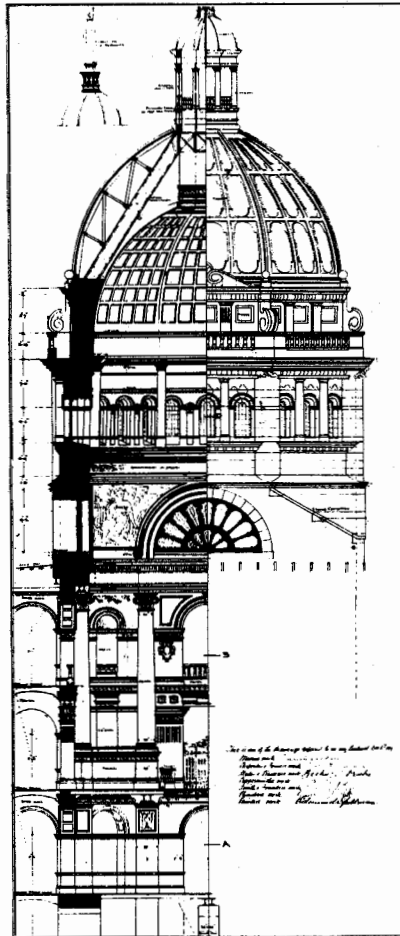


Restoring British Columbia's "Marble Palace"

by Alan Hodgson

The British Columbia Parliamentary Buildings were designed by architect Francis Mawson Rattenbury and were officially opened on February 10, 1898. The "Marble Palace" as it was nicknamed quickly won unqualified respect from all who gazed upon it. But over the next seven decades many changes occurred to the Province of British Columbia in general and to the Parliament Buildings in particular. The population of the province (estimated at 100,000 in 1898) multiplied many fold. The number of government ministries grew from four in 1898, to eighteen in 1972; most of which were still based within these same buildings or in the immediate vicinity. By 1972 a shortage of office space prevented some cabinet members from having their offices in the Rattenbury complex. This lack of physical proximity interfered with the day to day communication among various ministries.



Even the executive council room was no longer adequate for cabinet meetings. Overcrowding of the Parliament Buildings created frustration for all levels of government. There were also general health and safety problems. Many of the working spaces were damp and had poor ventilation while others lacked any natural light. Over time, the mix in the work force had changed which by 1972 had resulted in a chronic lack of facilities for the female staff. Then too modern office demands had pushed dated electrical and mechanical systems to their limit. Years of endeavour to meet the growing demands for space and modern office requirements resulted in many changes being superimposed over the original building fabric in an ad hoc and far from aesthetic manner. In short, the Parliament Buildings cried out for renovation. This article outlines how the "Marble Palace" was restored to its former grandeur. In August 1991 the CPA Regional Conference will be held in Victoria.

Francis Rattenbury was only twenty-five years old and a resident of Canada for less than a year when he won the commission of a lifetime. He responded to the challenge of the competition by designing a group

of three buildings; the most significant being the cross shaped central block containing the Legislative chamber and the great majority of the office space, together with two detached buildings which originally contained a land registry office and a government printing office. All three buildings were aligned on their northern elevation and connected by colonnades.

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The five hundred foot length of this northern elevation make the building appear as one, when viewed from the front. The grand dome of the central block, which

features the gilded Captain Vancouver holding the Union Jack 165 feet above the ground dominates this frontal view.

In appearance it is a design full of emotional resonance. In style it has been described as "free Classic", so termed because of its liberal interpretation of Renaissance forms, in themselves, a rejection of a classical revival.

As for the interior planning space arrangement, Rattenbury strove for the aesthetically functional. Even the elaborate Domical hall with all its restrained opulence was aimed at serving what the architectural mind considered a practical function: namely, a central and visible location for the public to enter the buildings and find their way to the various sections of Government.

In the design of the Domical hall and the Legislative chamber, Rattenbury used the grandeur of shapes, colours and lighting to stress the role of the parliamentary process in the provision of good Government and in its importance to the welfare of those fortunate enough to find themselves basking in the sun of the British Empire.

The various government offices were placed in the wings of the central block in a subsidiary position to the Legislative chamber. The Domical hall, located on the axis of the cross shaped central block, is positioned to represent the crossroads of power which flows out of the Legislative chamber and is dispersed among the various ministries located down corridors leading away from the Domical hall.

