

THE OLD COURTHOUSE

Introduction

On February 10, 1906, F. C. Gamble, Public Works Engineer of British Columbia's Lands and Surveys Department, invited architects to submit competitive designs for a courthouse in Vancouver that would replace one no longer deemed adequate.¹ The "accommodations" were to include:

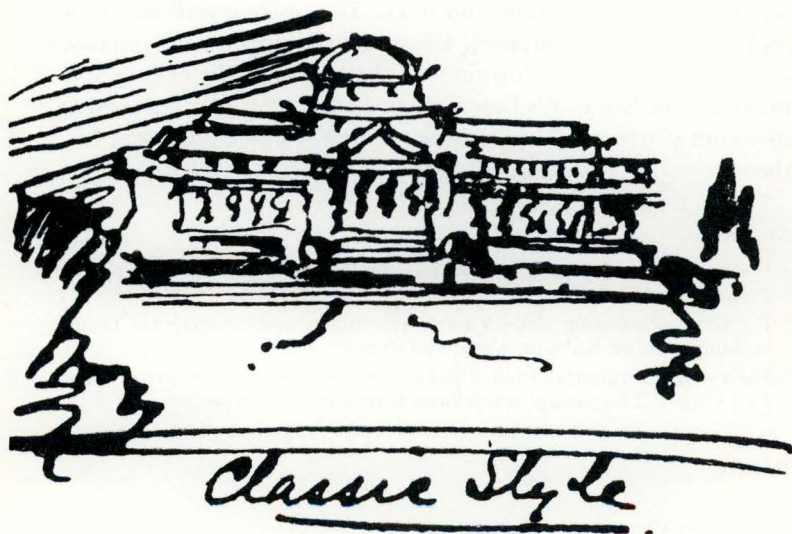
- (1) Boiler Room (2) Police Department (3) Six Cells (4) Timber Agent's Office (5) Assessor and Collector's Office (6) Agriculture Department (7) Assize Court (8) Full Court...

Twenty-six areas in all were specified.

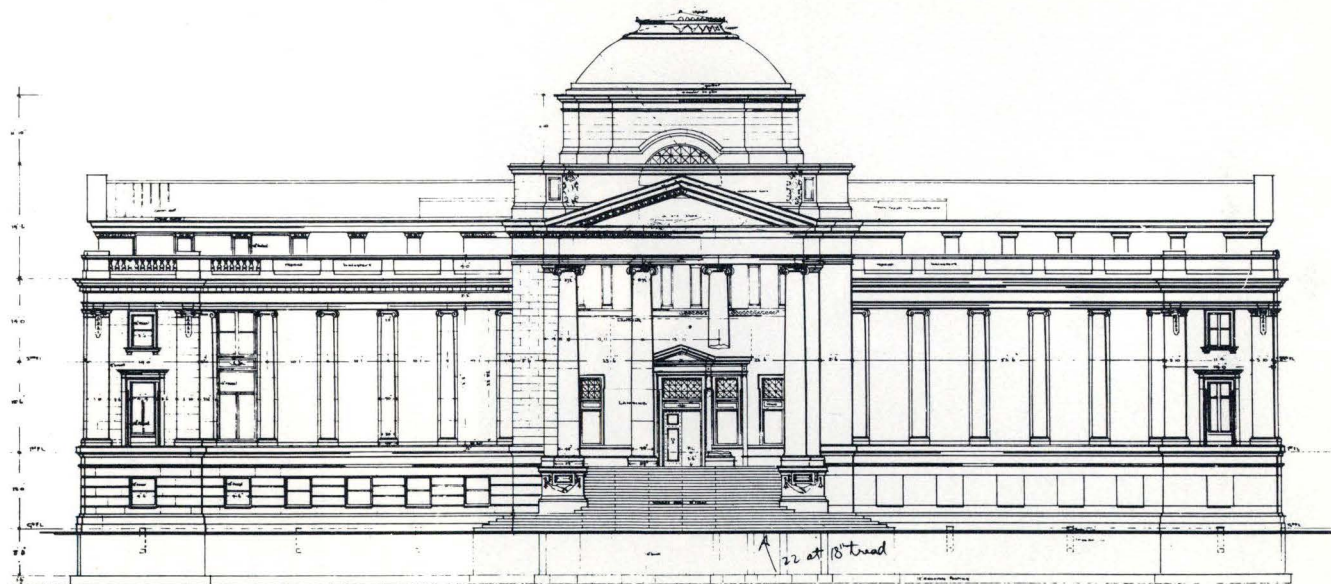
The competition invitation recommended that the Land Registry Office be a fireproof annex on one side of the building, that the corresponding annex on the other side not be directly connected with the courts, and that the design of the building as a whole should facilitate later additions.

