

1977

THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

*Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works*

## REPORT

relating to the proposed construction of a

# LAW COURTS BUILDING

at

Alice Springs,  
Northern Territory

(SECOND REPORT OF 1977)

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PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS

LAW COURTS BUILDING  
ALICE SPRINGS, NORTHERN TERRITORY

R E P O R T

By resolution on 9 December 1976 the House of Representatives referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works for investigation and report, the proposal to construct a Supreme Court Building at Alice Springs, Northern Territory. The title of the reference was subsequently corrected to Law Courts Building, Alice Springs.

The Committee has the honour to report as follows:

THE REFERENCE

1. The proposal referred to the Committee is for the construction of a two-storey court building designed to accommodate the requirements of four courts and associated public areas, jury rooms, judges' and magistrates' accommodation, court reporting facilities, registry areas and a secure area for persons in custody. Separate access and circulation within the building will be provided for judges and magistrates, the public and persons in custody.

2. The estimated cost of the proposal when referred to the Committee was \$3.2 million. At the time of the public hearing this had been reduced to \$3.1 million.

THE COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATION

3. The Committee received written submissions and drawings from the Attorney-General's Department and the Department of Construction and

took evidence from their representatives at a public hearing in Alice Springs on 7 and 8 February 1976. Written submissions and evidence was also received from the Corporation of the Municipality of Alice Springs, Mr. J.M. Robertson, M.L.A. and Miss E.J. Andrew, M.L.A., Cabinet Member for Law. Evidence was also received from a representative of the Department of Administrative Services and Mr. D.L. Pollock, M.L.A. Subsequent to the public hearing a submission was received from Mr. Brian Martin, Barrister and Solicitor, Alice Springs.

4. Prior to the public hearing, the Committee inspected the existing facilities and the site for the proposed building.

5. The Committee's proceedings will be printed as Minutes of Evidence.

#### BACKGROUND

6. The proposed Law Courts building will form a further part of the overall Commonwealth Government Centre development in the central business district of Alice Springs.

7. In its Thirty-fourth Report of 1972, the Committee recommended the construction of a three-storey Commonwealth office block which is now completed and forms part of this overall development.

#### THE NEED

8. Existing Facilities The existing courts building at Alice Springs was erected in 1928. It was originally designed as a residence and later converted to administrative offices. The first sittings of the Supreme Court were held there in 1934. This building is now substandard and inadequate for the purpose.

9. Stone was used in the original construction of the building, but alterations and extensions have been carried out over the years to adapt it for use by the courts and on these occasions asbestos cement sheet has been used for cladding. The result is an unimpressive building that detracts from the administration of the law and does nothing to enhance the dignity of the courts.

10. There is only one courtroom in the building and arrangements have to be made, when the Supreme Court sits, for the Lower Court to be conducted elsewhere. Supreme Court sittings presently occur for six periods

of three weeks each year. The Lower Court is temporarily located in leased premises on the ground floor of the R.E.L. Building, Parsons Street, Alice Springs.

11. An external jury room has had to be provided adjacent to the existing Courts building. Its cladding is of asbestos cement sheet which is not sound-proof and, if adequate supervisory precautions are not taken, the discussions of juries can be overheard. Toilets have been provided for jurors in the jury room and these facilities are used by the staff when they are available. When a jury is empanelled staff must use the external public toilets. Accommodation for the public, legal profession and the staff are totally inadequate.

12. Circulation space in the building is negligible. It is not possible to cross from one side of the building to the other without going through the courtroom or the judge's chambers. Concern over violence and disorder in courtrooms has been increasing. Adequate protection of Judges and courtrooms is essential to maintain security and to safeguard the court proceedings from intimidation.

13. Alterations and extensions have been made to the existing building to meet increased needs but the site on which it stands is small. As a consequence these methods can no longer provide a reasonable solution to the accommodation problem. The building was originally designed as a residence but has never been really satisfactory for court purposes. With the growth in population and consequent increases in court business it has become totally inadequate to meet requirements.

14. Portion of the site previously available for possible extension is now occupied by a new two-storey building occupied by the Housing Commission.