Over the years the Buildings' physical decline and its resulting change in character did not go unnoticed. James K. Nesbitt, a newspaper columnist who took pride in British Columbia's history, was one of the first to speak out about the sorry state of the Buildings. In 1961 his acerbic pen was directed toward the replacement of certain ceramic tiles with linoleum - "cheap, horrible, barbershop oilcloth". His commitment to preserving the true character of the Buildings and protesting against a perceived depredation extended to taking his sleeping bag there and threatening the workmen with a rifle once used by Governor Richard Blanshard.

Following the 1961 episode, Nesbitt's supporters, who included the provincial archivist, Willard Ireland, were instrumental in convincing the Victoria branch of the B.C. Historical Society to pass a resolution urging the government to set up a legislative committee that would have to be consulted before public buildings could be altered - "particularly the Parliament Buildings..." And some years later, Nesbitt again did battle and saved the mosaic tiles in the centre of the Domical hall. This time, he and provincial Liberal leader David Anderson initiated a public letter writing campaign that convinced

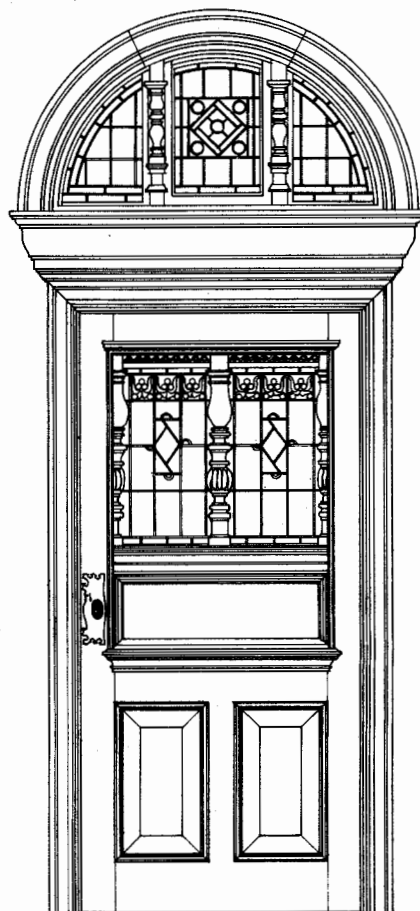
the government to retain the tiles and to rope them off from further pedestrian traffic.

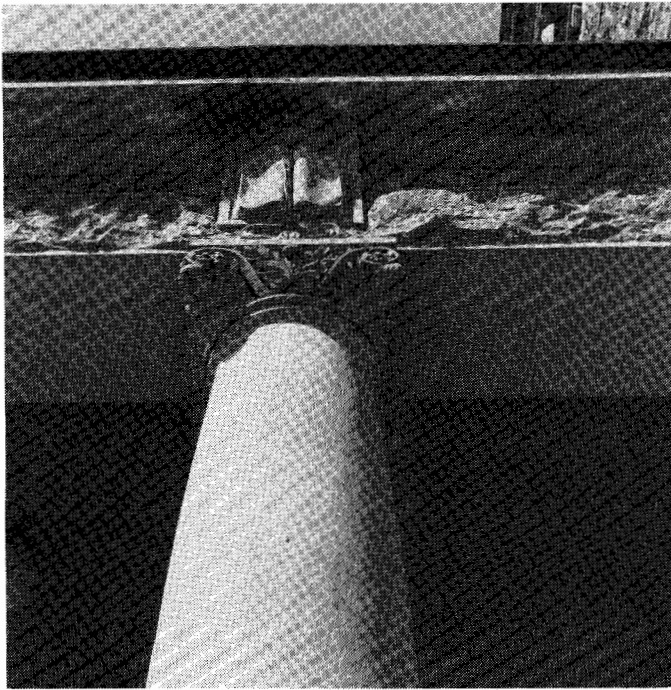
From these first few starts of public input to the democratic process, came a gradual widening and strengthening of attitude toward accepting history's valuable contribution to enhancing the general quality of society.

By 1972, the much needed revitalization effort was finally launched by an all-party committee of the Legislature. The two Premiers, under whose leadership this project developed, both endorsed the effort. Former Premier David Barrett, whose government initiated this restoration, declared: "this is our heritage, this building...it is so important in terms of continuity."

This sentiment was echoed by Premier William Bennett, who stated that the building, and the faith that it represents for this province, "...is a faith that we must renew constantly." The restoration program began with a development plan embracing a clear set of objectives.

