

RESTORE & CONSTRUCT

Words by Jamie Douglas  
Photography by Mike Heydon

# A supreme effort





(This page and opposite)  
The classical façade of the old High Court building juxtaposed with the contemporary design of the new Supreme Court.

## A major project involving restoration of the old and construction of the new will result in a unity that respects and reflects both buildings

There is a small kauri cone in architect Roy Wilson's office. Its spherical shape and spirally arranged overlapping scales were the catalyst for the design by Warren and Mahoney of the main courtroom of the Ministry of Justice's new Supreme Court building in Wellington. As far as symbolism goes, you can't get much more of a New Zealand flavour to the design of this country's highest judicial institution, which will open early in the New Year.

And the symbolism doesn't stop there. Internal and external features of the new Supreme Court building will add to the rich heritage provided by its revitalised partner, the former High Court building which was opened in 1881. For almost a century this 19th-century landmark was known as the Supreme Court before being renamed the High Court in 1980.

A walk around the block from the new Supreme Court's entrance on Lambton Quay gives an appreciation of how the new building has merged with the former High Court, which has been left unused since 1993. At first glance the two buildings appear at odds – not only in an age difference of nearly 130 years but in appearance. However, they are connected, not just physically, and designed with the intent of ensuring at least a further 100-year life expectancy.



(Above)  
Mainzeal staff at work  
in the main courtroom  
of the old building.

(Opposite page, from top)  
Detail of the exterior bronze  
screen on the new building.  
The main staircase leading  
to the public gallery in  
the old High Court.

**“I have huge confidence it’s going to have a long life, not just because it is now secure against major earthquakes but because it is functionally useful again”**

The Supreme Court project was always going to be a challenge, melding the old with the new. Striking that balance between retaining heritage and creating what will, in time, become an iconic heritage landmark in its own right, took time, patience and vision. Roy Wilson and his colleague Bill Gregory started forming ideas in 2003 in what has been “a long but enjoyable process – a discovery process all the way”.

The new building is a modern interpretation of the old High Court. It was not the intention to mimic its architectural style but to ensure it was of a size, scale and shape compatible with and sympathetic to the old. And the consensus is that this has been achieved. The two-storeyed glass façade is symmetrical and wrapped in a bronze screen depicting pohutukawa and rata – imagery important in tikanga Maori as being associated with providing shelter, protection, strength, wisdom and longevity.

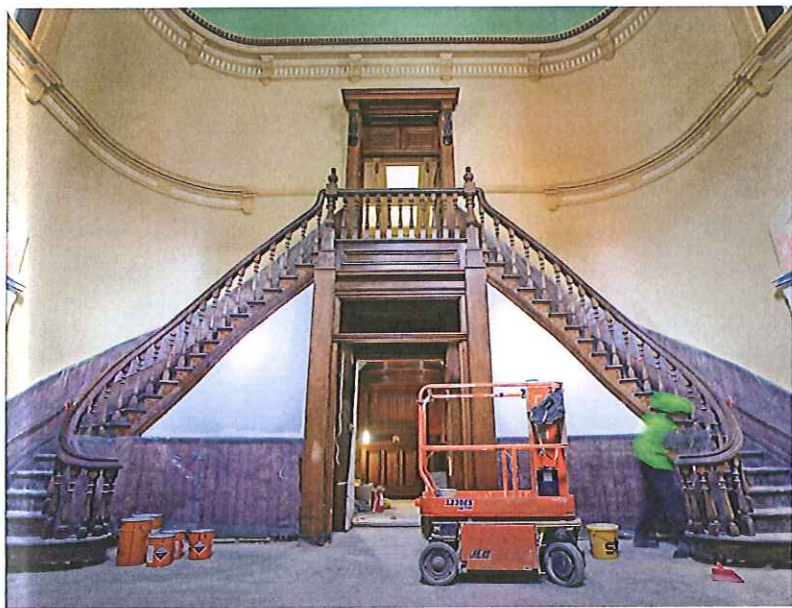
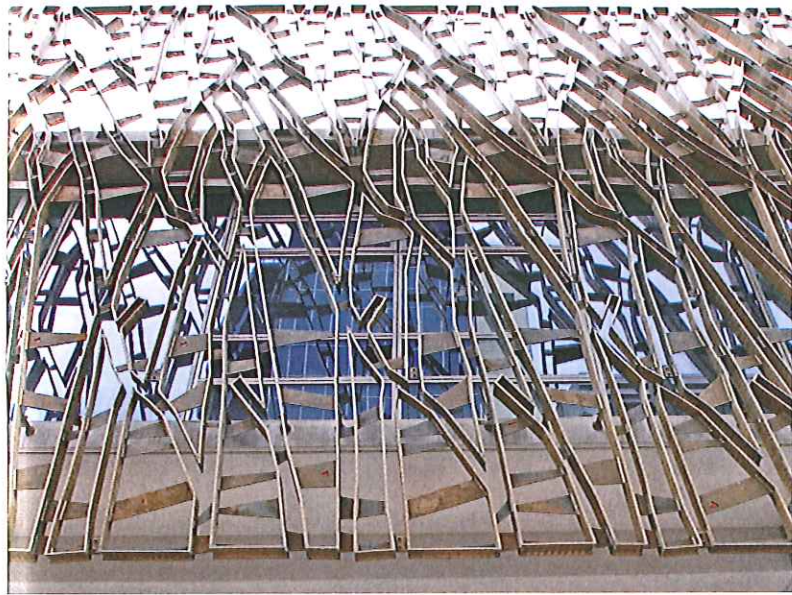
“The idea of the screen was to try to find a New Zealand link to the building,” says Roy. “Pohutukawa and rata come together in Wellington and the symbolism is appropriate. We’ve tried to make it a New Zealand building.”

