

Supreme Court of the United Kingdom Furniture for the Middlesex Guildhall



Luke Hughes

Furniture in Architecture

A landmark in constitutional and legal history was reached in 2009 with the creation of the UK's new Supreme Court. And, to some extent, a landmark was created in the refurbishment of the flamboyant Edwardian architectural curiosity in Parliament Square where it now resides.

Established through the Constitutional Reform Act 2005, and formally opened by the Queen in October 2009, the Supreme Court sits at the apex of the UK's legal system, taking over the role of the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords as the highest court in the land. It deals only with cases of the greatest public significance and plays an important role in the development of the law. The Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, the final court of appeal for certain Commonwealth and overseas countries, now sits in the same building.

Previously this ultimate appellate court sat in cramped conditions, notionally open to the public but in practice tucked away in the Palace of Westminster - where both the House of Commons and the House of Lords are accommodated. When appointed, Law Lords (as they were known) were automatically made members of the House of Lords, the UK's upper house. This created the anomaly of judges not only having the right to pass laws but also being the ultimate interpreters of those same laws. Although this anomaly had

exercised political philosophers for centuries, the system had nevertheless worked well for hundreds of years. Tony Blair, when Prime Minister, with his legendary capacity for shaking things up without regard to the consequences, determined to change this - hence the 2005 Act.

So the Law Lords, or Supreme Court Justices as they have been re-named, needed somewhere to go. The chosen venue was the Middlesex Guildhall, a former Edwardian council chamber originally built in 1912 and subsequently converted into a criminal court. The eclectic style of the original building was once described by the architectural historian, Nikolaus Pevsner as 'Art Nouveau Gothic', adding that 'altogether the architects have enjoyed being fanciful and have not minded being a little vulgar'.

The building sits just across Parliament Square, which is now, with a quaint constitutional symmetry, ringed on one side by the State (in the form of the Houses of Parliament), God (in the form of Westminster Abbey), Manon (in the form of the Treasury) and now, with the opening of Supreme Court on the west side of the square, the Law.

Cover: The Supreme Court opens with a reception by HM The Queen
This page: Middlesex Guildhall





The challenge for the conservation architects, Feilden & Mawson, was how to give this building another hundred-year life-expectancy and turn it into a viable modern space.

One of the main differences between an appellate and a criminal court is the collegiate nature of the legal debate - the trials are not adversarial, revolving on interpretations of the law rather than the presentation and disputation of evidence. This makes a huge difference to the relationship between the justices and the advocates. How this is handled ultimately comes down to the design of the furniture.

Our involvement came as a result of designing the prize-winning library for the Supreme Court in Edinburgh five years earlier.

The furniture scope included three courtrooms, a library, and the justices' private rooms. Court 1 is the most impressive of the new courts; all the carvings, stained-glass and decorative metal-work has been retained, revived and restored but modern desks and shelving have been designed to accommodate up to nine justices. Court 2 is the only completely modern court, seating up to five justices. Court 3 also seats up to five justices, and will be predominantly used for hearing cases submitted to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council from the Commonwealth.

Opposite: The original courtrooms when used for criminal cases before refurbishment
This page: Some of the fanciful carvings on the benches, all of which were revived and reincorporated

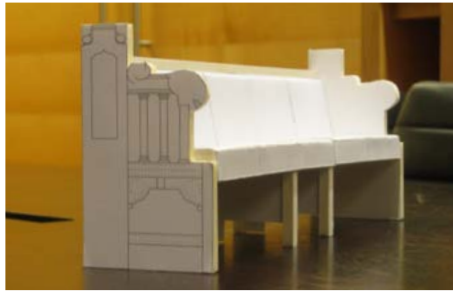


The court furniture was developed with designer Tomoko Azumi. We opted for a visually austere approach for the 'working' furniture to stand in contrast to the elaborately decorated historic building. Challenges lay in increasing access for both the public and the press, as well as enabling the intellectual exchange to flow between the various protagonists without compromising the importance of eye-contact and audibility.

Even in a digital age, (and the integration of ICT was another major concern), the importance of oratorical performance in legal communication is still alive and well. Although imposing, the rooms are not large, especially when wheel-chair turning circles are taken into account, and part of the brief was to greatly increase the capacity for both public and press.