On May 10, 1906, Gamble received this telegram from Edmund Burke, representing the Toronto-based judges:

CANNOT GIVE FIRST OR SECOND PLACE TO OTHER DESIGNS.
FAULTS TOO SERIOUS... HAVE NEW COMPETITION OR
ENGAGE NUMBER 4.



COURT HOUSE.
VANCOUVER. N° 10



ELEVATION TO GEORGIA ST

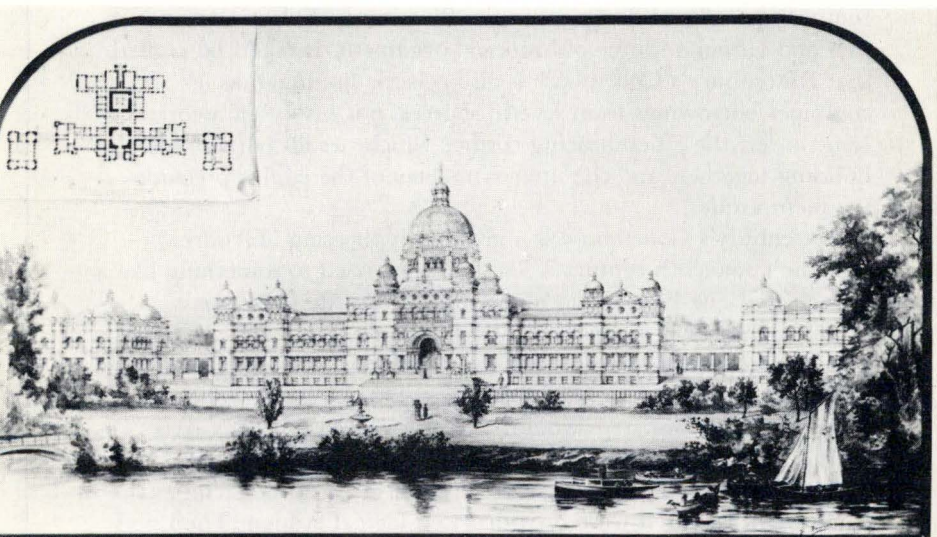
SCALE OF FEET

J.M. Ramezary Architect
Victoria B.C.
April 1909



Number 4 was the "classic" design submitted by Francis Rattenbury, one he had sketched for his mother and described as "swagger."²

It was probably no surprise that Francis Mawson Rattenbury (1867-1935) was chosen to create the Vancouver Courthouse. He had emigrated from Bradford, England in 1892, after apprenticing with a firm run by his mother's brothers which was known, principally, for the Italianate buildings it constructed. He moved then to Victoria after winning the competition for the design of the British Columbia Parliament buildings in 1893 at the young age of twenty-five. He had also recently completed the Empress Hotel and BC Government House (Cary Castle) in Victoria and was working on the Courthouse for Nelson.³



His colleagues may have been surprised at the Classicism of his design for the Vancouver Courthouse, at odds with the best-known of his early works. But with sophistication, they would have judged his choice of style as Rattenbury's shrewd reflection of the current taste in public buildings, one that was thought to be both "modern" and "cosmopolitan" (Whiteway et al.). At the time, Renaissance