15. As a temporary relief to the courts accommodation problems, the Northern Territory Administration agreed to provide space for a library in the basement of the new Commonwealth office building.

16. Future Requirements Statistics show that the population of Alice Springs has increased from 4748 in 1961 to 14200 in 1976. The population is expected to reach 34000 by 1990. Tourist activity adds to the work of the courts and numbers are expected to rise from 75000 in 1975 to approximately 125000 in 1980.

17. The present population of Darwin is approximately 40000 and the current court provision of two supreme courtrooms and two courtrooms for the courts of summary jurisdiction are inadequate. Planning has commenced for further extensions to the Darwin Law Courts. The population and court requirements of Alice Springs in the 1990s are expected to be comparable to those of present day Darwin.

18. The nature of the work of the courts, which demands special provision to ensure a minimum of disturbance, makes courts buildings difficult and costly to alter or extend. Therefore, it is considered that the proposed new building should be capable of carrying the increasing work load for a period of 15 to 20 years with a minimum of internal alteration. Provision of space to cater for expansion beyond this period would be uneconomic particularly in the present circumstances of financial stringency.

19. Account has been taken of the foregoing in determining the future court requirements for Alice Springs which are as follows:

- one courtroom for use by the Supreme Court;
- one courtroom for use by the Supreme Court as the need arises but mainly for use as a Court of Petty Sessions in the early stages. In the long term the courtroom would be used by the Supreme Court almost exclusively;
- one courtroom for use full time as a Court of Petty Sessions;
- one courtroom for use as a Children's Court and for a Family Court of Australia.

20. Chamber accommodation has been determined on two magistrates in the long term and for one resident judge and two other visiting judges or tribunals in the event of an extension of the legal jurisdiction which could include an appellate jurisdiction plus ad hoc tribunals of superior court status.

21. Office accommodation of sufficient area and flexible enough to take account of possible staff increases is required. Accommodation for law library, transcript centre, interview and witnesses rooms, storage facilities, holding cells and conference facilities is also required. The requirements of the new courthouse building include the provision of a

flat for the visiting judge. The existing courthouse contains a small flat for this purpose.

22. Committee's Conclusion The existing Law Courts facilities in Alice Springs are inadequate and outdated. There is a need for a new Law Courts building.

#### THE SITE

23. An area of approximately 3000m<sup>2</sup> has been allocated for this project. It is located at the south-west corner of Parsons and Hartley Streets, one block from the commercial centre in Todd Street.

24. Presently on the site are three old houses which are to be demolished. One house is used as office accommodation by welfare staff of the Department of the Northern Territory, another is used as a night shelter by a voluntary organization and the remainder, an ex-police barracks building, is currently being used by the Craft Association of Central Australia. In addition, there is an old cell block and attached buildings on the site, of which the cell block will be retained. Alternative accommodation will be provided for present occupants of buildings on the site in order to release it for building purposes.

25. We were informed that the closure of Parsons Street between Hartley and Bath Streets is currently under consideration. This would provide a large landscaped plaza and enable complete integration of the proposed Law Courts building, Commonwealth office buildings and the existing police station. However, the Commonwealth Centre development would function successfully whether or not Parsons Street is closed.

26. Committee's Conclusion The site selected is suitable.

#### THE PROPOSED WORKS

27. Planning and Design The building will be a prestige air conditioned court building for the conduct of Supreme Courts, Courts of Summary Jurisdiction and other court works having as far as practicable separate access and circulation within the building for judges, magistrates, prisoners and escorts, jury and members of the public.

28. The proposal has been developed to achieve a design consistent with the dignity and authority associated with this type of building and appropriate to the climate of the region. Planning has resolved a number

of difficult circulation problems including total segregation between judges magistrates, prisoners and all other users of the building.

29. To effectively segregate the judiciary, prisoners on trial, court staff and members of the public within the building, separate entries will be provided with related floor areas planned at different levels according to their particular requirements.

30. A basement will provide holding cells for prisoners awaiting trial. Controlled access from this area to the courts will be provided by stairs. Prisoners will enter the court building via a secure covered link at the rear of the old cell block courtyard which will link the adjoining gaol with the Law Courts building. Storage of stationery, furniture and archives is also provided at this level.