The highest priority of these restorative and renovative efforts was to retain the same vision that had given birth to this reality seven decades earlier, and to take it with confidence into the next century. In order to meet these





Rattenbury kept ornamentation to a minimal level, although he did provide the most significant spaces with plaster faces, stone statuary and other fenestration.

(John Fulker - Associates)

stated objectives, certain control methods over the renovations were recommended in order to ensure the continuity of spirit. The design guidelines were as follows:

- The restriction of the range of building materials to those that are in evidence as having been used in the existing building.
- Alterations would only be tolerated where it was technically impossible for the original architect to foresee the present standard of physical or technical requirement.
- The preservation of the character of specific areas of the Legislature which are inheritably significant, should not be violated.

When these objective guidelines were applied to the massive restoration and renovation efforts, a pervasive sense of harmony and order was maintained. But even more significant was the ability to maintain Rattenbury's original vision in the spirit of the revitalized buildings. Rattenbury's plan and decorative details can be labelled as "grand design". The success of the present renovation lies in the honesty, purity and liveliness of the representation of that design.

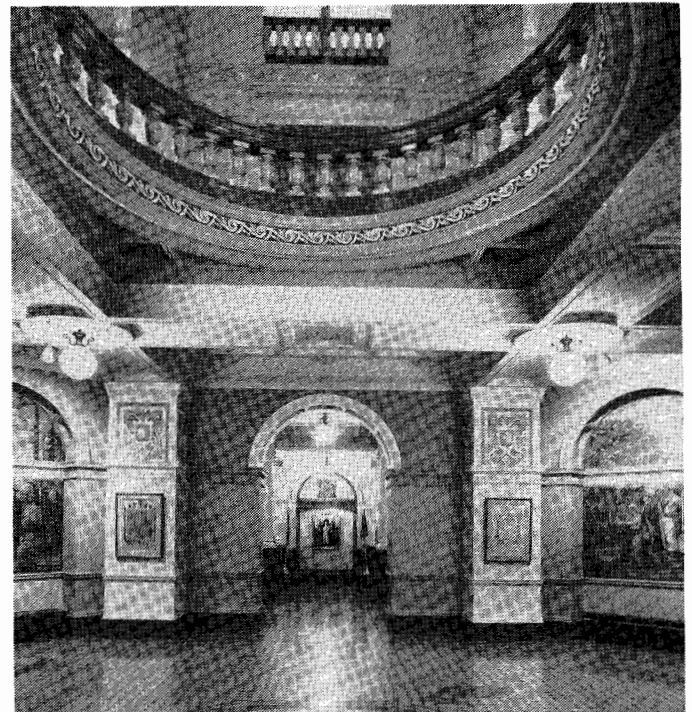
The building renovations program included the relocation away from the Legislative Precinct, of all

government employees who were not directly connected to the process of law making. This move provided the space that was necessary to house expanded Ministers' suites, each having their attendant staff and advisors. In addition, there are now committee rooms and washrooms servicing the expanded needs of this area.

Offices for MLA's are spread throughout these buildings. The West Annex (formerly the Queen's printer) is given over the Premier's Office, while the East Annex (formerly the Museum, originally the Land Registry Office) has been converted to house the Leader of the Opposition.

For political and economic reasons it was a part of the understanding between Rattenbury and the government, that most of the materials used for the construction of the Legislative Buildings would originate in the Province of British Columbia. With some notable exceptions such as marbles of both rich and subtle hues imported from Italy and the United States and steel from Ontario, most of these building materials were local. There was stained glass from New Westminster, Nelson Island granite and slate from Jervis Inlet, locally kilned brick and lime, British Columbia woods such as Douglas fir, cedar, oak and maple – as well as the fine grained light grey coloured sandstone from Haddington Island.