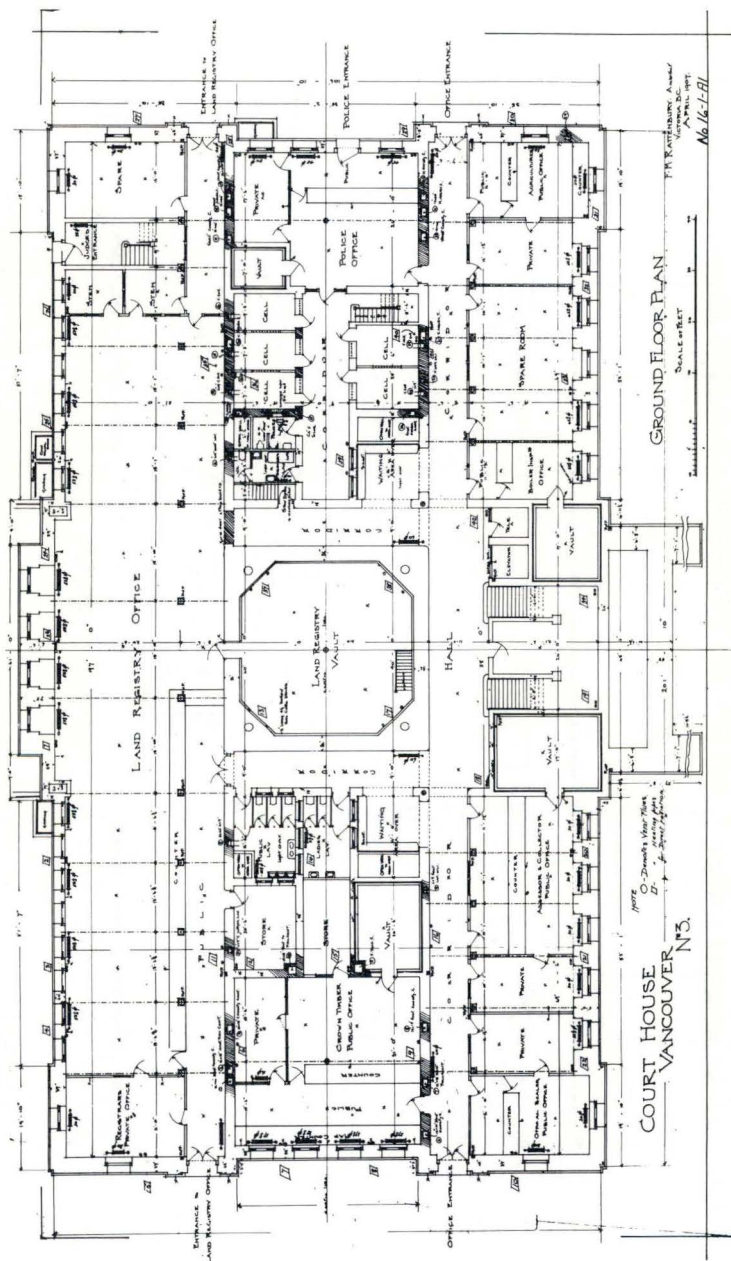
Classicism was experiencing a return to popularity, in part because of the several structures in this manner that had been created for The Chicago World's Fair in 1893, but more especially because one firm (McKim, Mead and White) was producing dozens of buildings with classical detail which influenced other architects.

