
LIBRARY OF THE SUPREME COURT



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2008



1 library of the supreme court
william street melbourne view
of dome



h01477 library of the supreme
court william street melbourne
steps



1 library of the supreme court
william street melbourne
pediment

Location

210 WILLIAM STREET MELBOURNE, MELBOURNE CITY

Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

Level of significance

Registered

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H1477

Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO757

VHR Registration

August 20, 1982

Amendment to Registration

May 23, 1998

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - February 17, 2000

What is significant?

The Library of the Supreme Court is part of a complex of buildings known as the Melbourne Law Courts, 192-228 William Street. Alfred L Smith and Arthur E Johnson won the design competition in 1873 for the Courts and Library and prepared the working drawings. J J Clark and Peter Kerr, architects at the Public Works Department, undertook the detailed drawings and also supervised the works. Erected between 1874 and 1884, the Law Courts are constructed in brick on bluestone foundations and faced with Tasmanian freestone. The library is a freestanding structure within the central quadrangle of the Law Courts and is symmetrical in plan. Internally the library dome has a diameter of 16.8 metres. The shallow copper-clad dome is supported by twenty-four Ionic columns set on a drum. The dome was once a landmark on the city's western skyline. The three storey chamber is linked to surrounding rooms and reading alcoves by columned archways. The upper level has a circular gallery with a cast iron balustrade.

How is it significant?

The Library of the Supreme Court is of architectural, historical and social significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

The Library of the Supreme Court is architecturally significant as one of the most finely designed and executed public buildings in Australia. Whilst stylistically characteristic of the work of architect A E Johnson, it is his finest work. It was possibly modelled on the Dome of the Four Courts in Dublin designed by James Gandon. Internally the cylindrical plan with dome and the superb quality and design of the plaster finishes makes the library one of the greatest of Melbourne's interior spaces.

The Library of the Supreme Court is historically significant as a landmark building in the western part of the city, now partially obscured from some sides by twentieth century development. It is significant for its origins in a design competition in 1873 that scandalised the architectural profession, due to the close professional relationship between one of the assessors, George Johnson, and the winner Alfred Smith.

The Library of the Supreme Court is socially significant as part of one of the most important nineteenth century public buildings in Melbourne, and as part of the premier Law Courts in Victoria.

Permit Exemptions

General Exemptions:

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

Places of worship: In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must **notify** the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

Subdivision/consolidation: Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

Construction dates	1877,
Architect/Designer	Smith & Johnson,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered place,
Other Names	SUPREME COURT LIBRARY,
Hermes Number	825
Property Number	

History

History of Place:

The Law Courts stand on a site previously occupied by the government reserve.

It has been suggested that Sir William Stawell, the Chief Justice in 1875, proposed that the design should follow the plan of the Four Courts in Dublin, by James Gandon. (M Casey et al, *Early Melbourne Architecture*, 1953, pp.64-65) The competition for the design caused a scandal when it was revealed that one of the assessor's, Johnson, was a partner of the competition's winner, Smith. Johnson, who had designed the GPO in Elizabeth Street, resigned from the PWD and joined Smith in a long and prosperous partnership. (P Goad, *Melbourne Architecture*, p.48)

Work on the foundations began in 1874 and the tender by Pearson & Downie for 239,000 pounds was accepted and construction commenced in 1877. The delay was caused by arguments about the type of stone to be used. Contracts for internal fittings were given from 1881. The final cost of the courts was 330,000 pounds and the first court sitting was in February 1884. (Howard Ashley, from National Trust file no. 115).

CONTEXTUAL HISTORY

The first Supreme Court building was built in 1843 on the corner of Russell Street and Latrobe Street, the site now occupied by the former Melbourne Magistrates Court designed by GBH Austin. The original building soon proved inadequate and in 1863 a Royal Commission was appointed to consider the matter. In 1873 a competition was announced.

Extent of Registration

Amendment of Register of Government Buildings

Melbourne City

William Street, City.

(iii) Library of the Supreme Court.

[*Victoria Government Gazette* No. G39 12 October 1988 p.3092]

Transferred to the Victorian Heritage Register 23 May 1998 (2 years after the proclamation of the Heritage Act 1995 pursuant to the transitional provisions of the Act)

This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.

For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>