

THE NEW LAW COURTS

Introduction

Although the firm had been commissioned to start urban design studies in October 1972, it was not until February 16, 1973 that the local newspapers announced that Arthur C. Erickson (b. 1924) had been hired to prepare a report on the building or buildings and the impact on traffic flow of the newly proposed low-rise complex on Blocks 61 and 71 adjacent to the Block 51 Old Courthouse. This project, agreed to by the new city council, dominated by The Electors Action Movement Party, and sanctioned by the recently elected New Democratic Party Government of BC, was to supercede the now discarded Social Credit Party scheme for provincial government buildings on Blocks 51 and 61, a project that had included the unpopular fifty-five storey tower mentioned above.

The new scheme, unveiled on June 6, 1973, was substantially different from the earlier one, as Erickson's office had been asked to redesign it for three blocks instead of two.¹ The firm was to consider which services should be provided in the downtown core and which should be provided in the suburbs. The development had to include a civic centre, courtroom facilities, government offices, and public parking. The arguments upon which every aspect of the scheme is based are equally interesting, but, in order to make a pertinent contrast with Rattenbury's Courthouse, facts and ideas concerning the New Law Courts on Block 71 will be the focus here.

In the 1973 brief prepared by Erickson's office, the New Courthouse's function is summarized:

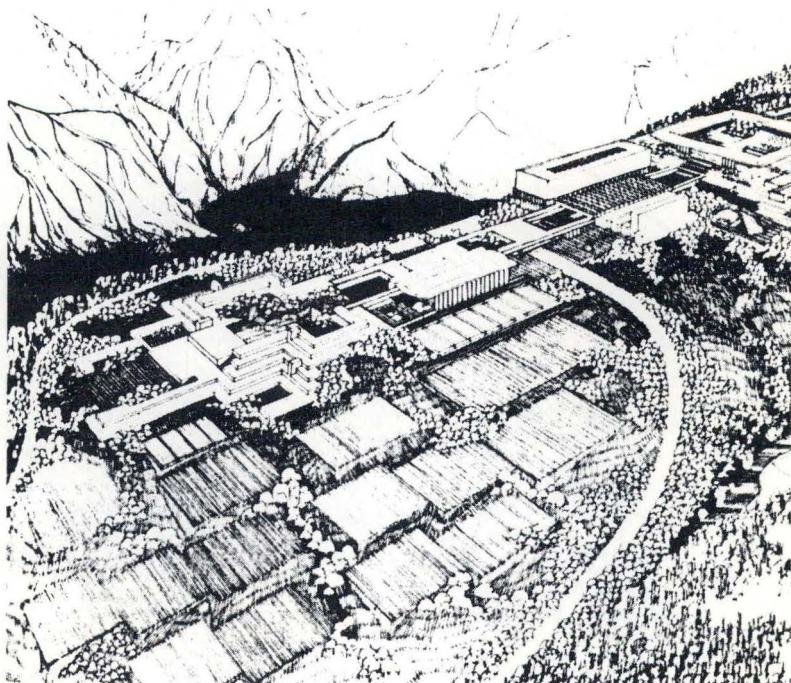
The law courts building is organized into four major components: public space, courtrooms and cores, judges' chambers, administrative and support facilities. These four major elements have been arranged so as to give considerable importance to the courtrooms themselves.