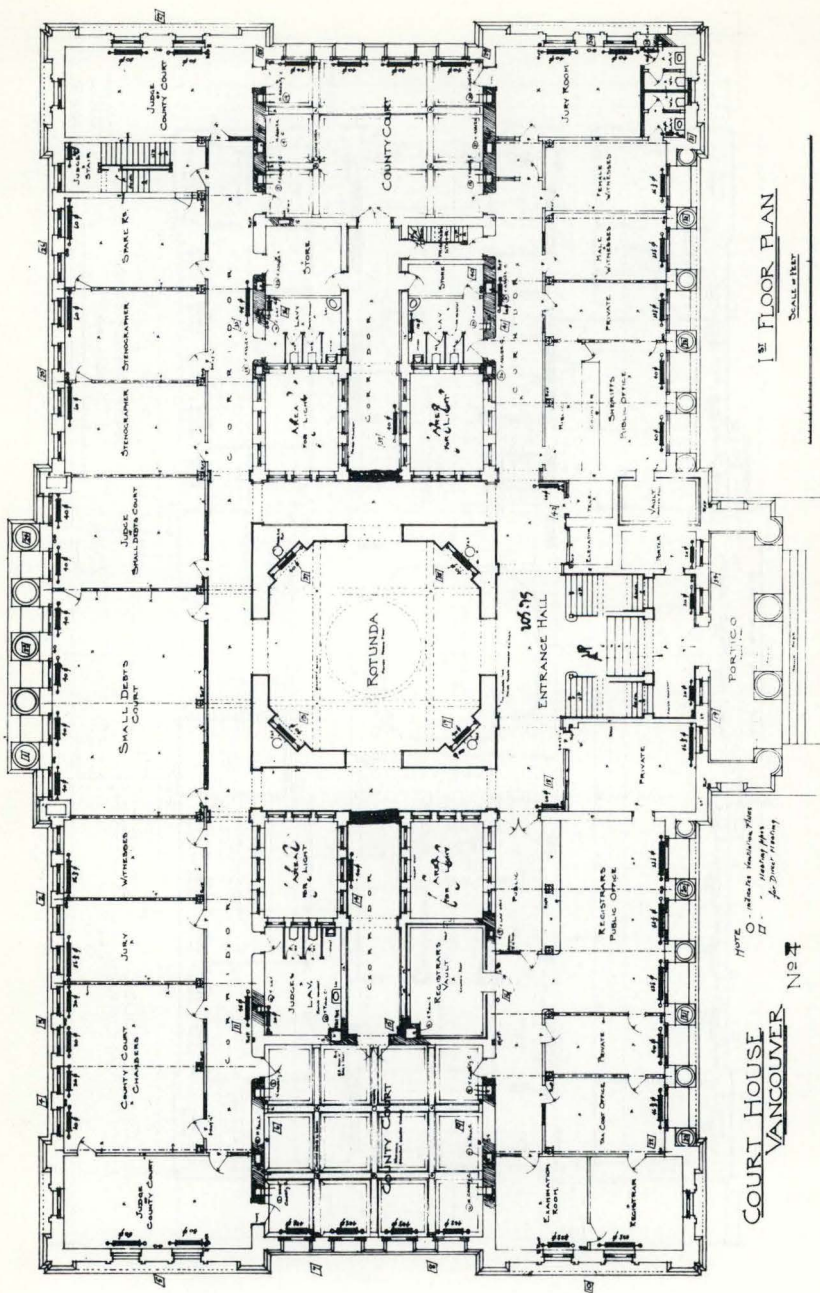
To imitate the Classical (Renaissance or other) was to break away from the Medieval, the historical period which in the previous century had offered designers in the Picturesque Eclectic manner so rich and varied a source of historical ornament. It could be argued that Rattenbury's Courthouse is also eclectic inasmuch as it combines borrowings from several sources, but his use of a correct Ionic order, the all-embracing cornice which ties all parts of his building together, and the utter symmetry of the edifice preclude the picturesque.

Rattenbury's Courthouse is a graceful rephrasing of Andrea Palladio's sixteenth-century Villa Capra married to something like a French Baroque Palace and made suitable for the law court's requirements, or it is a sister to Washington's White House, dome added on top. In any event, it is richly allusive and was fashionable. The special swags he ordered for its facades and the lions he had carved for the front steps would make Rattenbury's Beaux-Arts exercise seem original.