31. The ground floor will accommodate the major activities of the court. The public will enter the building from Parsons Street by a broad flight of steps. A ramp will provide safe access for handicapped persons. This entrance will form the main axis fronting the proposed plaza. A separate and less formal entrance from Hartley Street will provide access to the Family Court. The main entrance lobby will open into a spacious public area from which the four courts will be directly accessible. Ready access from this area to public toilets, interview rooms, witness rooms, barristers' robing room, press room, crown prosecutor, police prosecutor, sheriff's office and an exhibit store will be provided. The marriage room will open off the main entrance lobby and have an exit facing Hartley Street.

32. Judges and magistrates will have separate entrances from a private covered car parking area at the rear of the building and separate access between chambers and courts. An electrical substation switchroom and a gardener's store will also be provided at this level with access from the service entrance at the rear.

33. In a town like Alice Springs, provision of a self-contained flat for a visiting Judge is considered necessary in order to reduce the possibility of contact with persons anxious to discuss cases. The flat will be on a mezzanine level between the ground and first floors at the rear of the building.

34. The first floor will accommodate the administrative and chamber functions of the court and will be approached by a public staircase, leading from the main entrance lobby. General office, search and transcript sales

counters will be located at the head of this stair and be open to the public. Controlled access to the remainder of this floor will be available for the judges, magistrates, staff and approved visitors but not to members of the public. Accommodation comprises offices, general storage, library, transcription centre, staff amenities, toilets and judges' and magistrates' chambers with offices for associates and tipstaves. The second floor will accommodate air conditioning plant serving the building.

35. Committee's Conclusion The Committee considers the work proposed in this reference will benefit judicial proceedings in Alice Springs.

#### CONSTRUCTION

36. Structure The structure will generally be of reinforced concrete with an insulated metal deck roof supported on steel frames. The floors of the building will be of reinforced concrete slabs, beams and columns. Where appropriate, reinforced concrete walls will be utilised to carry vertical loads and to act as wind bracing for the structure. Footings for the columns will be reinforced concrete pads.

37. Materials These will be selected for their local availability, durability and their suitability to enhance the civic design and architectural expression of the building.

38. Exterior The exterior walls will be concrete masonry blockwork to match the Commonwealth offices and reinforced concrete with an applied aggregate finish. Window and door frames will be anodized aluminium and glazing will be grey tinted to reduce glare. Steps, ramp and paving will have an exposed aggregate finish and local stone will be used for retaining walls as part of the landscaping of the site.

39. Interior Special attention will be given in the detailed design to ensure that the finishes are combined to provide the correct acoustic environment and separation of the appropriate areas such as courts, chambers and public areas.

40. Mechanical Engineering Services Mechanical engineering services will comprise air conditioning, mechanical ventilation, domestic hot water supply and sundry other services.

41. Full air conditioning will be provided in all court rooms, jury rooms and judges' chambers, offices and ancillary areas, public spaces and

the judge's flat by ducted air handling systems or by room fan coil units supplemented by ducted air supply, as appropriate.

42. Air handling plants for ducted air distribution systems will generally be housed in the roof plant room to minimise noise problems. Chilled water and hot water will be circulated to air handling plants and room fan-coil units from a central plant room located in the basement of the new Commonwealth office block.

43. Separate air conditioning plant will be located in the roof plant room to supply the judge's flat to ensure that full air conditioning is available for the flat on a 24-hour per day basis.

44. Special precautions will be taken to provide adequate vibration isolation and attenuation of structural and airborne noise and to ensure acoustic privacy by preventing cross transmission of noise between adjacent rooms through air conditioning ductwork.

45. Mechanical ventilation will be provided for the basement security area, kitchenette, toilets and cleaners' rooms. Duct silencers for noise control will be fitted where necessary.

46. Domestic hot water will be supplied to all basins, sinks and showers from a central solar electricity boosted hot water supply system. Other mechanical services will include chilled drinking water units, sanitary disposal units, refrigerators, pie warmer, boiling water units, water softener, sump pump and sewerage ejector.