Although the buildings had suffered many years of neglect, the splendour and dignity of existing materials were still able to impart a sense of purpose to the



The rotunda features four murals by G.H. Southwell

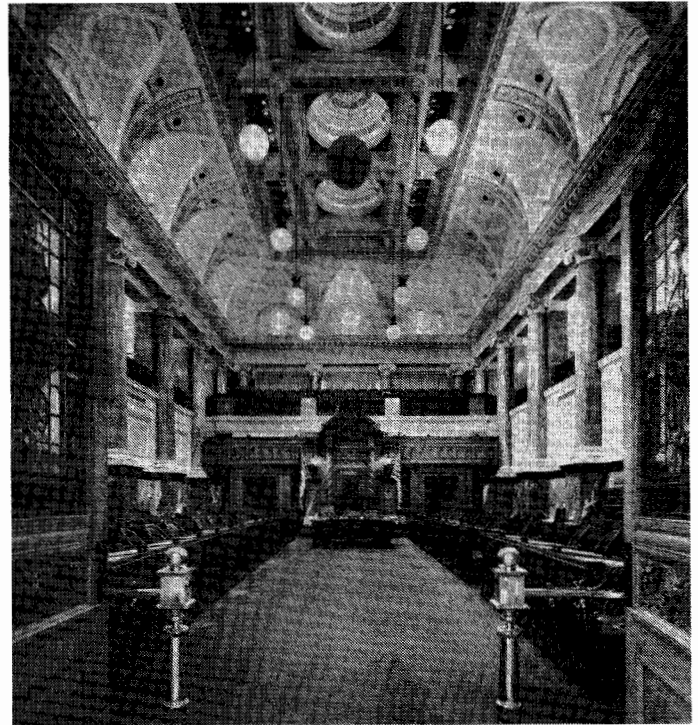
(John Fulker - Associates)

restoration effort. Similar to the monumental endeavour of seven decades earlier, all who worked on these restorations became captives of the effort to match the spirit of the original vision.

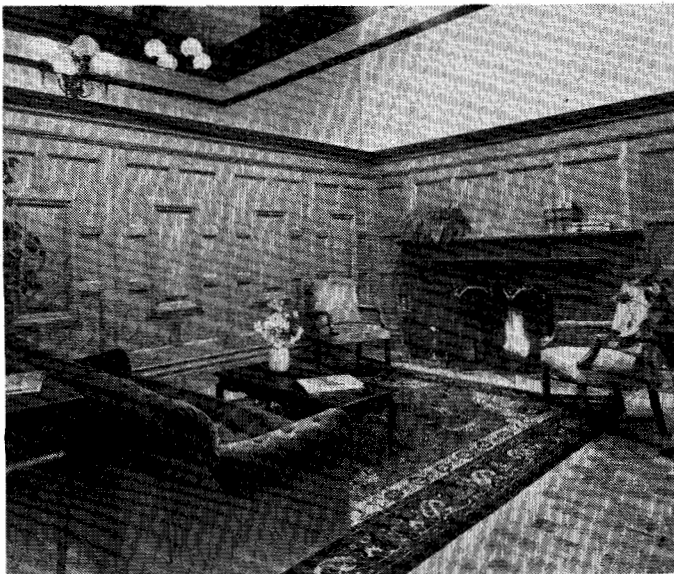
By erecting a legislative seat of such epic proportions, they expressed a heroic conception of the province's future. This vision continues to serve the residents of British Columbia even today.

One manifestation of neglect, and a source of extreme offense to all who loved the buildings and the cultural symbolism which they were meant to reflect, was the insensitive way in which the interiors were maintained. Rattenbury's sensitive colour scheme was one of the first victims of this neglect. The distinguished slate-grey baseboards found in all the corridors for example, were masked by a brick red that drained the vitality from the ceramic floor tiles. In turn, many of these tiled corridors had been ripped apart and replaced with the inelegance of vinyl linoleum, or with rubber tiles installed in a hapless attempt to imitate carpet.

Similarly, the dadoes, the walls and ceilings had given way to utilitarian creams and whites; while silver and



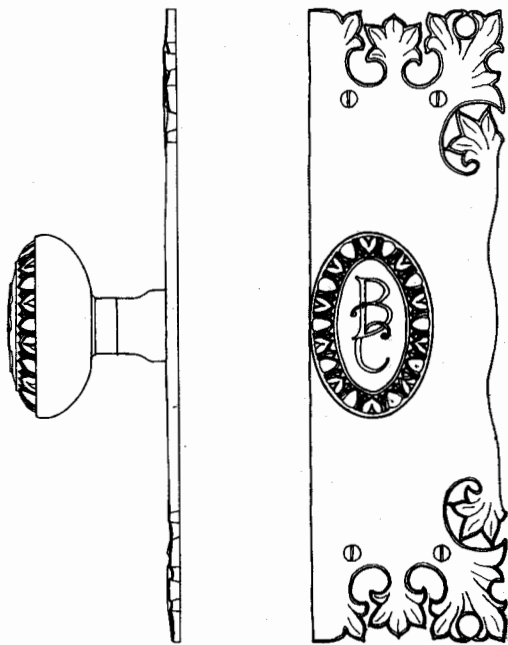
The chamber as seen from the bar of the House
(John Fulker - Associates)