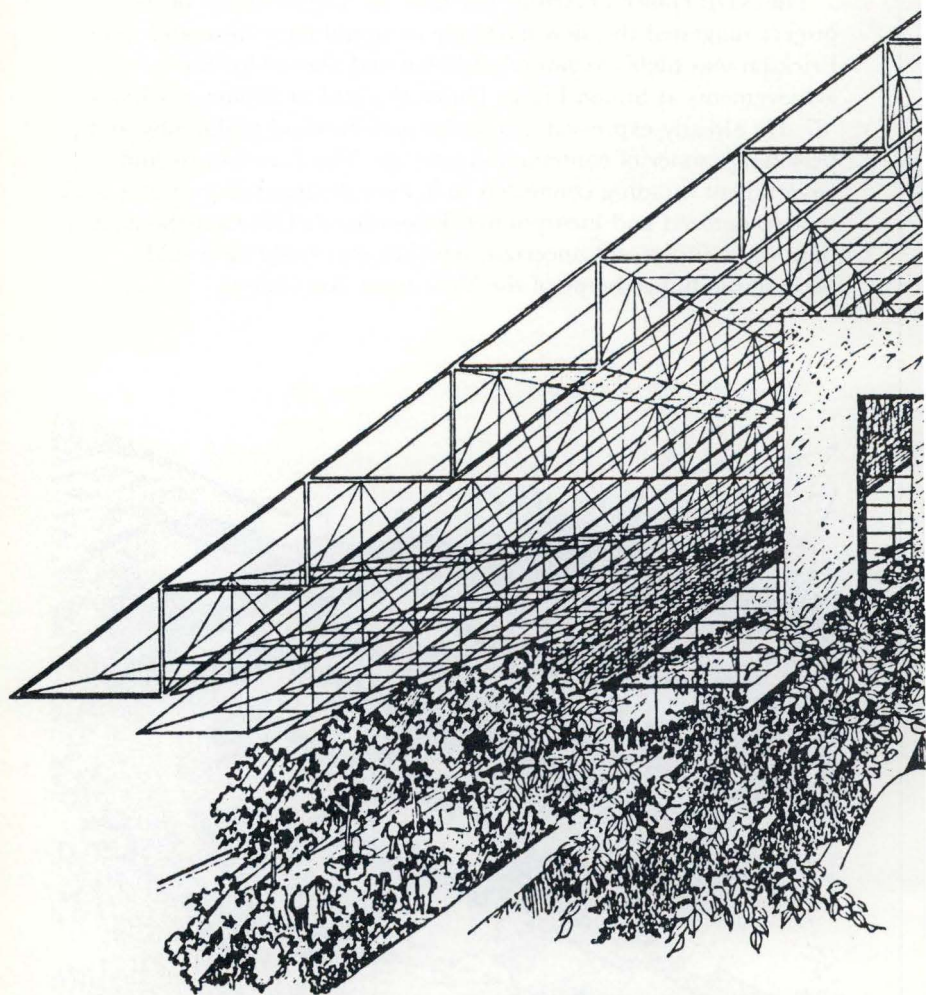
After a first speculative stage, however, the design team had to come to terms with the precise solutions for the many specialized accommodations the complex had to contain, especially in the Law Courts building, where it was necessary to create rooms appropriate for judges' courts and chambers, secure places for the accused, and many other specialized (or specially equipped) areas.



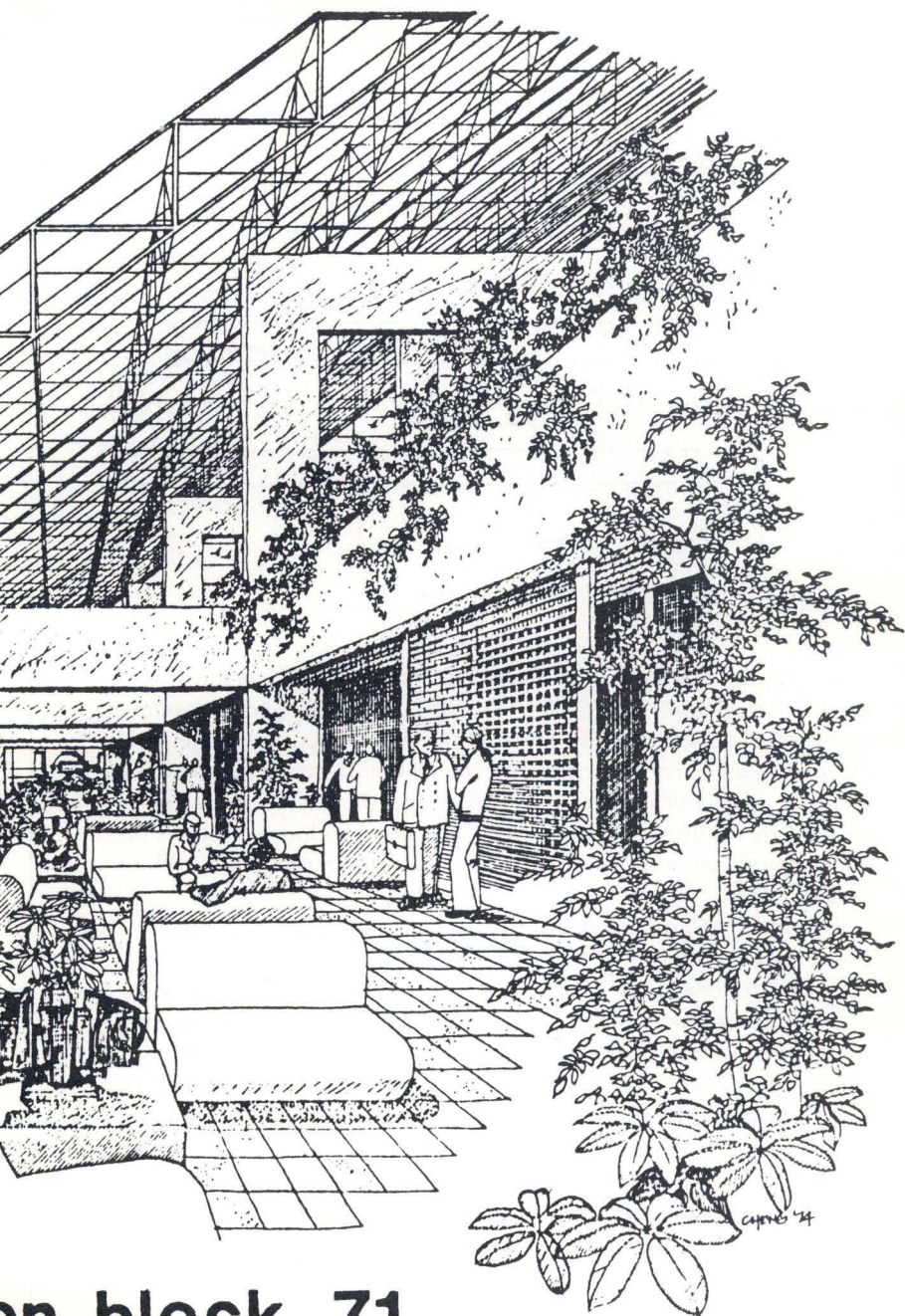
By the time the document, Block 71 Schematics, was produced in 1974, many of the technical features of the New Law Courts had been fully conceived. The Erickson team of architects and engineers was moving towards the construction of a multipurpose complex.

