

Ottawa, Ontario
Supreme Court Building
Wellington Street

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The Supreme Court Building was erected in 1938-40 to the designs of architect Ernest Cormier. As home of the Supreme Court of Canada, and of the Federal Court, it has become a familiar symbol of the justice system in Canada at its highest level. Management of the property is the responsibility of Public Works Canada. See FHBRO Building Reports 87-34 to 87-37.

Reasons for Designation

The Supreme Court Building was designated as a Classified heritage property because of its strong historical associations, its impressive architectural design and detailing, and its status as a national landmark. At the time of its construction, its siting and design were central to the establishment of the new governmental precinct west of Parliament Hill. Its symbolic prominence has increased over the years with the expansion of the Supreme Court's influence and power.

Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of this property is defined by the careful design and execution of a formal progression from the large landscaped forecourt through the impressive entry sequence and into the magnificent interior spaces. The carefully proportioned, symmetrical design both inside and out is enhanced by the use of elegant materials to create a dignified sense of occasion and presence.

The landscape setting carries vestiges of the Beaux-Arts schemes proposed for the entire western precinct by planners in the first decades of the century. The balanced approach roads, with the large central green, the formal planters and urns, and the circular plaza with fountain at the rear of the building were all conscious elements in the original design and should be retained. The subsequent use of these open spaces for parking detracts from the original concept and should be reversed if possible.

The exterior of the building has two distinct elements, the severe classical granite-clad base and the borrowed "chateau" roof, added by the architect at the government's request to maintain a vocabulary established by the original Parliament buildings. It is important that their separate identity be maintained. All exterior finishes and detailing, including the carefully dressed stone and the intricate metalwork, should be meticulously preserved on all four façades. No additions should be made to the original volume of the building, set as it is in its open park.

On the interior, a similar approach should be taken to the preservation of both the layout and the decorative finishes. The original marble, walnut, mahogany and bronze finishes were carefully selected and detailed by the architect, whose work is characterized by a consistent attention to detail, from large scale decisions about

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access and layout to the smallest items of grillwork and furnishings. Even very small changes which might be necessitated by functional requirements should first be evaluated in terms of the strict design parameters of the original building, and no new materials introduced which would distract from the simplicity of the concept as developed by Cormier. The most important interior areas are the entry stairs, vestibules and halls, including the Main Hall, and the courtrooms which open off them. The less accessible areas, however, should also be treated as integral parts of the overall design.

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