“The main courtroom had to meet its function and be a grand space. It was modelled on a kauri cone through diamond patterns of copper and timber (sustainable silver beech). We needed a new building that respected the old and we had to ensure that both buildings recognised each other. This is the Supreme Court for New Zealand in 2010. The other was for the judicial system of the 19th century.”

The new site occupies prime Wellington real estate on Lambton Quay between Whitmore and Ballance Streets and is within a stone’s throw of Parliament. The former High Court, which borders Stout Street, was registered as a Category I historic building by the NZHPT in 1982 and is within the Government Centre Historic Area. Designed by architect Pierre Burrows, it was the first masonry structure built by the government in the capital and was designed in an academic classical style.

Before Warren and Mahoney’s final design for the new building was accepted, there had been extensive consultation on the concept with the Supreme Court Judiciary, NZHPT, Ministry for Arts, Culture and Heritage, Ministry for the Environment and Wellington City Council. The NZHPT encouraged the development team to consider the strong heritage values of the former High Court when the pressures of space required new facilities and the state of the old building presented considerable challenges.

Alison Dangerfield, NZHPT Architecture Heritage Advisor, says the final design reflects advice put forward for the retention of the values of the former High Court. “The statutory advocacy role of the Trust is about advocating for the heritage values of an historic place or area. For the former High Court, the values were outstanding and special. The result of that advocacy is the building that is coming into fruition today, with retention of the remarkable interior spaces.”



Project manager for the Supreme Court building and former High Court revamp was Ian Macaskill of The Building Intelligence Group. His role was to bring all the project participants together so that “everyone went away happy”.

This included overseeing the work of main contractor Mainzeal which, in turn, was responsible for sub-contracting. It added up to a very large project in terms of input, management and staffing. “Projects aren’t just about the end result, they’re about getting there,” Ian says. “The project was about the building of a home for the Supreme Court and the history it will create. And in the old building there’s heritage that won’t be recreated in terms of design.”

An assessment of the design concept was prepared for the Ministry of Justice by Wellington conservation architect Chris Cochran. It formed part of the brief to Warren and Mahoney and was important in helping to obtain NZHPT approval for the work and resource consent from the Wellington City Council.

From a conservation perspective, Chris believes the whole of the life of the former High Court is represented in the restoration and the fact that it was not pared back to how it had been in 1881 showed how it had changed over time. “We have consciously looked to preserve the continuum of history that the building demonstrates,” he says.

“That means, for example, that additions from the 20th century have been kept. The Chief Justice Chamber was refurbished in the 1940s and Courtroom No 3 was refurbished in the 1960s in a style completely different from the rest of the building. That space is being preserved in its 1960s’ form and it stands out as a contrast. It’s a conscious decision to illustrate that the building has had a long life, one that has seen change to meet new functional requirements.”

