

August 10, 2020

**An open letter to:**

*via-mail only*

Sunny Dhaliwal  
Assistant Deputy Minister  
Ministry of Citizen Services  
[Sunny.Dhaliwal@gov.bc.ca](mailto:Sunny.Dhaliwal@gov.bc.ca)

Salman Azam  
Assistant Deputy Minister  
Ministry of Attorney General  
[Salman.Azam@gov.bc.ca](mailto:Salman.Azam@gov.bc.ca)

Dear Mr. Dhaliwal and Mr. Azam:

**Re: Public Restaurant at the Vancouver Courthouse**

The undersigned are three senior members of Arthur Erickson's Robson Square/Law Courts design team with a combined total of nearly 100 years of working closely with Arthur Erickson. Rainer Fassler was the project architect through both the design and construction phases of the Courthouse project, Nick Milkovich was the senior architect for the courtroom design and Alan Bell led an early 15 block planning study establishing the planning and urban design framework for the entire Robson Square precinct.

We are writing to express our serious concerns regarding the B.C. Government's apparent intention to close this important public facility at the Vancouver Courthouse, and provide some key background/context for this major component of the overall 3-block Provincial government project.

**Courthouse as a Place where Justice is Visible and Accessible to the Public**

The Vancouver Courthouse concept evolved in 1973-74 through intensive dialogue with the judiciary under the chairmanship of Chief Justice Nathan Nemetz, representatives of the Bar Association as well as representatives of the NDP Provincial Government of the time.

From the outset, it was decided that, while presenting the necessary dignity of the law, the Courthouse should not appear intimidating or exclusionary. Rather, it should demystify the judicial process, invite the public into the building and encourage them to observe and comfortably participate in the system.

This "publicness" and openness of the Courthouse is the most outstanding and innovative aspect of its design.

**Courthouse "Great Hall" as a Major Public Space**

The "Great Hall" was seen as a major civic space inviting public awareness and involvement in the matters of justice. To this end, it was conceived as being open and able to be used throughout the week

as a focal point in the downtown core. It was also conceived as part of a continuous north-south pedestrian route, that would bring members of the public into contact with the judicial process housed in the Courthouse.

The "Great Hall" was conceived as an area that was not closed off from the streets of the city - but open to them and thus vitally involved in the life of the city. The "Great Hall" was also planned with supporting public amenity areas outside the courtrooms themselves - for relaxation, refreshment and communication.

#### **The Restaurant as an Integral Component of the Courthouse**

From the beginning of the planning process, a public food service facility was deemed to be an essential component of the Courthouse. It was also seen as an important complement to the "Great Hall", as an amenity that supports the very essence of this wonderful civic space, and a significant draw to outsiders.

With its location on the first gallery level, at the north end of the Courthouse, the restaurant also makes accessible to the public views over the multilevel park space and water features, with the city and mountains beyond - the best views in the entire 3-block complex.

#### **The Courthouse as part of a 3-Block Government Complex and Public Park**

The Courthouse was conceived as an integral part of a 3-block complex accommodating 3 major public institutions and united by gardens, water features and pedestrian plazas, with a high level of public space and accessibility.

Through the expansive 3-dimensional public open space on Blocks 51, 61 and 71, the Province finally delivered the large/full-block downtown park that had been promised to the public for many years, by successive NPA city councils and the previous Social Credit government.

The concept of openness was also extended to the views between different components of the project - most notably the Art Gallery and Robson Street plaza on the north, and the Courthouse and public restaurant on the south.

The full-block glazing over the "Great Hall" was designed to afford views toward the North Shore mountains, but these have since been blocked by tall apartment slabs on the west side of Hornby Street. This makes it all the more important to preserve public access to and enjoyment of the expansive view to the north from the restaurant location.

#### **Conclusion**

Elimination of the public restaurant at the north end of the Courthouse would represent an erosion of the powerful concepts of publicness and openness, central to the Courthouse and the 3-block complex, and a disrespect the 1972-5 NDP government that courageously sponsored the creation of this internationally recognized public building complex.

It would also be a serious retrograde step for the Province to convert this public amenity to private use and eliminate public access to the most important public place and viewpoint over the entire 3-block park, just when the City of Vancouver is completing major enhancements to the public amenities at the north end of the complex.

Consequently, we urge you to respect the principles of publicness and openness that are central to the Courthouse and the 3-block complex as a whole. Specifically, we ask you to refrain from permanently alienating this unique location from public use and enjoyment, by preserving and improving the public restaurant facility at the north end of the Courthouse.

Respectfully,



Rainer Fassler  
Retired Architect AIBC



Nick Milkovich  
Architect AIBC, FRAIC



Alan Bell  
MArch

cc: Hon. Anne Kang,  
Hon. David Eby QC,  
Spencer Chandra Herbert,  
Lorne DeLarge,  
John Marsh,  
Gorman Lee,  
Adam Howden-Duke,  
V. Philip Boname,

Minister of Citizens' Services  
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Ministry of Citizen Services  
Ministry of Citizen Services  
Ministry of Citizen Services  
President, Lawyers Inn Society  
President, Arthur Erickson Foundation