

A stern judgment on their Lordships' refurbishers

Marcus Binney, Architecture Correspondent

A new word is needed in the vocabulary of restoration to describe the transformation of the Edwardian Middlesex Guildhall into Britain's new Supreme Court. In future the word "supreme" should stand for the total emasculation of a historic building's character, the gratuitous removal of fine fittings designed and made for it, and, in this case, the neutering of the Guildhall's robust masculinity in favour of a bland, executive lounge look, with the rejection of shiploads of fine craftsmanship in favour of a select number of token artworks.

Much is made of the new Supreme Court's symbolism but in fact it is schoolboy stuff, a few slogans and flowers repeated incessantly throughout.

Meanwhile, and this really sums it all up, the handsome marble bust of Edward VII, King and Emperor, which stood nobly opposite the entrance doors, has been banished to the basement café, where it is seen against a background of Costa coffee cups and has had to be cordoned off by the kind of strap barriers used to corral passengers at airport check-ins.

In the thinking behind the transformation of this building, words have taken on the opposite of their traditional meaning. Listen to this apology; the £58.9 million makeover has restored the building "to full splendour . . . original features were obscured by machinery, cells and partitions and it felt cluttered and gloomy. Today sensitive restoration work has brought many hidden architectural treasures back to light."

I was one of those who campaigned against the Supreme Court proposals which involved stripping out the judges' thrones and all the carefully configured courtroom furniture from the criminal courts.

The only features which have been revealed (as opposed to removed) by the architects Fielden & Mawson are two light wells clad from bottom to top in shining white lavatory tiles. Glazed over at the top, these funnel-like spaces now serve on one side for the café (and no more) and on the other for a library table and a rather splendid judges' sitting-out terrace.

This is nothing to compare with the brilliant use of redundant light wells at the Royal Academy, where Norman Foster transformed circulation through the galleries by introducing a dramatic hanging stair and glass lift, at the same time revealing the Earl of Burlington's original garden façade.

In the entrance hall the gracefully curving steps have been ripped out and a glass security screen is fitted around columns to deflect visitors to the security check.

The doors at back of the entrance hall used to open into Court Room 1, which has now been transformed into a library for the justices and is not shown to the public. The glory of this space was to look up at the Gothic vault in the form of a cathedral rose window supported on fan vaults. Now the eye is deflected downwards as the floor has been taken out to create a double-height library. You would have thought it would be an easy matter to make this a splendid affair, but this is merely a very expensive book stack.

There are no tables or reading desks, just book rests around the balconies. The light is dreary. The bookcases themselves could have been bought at Ikea — in fact that would have been better as they would have been not darkened to match the few remaining visible fragments of the once glorious

Edwardian woodwork. This library is just a hole with clunkily detailed fittings — the modern libraries in Brighton and Norwich are far more elegant.

The former Court 2 (now 3) has been stripped of its canopied judge's seat and of woodwork as neatly configured as a Georgian box-pewed church, and now evokes a makeshift conference room in a historic house hotel.

The climax of a visit to the Guildhall was the Middlesex County Council Chamber which served as a court with beautifully configured crescent benches and very good sightlines. But this was not acceptable to the Supreme Court justices, who demanded a level floor, so all the handsome, intricate woodwork has been stripped out and the court's orientation turned through 90 degrees. This has meant the removal of the canopied judge's seat (as richly carved as a bishop's throne in a cathedral).

A few of the richly carved bench ends have been reapplied to new benches for the public to sit on but the new bespoke furniture, designed for the courts by Luke Hughes, is an even greater puzzle. It looks as if the talented Mr Hughes has been firmly sat on by civil servants. The result is that the woodwork looks like Formica veneer and the high-backed armchairs are slightly refined versions of executive-class airline seats. The flat finishes detract from the panelling that survives. Worse still, the surviving Gothic carving has been coated in a treacly veneer which ruins the once polished surface.

Setting mere aesthetics aside, the Ministry of Justice proclaims that this building was brought home on time and on budget — albeit for a thumping £58.9m. But wait a minute? Did not Lord Falconer tell us in 2004, when he announced his plans, that the Supreme Court makeover would cost £32m? Any fool can bring home a building on budget if the budget is doubled before work is started.

For £58.9m a new landmark tailor-made for its purpose could have been built. At least with the Scottish Parliament it is possible to see where the money has been spent — on flamboyant interiors and complex façade treatments. But here? There are lots and lots of new carpets and a very impressive closed-circuit colour TV system. But do not forget this building was extensively refurbished and reopened in 1989 by Lord Mackay of Clashfern — as is still recorded in a stained-glass window.

I asked the Ministry of Justice if it could provide a breakdown of the £58.9m cost, including the percentage spent on fees. The brief answer was this: the capital construction fee of £36.7m was paid to Kier Group, using a leaseback arrangement with rental payments of £2.1m per annum increasing to £2.5m a year over 30 years. Set-up costs (provision of library, visitor facilities etc) were £20.2m — just think what Westminster Abbey across the road could do with that.

No further breakdown of the capital cost of £36.7m could be provided because of the lease and leaseback arrangement, “and therefore the department does not hold itemised figures”. Surely this is a case for the Public Accounts Committee or the National Audit Office? At this rate it looks as if the taxpayer will still be paying for the building well after the next refurbishment is under way.

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