

# THE OLD COURTHOUSE CONVERSION

## Introduction

When Erickson's firm undertook the redesign of Blocks 61 and 71 in 1973, it was already known that the Old Courthouse on Block 51 would be part of the scheme. In 1974 the firm was engaged to do a feasibility study on what possible civic use could be made of that building. Although several alternatives were suggested, the architects thought its conversion into new premises for the Vancouver Art Gallery "the most promising" idea. In 1976, after the appointment of the new director, Luke Rombout, the Vancouver Art Gallery Association commissioned a study called "Functional Program for the Vancouver Art Gallery." Its author, Gustavo da Roza, a Winnipeg architect, was concerned to create a document that did not have to be tied to the Courthouse as site, although there was never any question that it was "one potential solution to the space requirements of the Vancouver Art Gallery."<sup>1</sup>

This report also recognized that there were no plans whatsoever to demolish the Courthouse. It had been declared a heritage structure by the provincial government through a process that did not exist before 1972. This designation, as we shall see, dictated the handling of the new features incorporated into the Robson Street facade when the redesign process began. Earthquake proofing and the provision of adequate fire exits were necessary by law because reconstruction exceeded twenty-five per cent of the building's replacement value. To meet these requirements, the interior of the Old Courthouse was virtually gutted. Finally, the gallery had to be renovated in such a manner that it would conform to the rigorous standards of light and heat regulation and of security demanded in a world class museum.





Government grants were augmented by funds raised through a highly successful campaign called "Take the Gallery to Court." The fund-raising goals were based upon Arthur Erickson Architects' cost figures as set out in the concept design study the firm was commissioned to produce in 1977. Construction began in December 1981. The new Vancouver Art Gallery was opened to the public in October 1983.

Because it was a heritage structure, no change could be made to the facades of the Old Courthouse without appropriate government approval. Erickson changed very little of the original exterior, and when it was altered, many of the renovations were made to appear to be part of the earlier structure. For example, on the roof of the Old Annex there is now an immense new chimney that looks as though it was there since the beginning. Created to perform all venting functions for the three major buildings on the site, it was finished with decorative flourishes which matched those on the original elevator penthouse of the Old Annex. The elevator penthouse was resurfaced in a contemporary grey stucco like that on the new chimney.

Some external alterations were major and executed in a modern manner and in materials which blended with those of the Old Courthouse. The imposing new Robson Street entrance falls into this category. Here, flanking floor to ceiling glass windows and doors, is a sturdy procession of orderless columnar supports, which are echoed by similar weight-bearing elements disposed within the lobby. These were executed in concrete of a hue that blends perfectly with the colour of the Old Courthouse's granite basement. Similar care in the preservation and blending of the old with the new has occurred within the gallery.

In the Hooper annex, which now serves as the VAG's administration wing, some of the original rooms have been left intact. The former law library was easily converted into an art library. Courtrooms have become meeting rooms, and offices remain offices. The present Board Room is one reminder of the rich elegance that turn of the century Beaux-Arts Classicism could represent.







Few original rooms remain in the Rattenbury designed structure of the VAG. These basement rooms are low-ceilinged and used for dead storage. They are now surrounded by new high-ceilinged rooms designed especially for storage and preparation. In the main galleries, only the ceilings and pilasters of the fourth floor Prints and Drawings Gallery appear as they did in the original Appeals Court. These architectural details have been painted white to harmonize with the reconstructed white walls beneath them. The Rotunda, which is a masterpiece of historic renovation, is described in the section which follows. A comprehensible and comprehensive report on all aspects of the conversion is retained at Arthur Erickson Architects' office.