As the plan of the ground floor suggests, most of the facilities the commission required were provided in a logical fashion. The Land Registry vault, which was ultimately located at the centre, however, was here the underpinning of a grand entry hall to which one gained access after climbing the tall stairway of the Georgia Street entrance. At the first storey level, this in turn was the lowest level of something more grand — a domed Rotunda which was the major circulation area, inner light well, and aesthetic highlight of the building, a simpler version of Rattenbury's successful BC Parliament Building foyer. There is little discrepancy between Rattenbury's original designs and what was finally executed. The original layout has been described in this fashion:

Beyond the fine entrance a short flight of stairs led up to the hall and the rotunda; on either side stairs descended to the ground floor, reached directly from street level at the rear. The ground floor contained the various government offices, chiefly the Land Registry office and the Police Department, while the lower ground floor was reserved for cells,





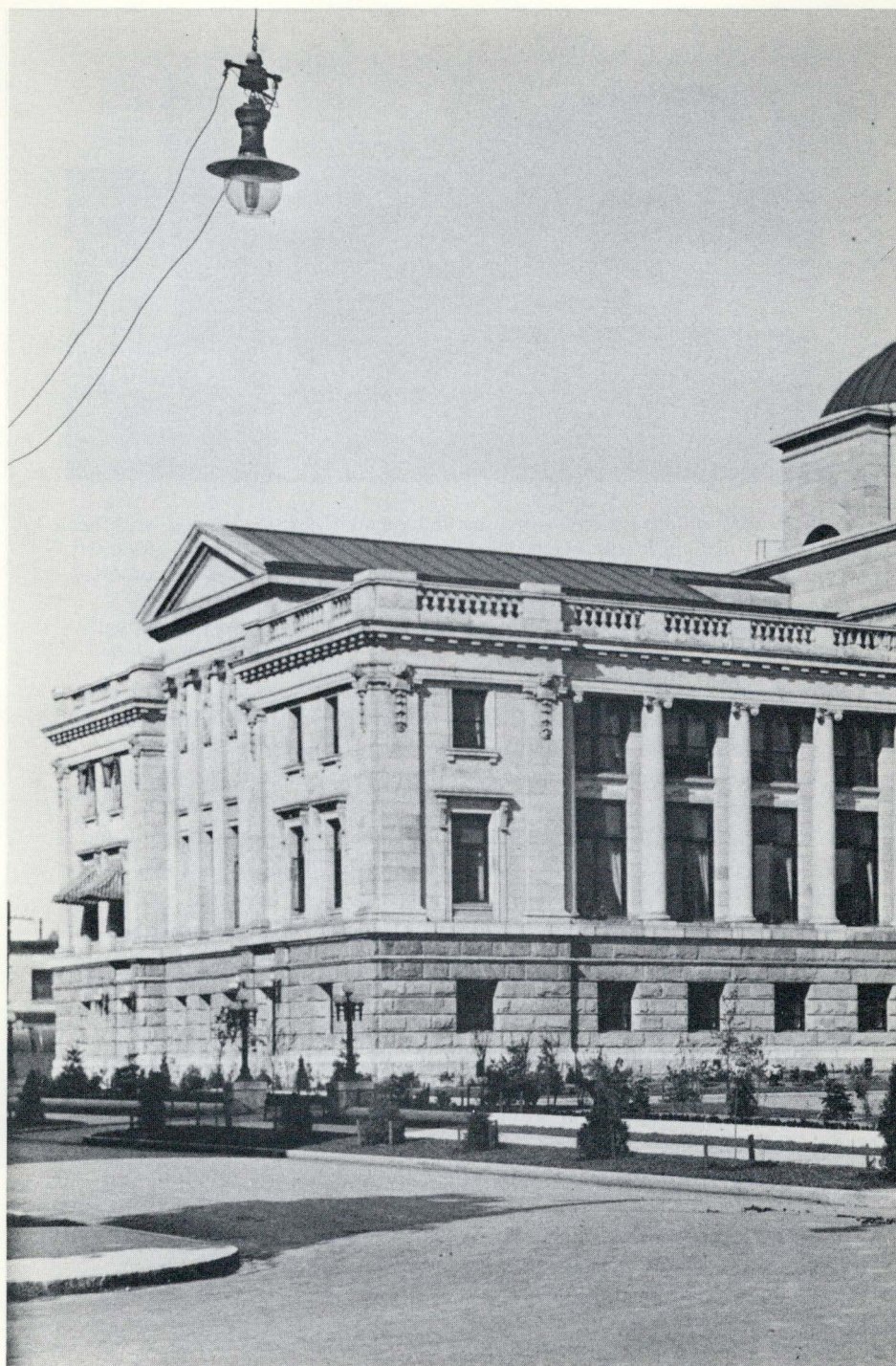


heating pumps for the ventilating and vacuum cleaning systems, and the electrical apparatus. From the entrance hall two further flights supported the upper part of the rotunda. At this level the four sides of the rotunda were decorated with tall pilasters enclosing columns and supporting a continuous entablature, perhaps in emulation of the Roman triumphal arch and thus intended to symbolize the triumph of justice through law. (Barret et al. 173)

The court rooms were disposed on either side of the Rotunda at three levels, and, also on either side of it, Rattenbury provided separate entrances for the public, the law officers and the litigants and prisoners.

The plans and drawings reproduced here were prepared as adjuncts to a May 7, 1907 document called Specification for a Court House, Vancouver, BC, prepared by the Provincial Government. This manual, which contained detailed instructions for contractors and workmen, announced that the work would begin on July 1, 1907 and finish on or before July 1, 1909. It stated that the entire work was to be executed in conformity with the drawings, specifications and details Rattenbury had prepared. As it progressed the Courthouse project would be supervised by Dalton & Everleigh, Architects of Vancouver.

