

# Renovations 1: monumental justice [Supreme Court of Canada building]

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

As the national symbol of justice, Ernest Cormier's Supreme Court of Canada is appropriately somber and monumental as it faces south onto Wellington Street in Ottawa. Harold Kalman describes the 1939-46 building in his History of Canadian Architecture as a "pristine and dignified example of Modern Classicism" in the best of the tradition practised by the important Montreal architect. Kalman also notes that Cormier told him he'd originally thought a flat roof was appropriate to this palace of justice, but Mackenzie King's government wanted it to be like other government buildings in the capital and dictated the Chateau-style roof with its steep copper slopes and dormers. Originally, the space under this large roof was used for a reception hall and judges' lounge, but in 1951 Cormier converted it into a library. To the south was a large mechanical room.

## FULL TEXT

As the national symbol of justice, Ernest Cormier's Supreme Court of Canada is appropriately somber and monumental as it faces south onto Wellington Street in Ottawa. Harold Kalman describes the 1939-46 building in his History of Canadian Architecture as a "pristine and dignified example of Modern Classicism" in the best of the tradition practised by the important Montreal architect. Kalman also notes that Cormier told him he'd originally thought a flat roof was appropriate to this palace of justice, but Mackenzie King's government wanted it to be like other government buildings in the capital and dictated the Chateau-style roof with its steep copper slopes and dormers. Originally, the space under this large roof was used for a reception hall and judges' lounge, but in 1951 Cormier converted it into a library. To the south was a large mechanical room. Despite its humble function, the mechanical room was an extraordinary space, with a huge skylight and glazing in its floor to let light filter down into the magnificent Great Hall below. When the library needed expanding in the late 1980s, Montreal architects Desnoyers Mercure took advantage of the mechanical room's qualities and converted it into an entrance hall for the library. They also created a direct central access to this entry hall by extending up a small stair off the great monumental staircase. The strategy reinforces the building's symmetry and means that the library, which was previously accessible only from flanking elevators, now has a significant point of arrival. Meanwhile rooms were built on the flat roofs to the side of the entry hall to maintain access to the side elevators, and the mechanical equipment was sent up into the attic. Cormier's library itself was restored and its ceilings opened up to create a mezzanine. Dormers were exposed, and the ceilings were redesigned with horizontal elements to hold indirect lighting and the return air systems. Around the perimeter wooden display cabinets hold cable raceways. While the above changes on the fourth floor were the most significant part of the renovation, the architects upgraded the entire building. The copper roof was replaced, three fire exit stairs were added, and accessibility ramps were strategically placed. They found imaginative ways to meet the fire and safety code so as to least disturb the listed historic building. In the Main Hall, for example, they integrated massive fire-rated doors which have Cormier-esque detailing and hold-open devices linked to the fire alarm system. As well, they installed special smoke detectors rather than mounting a sprinkler system on the coffered ceiling. They sealed existing openings on the second floor that looked down into the Main Hall with high performance fire-resistant glazing, thus making a fire separation but

maintaining the views. In the library, a special "pre-action" sprinkler system that is empty until activated gives less risk of causing accidental damage to valuable books.

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