were purchased, where possible of Tasmanian design and manufacture. Furnishings also included soft furnishings such as carpets from Tascott Templeton, one of the State's finest manufactured products. They are still in incredible condition after nearly 50 years of wear. Curtains were purchased from Dunlop Sheraton, and Partridge's commission extended down to the linen and all the trivia from cutlery to crockery, even ashtrays. The project encapsulated a single total design philosophy although some furniture was brought in from the existing court buildings, including the wooden Coat of Arms that adorns Court No 1.

When the new Criminal Courts were opened, the Governor, Sir Stanley Burbury, was quoted in the *Mercury* on 15 March 1975 as referring to the complex as, "the newest and best of Her Majesty's Courts of Justice". However, at the time, the buildings did not win an award. The only contemporary recognition was the featuring of the building on commemorative stamps on envelopes franked in July 1981, celebrating the 21st Australian Legal Convention, which was held in Hobart.

It was not until 2010 that the Court complex was recognised by the architectural profession at State level and nationally. Although Partridge is proud to have the building win the inaugural national award for "Enduring Architecture", he also feels that it is sad to think that there is such an award category for buildings a mere 25–30 years old. In conducting "Open House" tours of the Supreme Court since then, Partridge often remarked to his tour groups:

Of one thing I'm sure. In an urban environment one cannot create "enduring architecture" in isolation. It owes much to its neighbours, present and future, and an informed and caring owner who will not only champion the building's intrinsic qualities and defend them at times of demand for change.

In our land of opportunity, the long-lasting qualities of natural materials are now giving way to the immediacy of coated surfaces that invariably take the form of crisp computer generated photogenic images. Patina is no longer something to be treasured. Since the Courts were built, the conflict between fashion, which by definition is short lived, and endurance, has only intensified.

Our present Chief Justice, Alan Blow, has certainly championed the Court's buildings, rejecting outright suggested incompatible extensions and proposed alterations, and recalling the still practising Partridge.

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