The NDP choice of Arthur Erickson as chief architect of the project suggested this new government would have taste and style. Erickson was highly regarded at home and abroad for his achievements at Simon Fraser University and at Montreal's Expo '67. He already expressed a complex architectural philosophy and a personal manner of contemporary design. The Law Courts and government building connected to it were designed as part of a park that recognized and incorporated Rattenbury's Old Courthouse at a time when it was still uncertain whether that building would become the future home of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

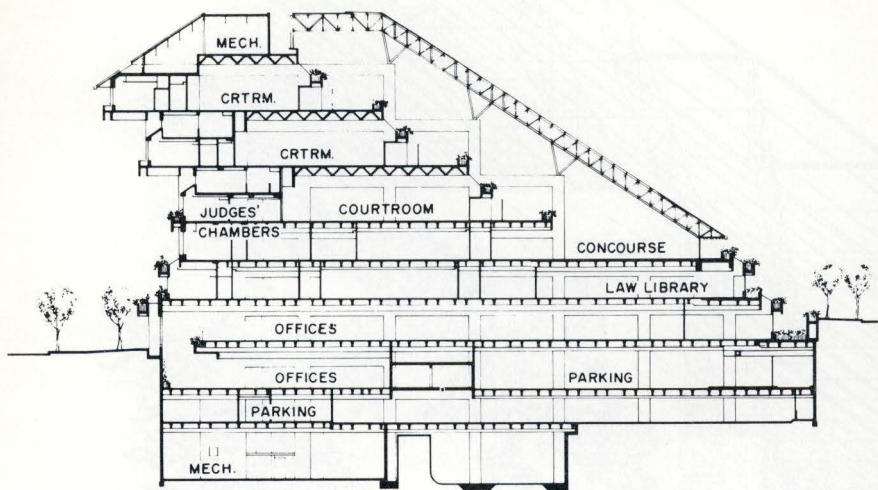




public gallery space



on block 71



70 ARCHITECTURAL RECORD December 1980

Schematics 1974 is a document that counterparts Specifications for a Court House, Vancouver, BC, 1907. It is, however, a statement of intent and philosophy rather than a working manual. Schematics 1974 contains notes on design aspects, technical matters, professional conduct, mechanical systems, acoustics and the like. It is designed to be read by an interested layperson. The more technical sections of Schematics communicate the concerns of the contemporary architect and engineer.

There are no equivalents to the carved lions' heads and swags listed in Rattenbury's Specification. There are many references to pre-cast prestressed concrete, poured and reinforced concrete, glass walls, space-frames, anodized aluminum, closed circuit TV, audio-visual aids—the methods and trappings of the modern age. Even fireproofing, now a mandatory requirement of all public buildings, is described and effected in terms that Rattenbury in 1907 would not have had at his disposal.