Meticulous attention was paid to every detail of the restoration including furniture and lighting
(John Fulker - Associates)

gold leaf was painted out in certain ceremonial spaces. This was quite a change from the elegance of Rattenbury's original design; he who had always exhibited the true artist's touch in his choices of materials and colour. His colour choices of marble columns serve as a marvellous example: Rattenbury has chosen a muted green colour of marble for the main columns, complete with beautifully scrolled gilded ionic capitals. The architect mounted these columns on a lighter shade of square green marble blocks with white rounded bases; all of which he set off with a pedestal of heavy black marble.

The Domical hall is another example of Rattenbury's deliberate attention to colour detail; detail found especially in the most ceremonial areas of this building. The second floor level of the Domical hall is infinitely more impressive than the lower level because of its huge vertical space superbly adorned and bathed with natural light. The dome high above is the focal point, but the wealth of coloured marble vies with it for attention. There is also the mosaic marble floor and the ring of dark Tennessee marble around the central columns which in turn, support a light coloured marble balustrade.



Rattenbury could not have selected any richer hued marble than this Tennessee product. Handsome capitals, now highlighted with gold leaf, make the square marble columns all the more striking. The new choice of a light blue colour theme in the higher levels of this Domical hall compliment the gold leaf and enlivens this space.

Rattenbury made use of the grandeur of shapes colours and materials to highlight the role of the parliamentary process. An example worth noting is the circular theme in the chamber, comprising for example, windows, column caps, and light fixtures. This is the only place where it is used in the buildings.

This circular theme picks up from the shapes of the great dome and its oculus in the Domical hall, possibly to symbolize the fact that those two ceremonial places form the most significant spaces in the entire complex.

The restoration architect used this cue for his own colour selection; reserving the use of a blue colour theme in support of Rattenbury's hierarchy of space. A visitor to these Legislative Buildings will now observe that the blue colour scheme is evident only in the Public and Ceremonial areas.

The general downgrading of light quality and fixtures was another result of seven decades of neglect. Many of the original lights that had shone so gracefully, had long since been trashed or stored away in dusty obscurity. Those were replaced with every conceivable type of contemporary fixture on the market; not any of which were as appropriate as the originals.

One of the greatest tasks in bringing some coherence to the restoration efforts was to locate and retrofit the original fixtures. To upgrade those fixtures to required

levels of safety and illumination was laborious business but it was clearly the best alternative in the effort to maintain Rattenbury's original spirit.

The issue concerning original light fixtures used in the Legislative chamber, is a notable example of the kind of work which had befallen the restoration architect. Through the benefit of an early newspaper photograph, archival research led to the discovery that the original fixtures on the ceiling of the Chamber were of a globular, pendent style. Since the existing ones were of a hexagonal box type pendent style, it was obvious that at some point, the original fixtures were replaced. Except for the archival photograph there was no longer any record of the fixtures.

When further research focused on Rattenbury's notable use of circular design theme for only the Chamber and Domical hall in his desire to emphasize the significance of these spaces, the original global type fixtures took on greater meaning. Using only the existing photographic record, the restoration architect had copies of the original light fixtures reproduced and reinstalled over the Legislative Assembly.

Besides providing the obvious benefits of natural light and fresh air, windows serve to animate the exterior facades of buildings, particularly in the classical design style of these buildings. Considerations for proportions, rhythms and scale of exterior elevations take precedence over other benefits such as natural light, view and fresh air. It is therefore significant to note, that all of the windows located on the exterior facades of these Parliament buildings, have shapes, sizes and locations that were primarily determined by aesthetic concerns.

The placing of new windows or removal of old ones would have had such an unwarranted impact on the overall aesthetic design that the renovation program never considered this option. In the odd case of relocated stairs or new room uses, that did not require windows, the renovations made use of either opaque glazing or darkened panels. A similar concern was extended to the way subdivisions of room interiors were handled. New wall locations, were, in part, determined by the position of existing windows.