Certain parts of the old High Court building were found to be of exceptional heritage value. These included the exterior, the main entrance foyer and Courtroom No 1. That these areas were able to be restored to their former glory was quite an achievement, given the deterioration of the building after years of being left unoccupied. “It had suffered severely but was caught in time. Another 10 years and it might not have been restorable,” Chris says.

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## RESTORE & CONSTRUCT

Underpinning this restoration work was the base isolation carried out for seismic strengthening. Rubber and lead bearings under stone and brick buildings dampen ground movement, isolating them from the worst effects of major earthquakes and greatly reducing structural intervention above.

"This is by far the biggest make-over the building has had in its long life and the earthquake strengthening is a very important part of it," Chris says. "There's no reason to believe it can't have another 130 years of life. I have huge confidence it's going to have a long life, not just because it is now secure against major earthquakes but because it is functionally useful again."

The new part of the Supreme Court building has concrete and steel support braces so that it moves with the ground during an earthquake.

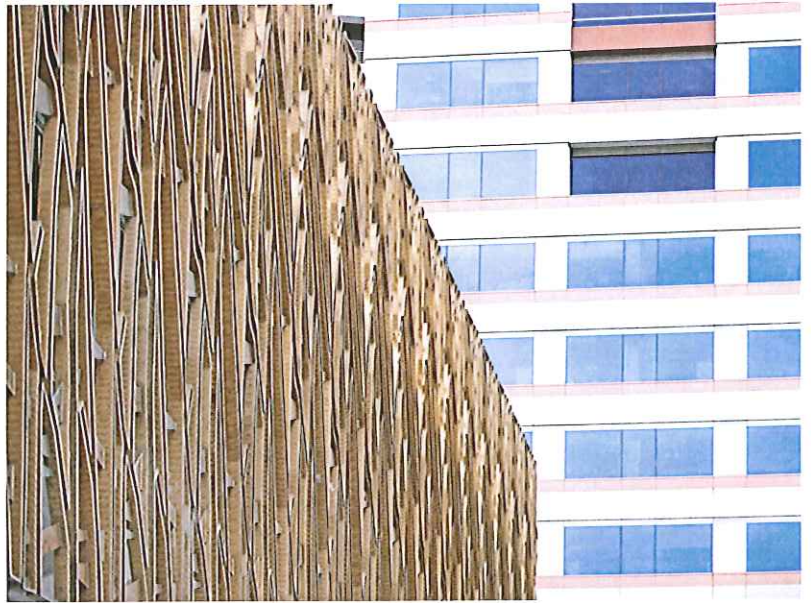
From the boardroom to the basement of the building site, the scale and technical requirements of the project have benefited all involved, with new skills learned along the way. Ian Macaskill says the project required old and new skills, providing the perfect opportunity for experienced, and some retired, hands to pass on their knowledge.

"Mainzeal has a good track record in heritage work, with the Parliament Buildings restoration project having a lot of similarities to this one. They had tradespeople available and after going back through their contacts got key guys out of retirement to go with the sub-contractors to tackle the plastering. It was important to use that knowledge base and connecting with skills from the past was a great opportunity for the younger guys to learn from them."

General Manager Higher Courts Andrew Hampton says that owing to uncertainty about the state of the High Court building - which could be confirmed only once work was underway - it was not possible to estimate the total cost of the project at the outset. The previous government had approved initial funding of not less than \$65.1 million, covering the restoration of the old High Court (\$25.3 million) and construction of the new Supreme Court (\$39.8 million), an approach which acknowledged certainty would come as the project progressed and more funding was likely to be needed.

Ultimately, the High Court building was in a significantly worse condition than anticipated, primarily owing to extensive water damage. This required extra remedial and strengthening work and in 2008 a final revised budget of \$80.7 million was approved; the project has remained within this budget. More than 90 percent of the additional cost is due to the state of the old High Court building.

So what do we have? In addition to the new Supreme Court, the public now has access to the important heritage spaces of the former High Court's entrance lobby, foyer and Courtroom No 1. Architecturally, the interior features some exceptional work including the double stairs to the public gallery, timber panelling and the judge's bench and canopy in the main courtroom.