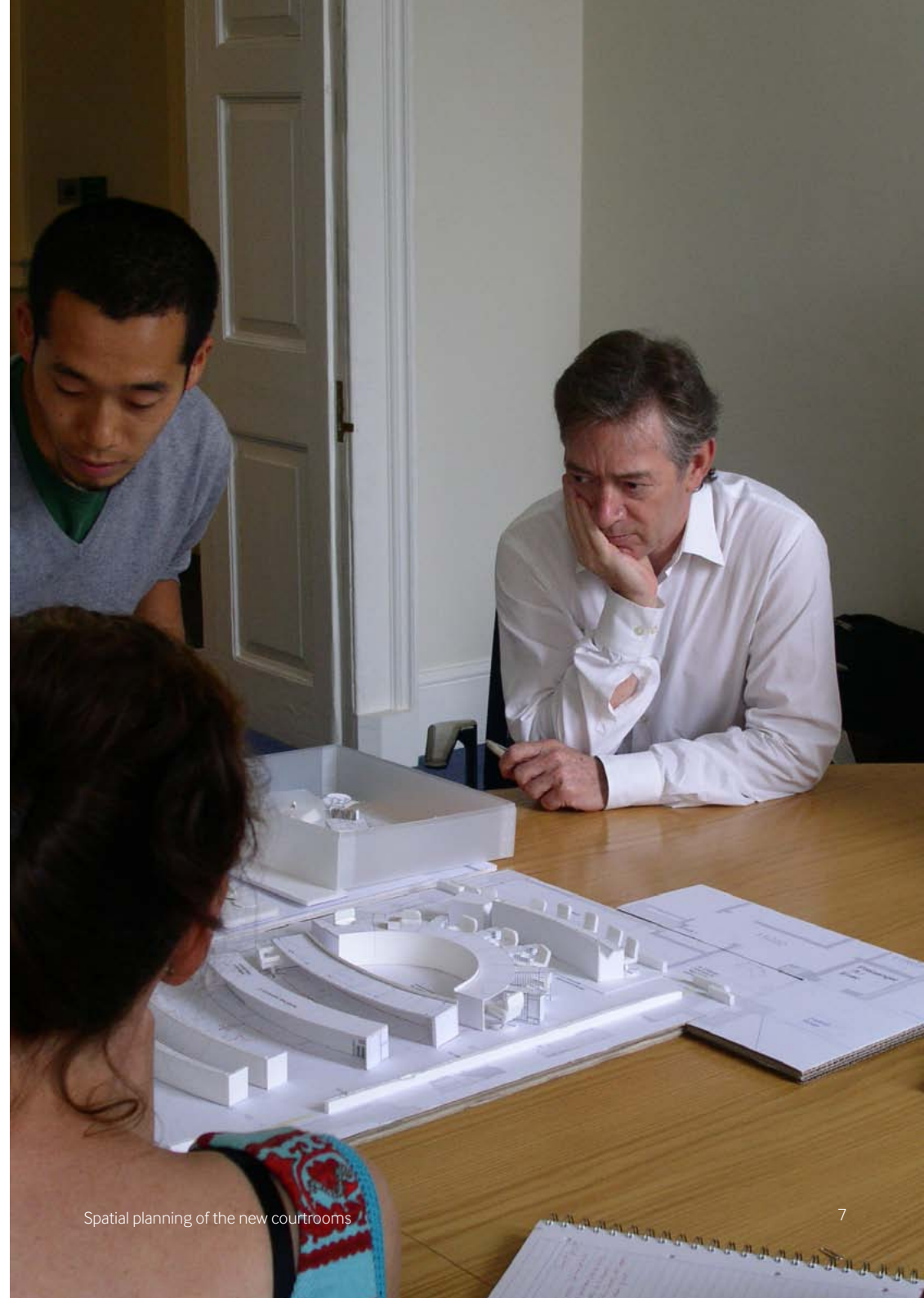
Above: One of the bench ends during restoration
Below: Trialling the prototype of the Justice's chairs



Above: Model of the new benches showing the new curve and original end pieces
Below: The shaped ply back panels during the design process



6



Spatial planning of the new courtrooms

7



Above: View of the new Justice's chairs and restored benches in Court 1.
Below: Lighting detail in the new Law Library





Materials were chosen that would take knocks well and patinate gracefully. American black walnut was chosen for the library and Courts 1 & 3 to harmonise with the existing joinery. European oak was chosen for the modern Court 2.