With Erickson's work one must always imagine that ideas will in part determine the form. Schematics 1974 made clear from the start the firm's views regarding courthouses, an approach based on the research of Project Architect Rainer Fassler in the USA and Canada:

the courthouse has traditionally in North America borrowed the symbols of classical architecture to lend an appropriate dignity and solemnity to its buildings. The grand stairway and classical portico are part of this evident wish to give the processes of law an appropriate setting. More recently . . . some courthouses have achieved an equally austere dignity through ponderous massing, or emphasized only the business aspect of law through putting the courts in standard office buildings.

In the Schematics document, this solution is suggested:

The courts, in presenting the necessary dignity of the law, should not exclude or inhibit the true participation of the public. . . . The courts are the servants of the society, reflect its ideals in the basic premise of British justice, that a man is innocent until proven guilty. The courts often unwillingly intimidate through their arrangement or architectural ponderousness, thereby effecting the opposite of their ideas. In most modern courthouses there is very little that offers reassurance to the distressed or even basic amenities for the participants forced to spend long hours in the court precincts.

Hence, the large, public access, glass-roofed gallery would be created as a major civic space "inviting public awareness and involvement in matters of justice," and as a ceremonial area for judicial, civic and provincial events. The building was intended, through its design, to promote public participation in the process of the law and to give the spectator unrestricted movement, except in the courtrooms and secure areas. Further, the lawcourt would contain many areas that would accommodate those who must wait there. Many alcoves suitable for quiet consultation, many rooms set aside for the purposes of media coverage, preparation, and education would be created. At the same time, the design would extend as much flexibility as possible in the recognition that "the entire judicial process . . . will change considerably during the life of the building."

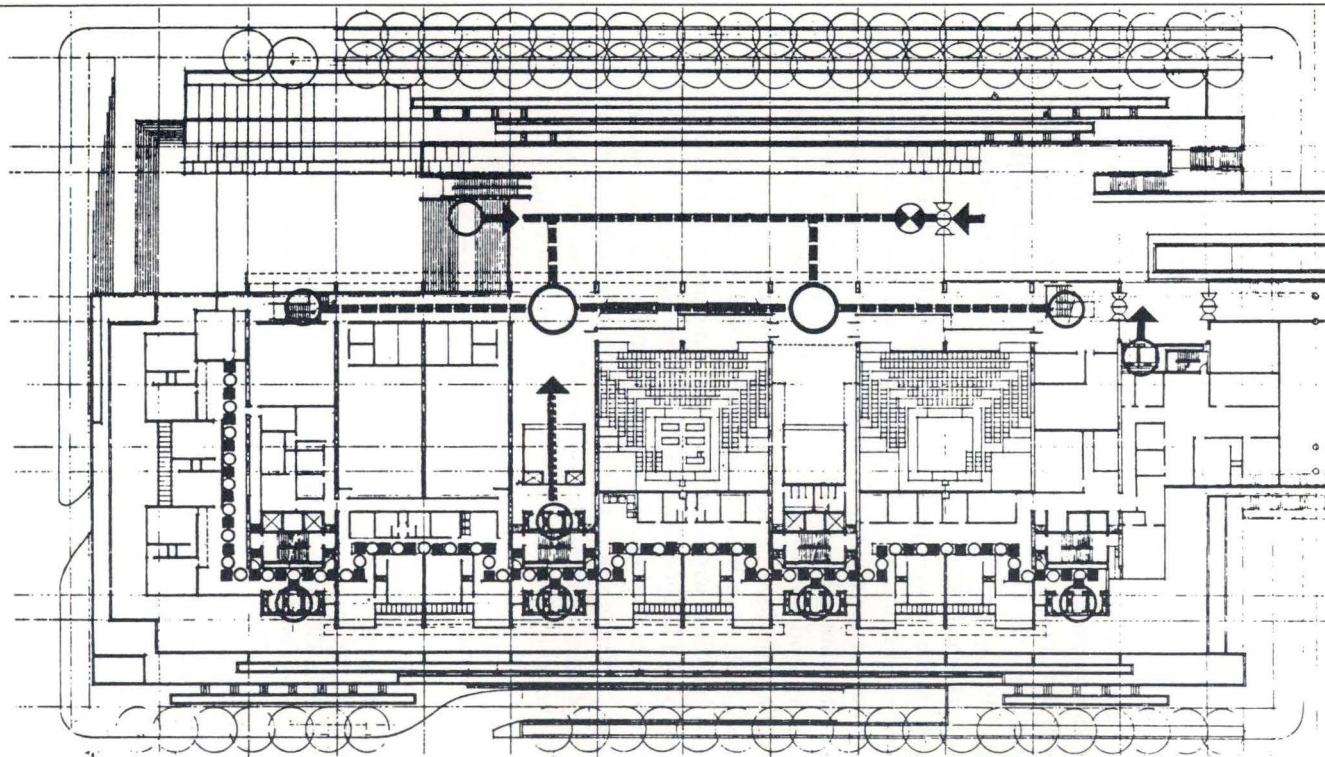
“In the usual courthouse,” Schematics 1974 proclaimed,