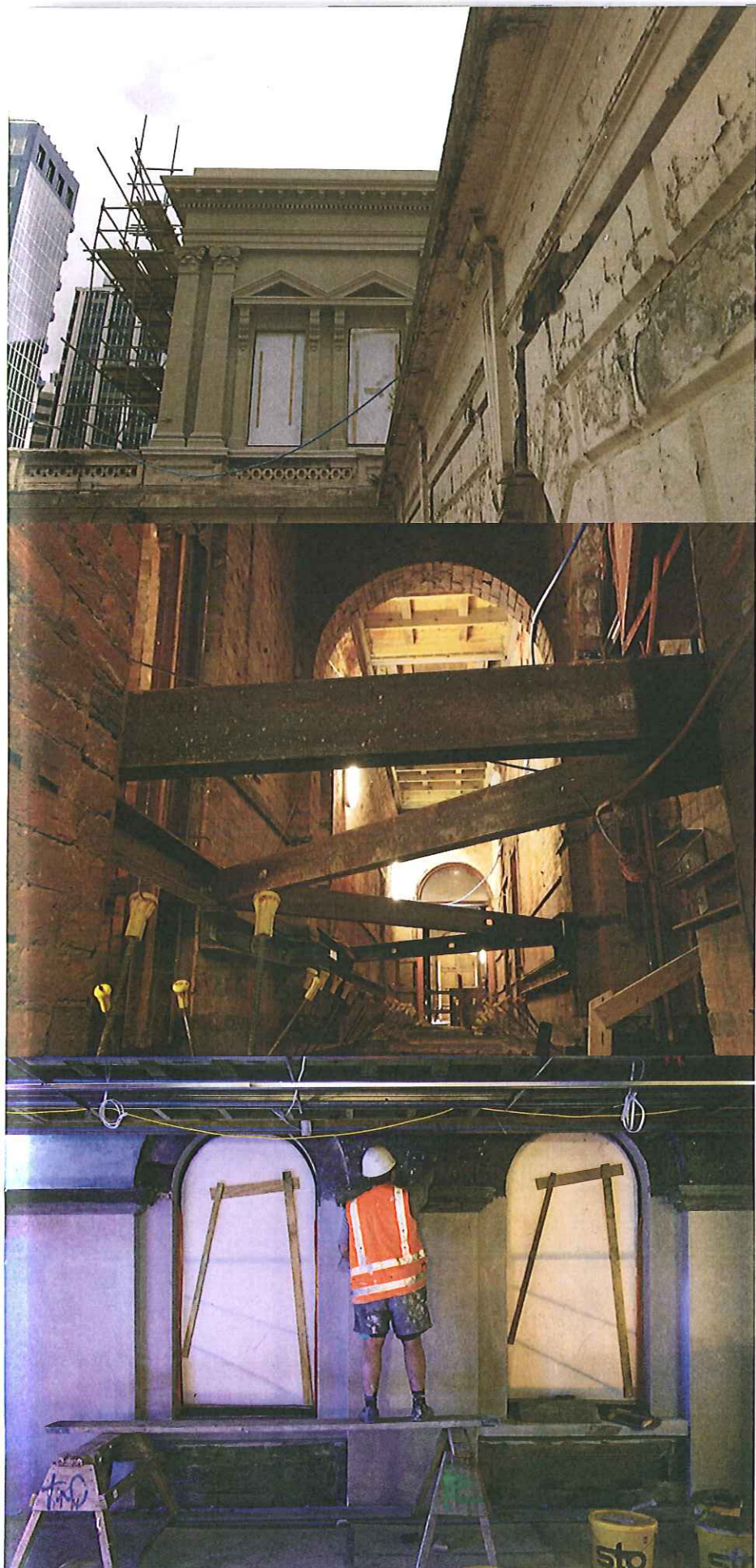


Roy Wilson is in no doubt as to the value the new Supreme Court will hold in architectural, historical and heritage terms. "People struggle to understand the concept of when the old High Court was built, not long after the New Zealand Wars.

"I believe it will be an absolutely stunning piece of architecture with both the old and new buildings existing together. We've tried to preserve as much as possible and put back the original where we can. Even the scribbles made by prisoners on the cell walls will remain. From inside the new entrance off Lambton Quay the public will be able to see the bench and justice being done."

(Above top)  
Pohutukawa and rata are depicted on the bronze screen that wraps around the new building.

(Above)  
The main courtroom in the old building will eventually be restored to its former glory.



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