Above left: Court 2
Above: Court 3
Below: Court 1





Above: Bespoke library shelving
Below: Courtroom desk edge detail



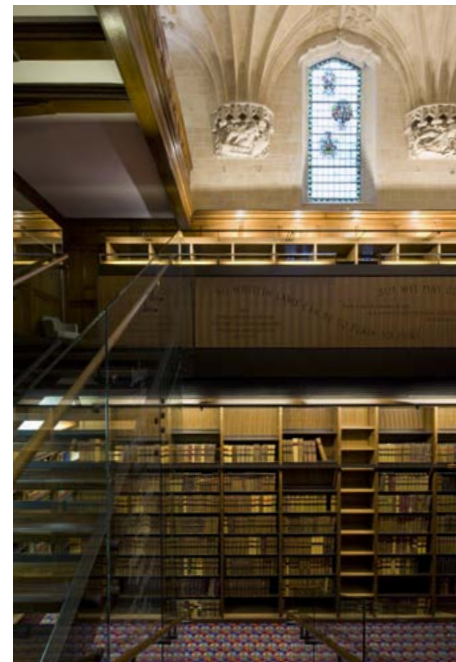
Above: carved lettering by Richard Kindersley
Below: Law Library ladders



Above: Magna Carta, replicated in glass by Bettina Furnée, in the new entrance doors to the library
Below: Law Library staircase



Above: Lighting detail
Below: Etched staircase glasswork





INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS A THREAT TO JUSTICE EVERYWHERE
WE ARE CAUGHT IN AN INESCAPABLE NETWORK OF MUTUALITY
TIED IN A SINGLE CLOTH OF DESTINY
WHATEVER AFFECTS ONE DIRECTLY AFFECTS ALL INDIRECTLY

The Supreme Court Law Library

An earlier courtroom, which carried the most impressive decoration in the walls and panelling, once led down to the grim, vaulted prisoners' cells; it has now been converted into the heart of the building, the library. The floor was removed to create a triple-height space with a spectacular view of the original fan-vaulted ceiling (see previous spread).

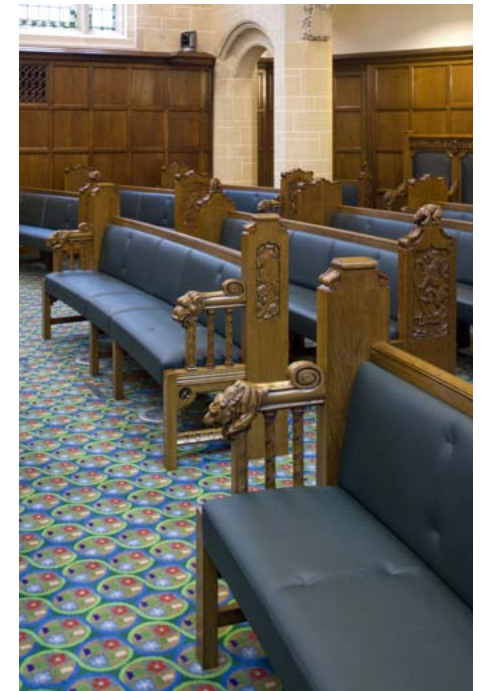
Great care was taken to preserve all the original architectural features; the library shelving (housing 35000 volumes) has been constructed without backs to allow the carved panelling to be seen through the bookcases. Indeed, the design of the bookcases has been one of the most challenging aspects of the project in terms of achieving a modern look with a genuine sympathy for the original interior, and even integrating the sprinkler system into the lighting, something the M and E engineers thought could never be achieved.

American black walnut, unstained, was chosen for its warm colour and its admirable capacity for mellowing. The mid-height shelving around the central void has been panelled in walnut, with carved lettering by Richard Kindersley presenting uplifting legal epigrams in a truly artistic way.

This is undoubtedly now the most impressive space in the building. The Queen certainly told me she thought so when she officially opened the building on Friday 16 October, 2009.

Luke Hughes, March 2010

This page: Visitors to the Law Library survey the collection
Opposite page: Document pedestals, refurbished benches, library shelving and custom glasswork





‘...the project demonstrates that with specialist expertise, skill and flair even the most challenging historic buildings can be adapted to new uses without sacrificing their fundamental significance and integrity.’

Philip Davies, formerly Senior Director at English Heritage, in his book, 'London: Hidden Interiors'.

Opposite: A visitor reads a book from the Law Library collection

This page: HM The Queen and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh attend the Supreme Court's official opening