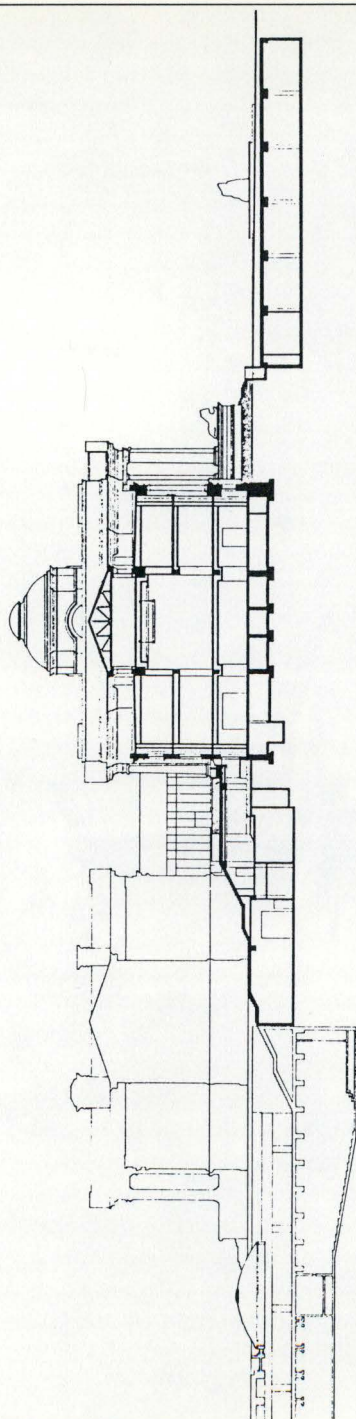


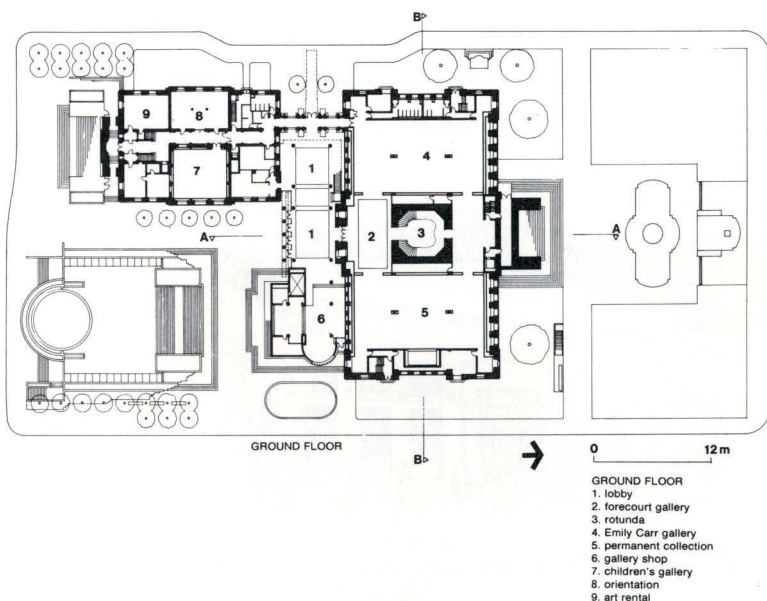












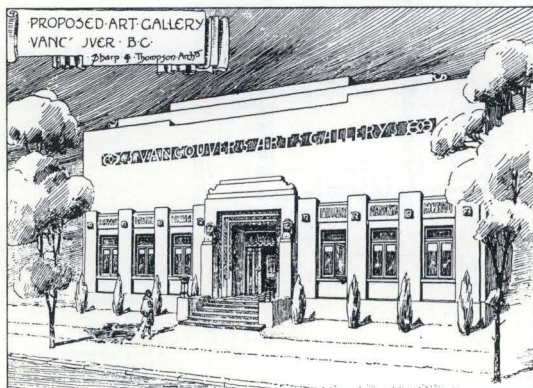
The premises into which the VAG moved can be summarized as follows. The main four-storey building contains 89,900 gross square feet of space; the Annex, 37,850. In addition, 37,050 square feet of new construction took place in the basement, ground, and second floors. An Appendix to the Gustavo da Roza study prepared by Erickson's office in January 1982 details what was recommended and compares it to what was finally provided in gross footage for every area of the space. The last page of another Appendix, prepared by Erickson's office in the same month, states that the total construction cost of the project so far was 15,701,835 dollars in total. The average cost of the reconstructed areas was 140 dollars per square foot; new construction had cost 130 dollars per square foot. The parts of the building which had required only minor renovations were estimated at 28 dollars per square foot.

The building which the VAG had previously occupied is shown in two of its phases below in a note.<sup>2</sup> The floorplans and the photographs reproduced in this section convey a sense of the current premises. No floorplan for the basement area is included here because, as with the secure areas of the new Law Courts, reproduction of it is prohibited.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This study, as amended in 1982 and with Appendices provided by Arthur Erickson Architects, and a recently prepared but undated summary, entitled Provincial Government Offices and Law Courts Building, Vancouver, British Columbia, are the two main documents from which the information in this section is drawn.
- <sup>2</sup> Drawing of the facade of the old Vancouver Art Gallery premises:



Photograph of the old Vancouver Art Gallery as redesigned in the 1950s:



## IMAGES

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