This document, archive photographs, and letters make it possible to present a very intricate picture of the Courthouse's metamorphosis from idea to fact. A City of Vancouver Archive photo shows workers breaking ground with horse teams. A 1908 illustration in a magazine of the period (*Westward Ho*., June 1908) depicts the granite basement in progress.





Rattenbury's Courthouse is at the change point between traditional and contemporary technique. The granite basement was walled with hand-cut masonry and supported walls of limestone that bore a good deal of the weight of the structure. The swags, the Ionic capitals, and the rich external and internal mouldings were hand-carved or moulded in plaster; the lions which guard the major stairway were the work of a sculptor. On the other hand, references to structural steel and reinforced concrete in Specification and the letters bring the Courthouse into the context of modern structural methods. Iron cage construction, ferro-concrete fireproofing, and wire glass, mentioned and used by Rattenbury and his assistants at various stages of construction, were new at the turn of the century. Although the Courthouse was begun in 1907, it was not completed until 1910, nor was it built within the estimated cost of 150,000 dollars. The arguments over the dome's methods of construction are not only interesting in themselves, but also indicate why then, as now, few buildings can be finished efficiently and on budget.

NOTES

- ¹ For documents, including those cited here, pertaining to the history of the Old Courthouse design competition, consult the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, in Victoria, BC.
- ² For a full and readable text which combines history and architectural history consult Barret and Liscombe, *Francis Rattenbury and British Columbia*.
- ³ For further information about Rattenbury's architecture and scandalous end consult Reksten.

IMAGES

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| 8 | UBC Press. |
| 9 | Provincial Archives of British Columbia. |
| 10 & 11 | Sono Nis Press. |
| 13 & 14 | Provincial Archives of British Columbia. |
| 16 & 17 | City of Vancouver Archives. |