the public space is the interstitial space between courtrooms. We will have changed this order from the courtroom being the focus of design, to its being complementary to the public space.

As the architectural rendering attests, a very detailed notion of the appearance of a glass-roofed public gallery adjacent to the courtrooms had been conceived by the time Schematics was presented. In addition, the cross-section through the lawcourts demonstrates that the relationship between the four major areas referred to in Erickson’s original proposal — public space, courts and cores, judges’ chambers, administrative and support facilities — had been worked out. The floor plan of the main floor indicates the presence of three large civil courts and their relationship to the judges’ chambers and to the spectators’ gallery that lies beyond.

Excavating the huge pit for the foundations, parking garages, and the water storage tank that would be a major feature of the heating-cooling system required all the modern cranes and equipment one now often sees at major construction sites. Not only is the philosophy on which the Law Courts design is based far removed from that which determined the appearance of Rattenbury’s Courthouse; so also are the techniques of engineering far removed from a horse-team.

* * *



main court floor level
elev. 215.0'

circulation patterns

- public circulation
- barristers & handicapped
- restricted circulation
- vertical circulation

While the basic layout and architectural intent of the New Court House were established in 1974, construction was not started until 1976. In August 1974, the month of the Schematics presentation, the Justice Development Commission published a review of the project asking in principle for fewer and smaller courtrooms and the inclusion of provincial courts and more administrative space. After consultation with the Department of Public Works and the JDC, Erickson's office agreed to pursue the option that least affected the project and its schedule.

New cost estimates were presented in August 1975. The design changes were numerous and very complex: fewer courtrooms, the creation of new departments, the redefinition of existing departments, and the elimination of a full floor. The floorplan from Schematics Appendix 1 (1975) reproduced here shows the revised version of the main floor of the New Law Courts.

In August 1979, Ron Beaton, Assistant Project Architect for the Law Courts building, wrote the following summary of the Law Courts spaces and facilities. It offers an interesting contrast to the item by item list in the competition notice of the Old Courthouse, and, further, it demonstrates that by the time the work was in the final stages of consideration, the number of courtrooms had again risen from the revised twenty-eight to the original estimate of thirty-five.

BLOCK 71 THE LAW COURTS STATISTICS

Site Area

Bounded by Nelson, Hornby, Smithe and Howe 475 x 260 feet

Main Court Floor

12,000 square feet concourse giving access to three upper public galleries each of which is 350 feet long contained under the steel structure supported glazed slope roof enveloping a volume of 1,700,000 cu. feet.

Courtrooms

- 3 appeal courtrooms
- 14 criminal jury courts
- 2 civil jury courtrooms
- 11 civil non-jury courtrooms
- 2 commercial courts
- 3 motion courts

35 Courtrooms

Chambers

60 judges' chambers plus two suites/offices with conference rooms for chief justice of appeal and supreme courts.

Accused Accommodations

22 holding rooms in primary holding areas adjacent to vehicle bays

24 holding rooms on upper mezzanine levels adjacent to courtrooms

Parking

140 public parking spaces

110 restricted parking spaces for judges/staff, sheriffs' use etc.

Materials

43,000 cu. yds. of cast in place concrete

70,000 sq. ft. of brown elm finished wood panelling

150,000 gallons of water contained for waterfall systems

NOTE

- ¹ Historical information, architects' statements, etc. about the New Law Courts and the conversion of the Old Courthouse are derived from notes and documents in the Archives of Arthur Erickson Architects in Vancouver.

IMAGES

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- 38 V. Tony Hauser.
39 Arthur Erickson Architects.
40 Arthur Erickson Architects.
42 Arthur Erickson Architects.
44 City of Vancouver Archives.
45 Arthur Erickson Architects.
48 Nathan Hohn.