It is interesting to note Rattenbury's use of certain windows to denote important spaces or occasions. His use of round or semi-circular shapes were notably reserved only for use in the Domical hall, the Legislative chamber and the library annex. These windows were presumably a tribute to the spirit, the body of knowledge or the civilizing role of the spaces inside.

Another window of significance is the Diamond Jubilee window which was originally designed to commemorate the 1897 sixtieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne. This window initially

illuminated the second landing of the old MLA's staircase on the south end of the main building. When the Legislative Library building was added to the south end in 1912-15, this window was removed and then promptly lost in storage. It was not until these restorations that the Diamond Jubilee Window was found and returned to a place of honour. The window is now a much photographed feature of the east wall of the tour assembly area.

Most of the interior windows in the ceremonial and public sections of the main building are seen to be either stained glass in geometric patterns, or a combination of stained and painted glass in various designs or figures. These were the work of the Vancouver firm H. Bloomfield & Son; and of two London, England firms, James Powell & Sons, and E.W. Morris & Sons. These windows present such a pleasing quality of light and colour, that it is difficult to imagine the building's interior without such works of art.

n. An intriguing features of the Legislative chamber is the plaster faces looking out at intervals from under the main ceiling moulding. It is sometimes suggested that these faces are of Plato, Aristotle and other famous philosophers whose wisdom the architect hoped would influence the politicians under their watchful gaze. They are now more likely thought to be anonymous representatives of the people keeping an eye on the legislators, and may well have been selected arbitrarily by the citizen craftsmen who decorated the Chamber.

Statues of figures famous in the history of British Columbia look earnestly out from their niche atop corners of the Legislative Library's exterior facade. Such legendary figures as the Nootka chieftain Maquinna, Captain George Vancouver and Captain James Cook, Sir Francis Drake, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, and Simon Fraser among others, are all personified here. The statues were the work of Italian classical sculptor Charles Morega who also fashioned the great writers and philosophers portrayed on the medallion panels of the same facades: Homer, Dante, Socrates, Shakespeare, Sophocles and Milton.

Standing atop the Domical hall is a gilded statue of Captain George Vancouver. Below him, centred above the main entrance is the Crest of British Columbia with a stag on one side, a mountain ram on the other and the Imperial lion standing above.

The rotunda of the parliamentary buildings is the location of four quasi-historical murals. These murals were painted by the artist Mr. G.H. Southwell, and presented to the Government in 1932 by the the Provincial Secretary at the time.

The subject of these four murals depict scenes of what the artist called "...historical qualities necessary for establishment of a civilization:"

- Courage: The meeting of Vancouver and Quadra at Nootka Sound in 1792.
- Enterprise: The landing of James Douglas on the shores of Vancouver Island in the enterprise of establishing a British Colony in Victoria.
- Labour: The building of Fort Victoria in 1843.
- Justice: The establishment of the British style of justice as depicted of Chief Justice Matthew Baillie Begbie holding court at Clinton during the Cariboo gold rush.

As a point of interest, these four murals had been the butt of notable criticism from members of the Indigenous People. The matter came to light once again during the course of the restorations. Eventually, the problem was settled to everyone's satisfaction, when it was decided by the restoration architect to have only the titles painted out. The art has survived and continues to embellish the Domical hall.

By the time that restorations were set to begin, a decorating disease, the product of decades of neglect and thoughtless alterations, had affected virtually every class of furnishings. Venetian blinds had replaced drapes and roll blinds on the windows; fabric covered chrome pedestal chairs had made their appearance alongside leather chairs from the last century; while chunks of red carpet were scrambled into position replacing exquisitely woven, original carpet of the Legislative chamber.

Other than literally scraping away much of the previous years' layers of offensive detritus, the focus of the restoration process was directed foremost toward a reiteration of Rattenbury's grand scheme and design in its relation to the democratic process of government. This meant an artisan's industry quickly evolved to take care of the intricate labour involved in painting, papering, tiling, marble mending, gold leaf application, wood and plaster mouldings to name just a few skills represented within the Buildings. Within just three intensive years of work, from 1972 to 1975, the basis was laid for a continuing, widening interest in the practical aspects of history; a healthy, safe environment was created for the efficient functioning of government services; and the buildings themselves have become a tourist mecca as a result of the restoration programme, favourably contributing to the economic and social conditions of the region. Above all, the resurrection and continuation of Rattenbury's grand design, has reinstated the original "genius loci" for all to experience and enjoy.