47. Electrical Services Light and power will be distributed from a substation and outlets will be provided as necessary. Emergency lighting will be incorporated in secure areas, corridors and similar locations. Wiring for a court reporting and recording system will be installed. Telephones, clocks, signalling systems and security alarm systems will also be provided.

48. Hydraulic Services Water supply and sewerage will be connected to the town mains in Hartley Street. A lawn watering system will be reticulated to the grassed areas of the site.

49. Civil Engineering A sealed driveway with kerbing and guttering will be provided for access to the judges' and magistrates' car park and the substation at the rear of the building. Paving at the main entrances to the building will be precast concrete. Elsewhere footpaths will be of concrete

cast in situ. Garden areas will be top-soiled and planted. Stormwater run-off will be collected and piped underground to the main stormwater drainage system.

50. Fire Protection Fire protection will include an automatic thermal/early warning system, fire detector and alarm systems throughout and early warning detectors in areas where highly important and irreplaceable records are to be stored. Fire hydrants, fire hoses, fire hose reels and portable extinguishers will be provided as required to comply with the requirements of local building regulations and the Comptroller of Fire Services, N.T.

51. Furniture and Fittings All built-in furniture and fittings are included in the estimated cost of the project.

52. Car Parking A private covered car parking area for judges and magistrates will be provided at the rear of the building.

53. The completion of the new Law Courts building will allow the existing parking provision in the area to be increased by 40 spaces following demolition of the old court house.

54. The Committee received evidence from the Corporation of the Municipality of Alice Springs which was critical of the provision made for car parking. However, the Committee feels that the question of car parking in this area may become acute when the second stage office block is completed. The Committee considers that the provision of car parking is a future problem more than a present one.

55. Landscaping It is proposed to develop a Commonwealth Government Centre in this area and proposals are aimed at creating a landscaped pedestrian precinct of park-like quality with shaded walkways, seats and a fountain. The short and long-term landscape proposals have been developed by a consultant landscape architect.

56. The estimates cover landscaping within the site bounded by Parsons and Hartley Streets, including the area between the proposed Law Courts building and the existing police station.

57. Liaison with Authorities The building will comply with the Northern Territory Building Regulations. The plans will be developed in accordance with the requirements of the Comptroller of Fire Services and

the Electricity Supply Undertaking. The project will comply with the requirements of the Northern Territory Town Planning Board.

58. Committee's Conclusion The Committee recommends the construction of the work in this reference.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS - OLD CELL BLOCK

59. In accordance with the requirements of the Commonwealth Government Environment Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act 1974, draft and final environmental impact statements were prepared for this project.

60. The draft statement was made available for public comment in February 1976 and a meeting was held in Alice Springs to discuss with interested parties the issues raised regarding the old cell block and the provision of car parking.

61. Local opposition to the demolition of the old cell block has been accommodated by designing the Law Courts building to allow its retention in a landscaped courtyard. The existing outbuildings attached to the cell block will be demolished and the exterior will be restored as nearly as practicable to original condition. The Department of Housing, Environment and Community Development has concurred with the conclusions of the final environmental impact statement.

62. We were advised that the estimated cost of the old cell block restoration is \$100000 and that provision has been made for this amount in the total estimated cost of the Law Courts proposal.

63. The Committee is disturbed that responsibility for the control and maintenance of the old cell block after its restoration has yet to be determined.

64. Committee's Conclusion The departments concerned should consult and determine without delay the responsibility for the control and maintenance of the old cell block after its restoration.

#### ESTIMATE OF COST

65. The estimated cost of the work at the time of the public hearing in February 1977 was \$3.1 million, made up as follows:

|                                             | \$               |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Building work                               | 2 120 000        |
| Electrical services                         | 250 000          |
| Mechanical services                         | 520 000          |
| Site works and services                     | 110 000          |
| Cell block, including associated site works | 100 000          |
|                                             | <u>3 100 000</u> |

PROGRAM

66. It is estimated that after an approval to proceed is given, the preparation of final documentation and calling of tenders will be completed by February 1978. Construction time for the work is estimated at 24 months after a contract is let.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

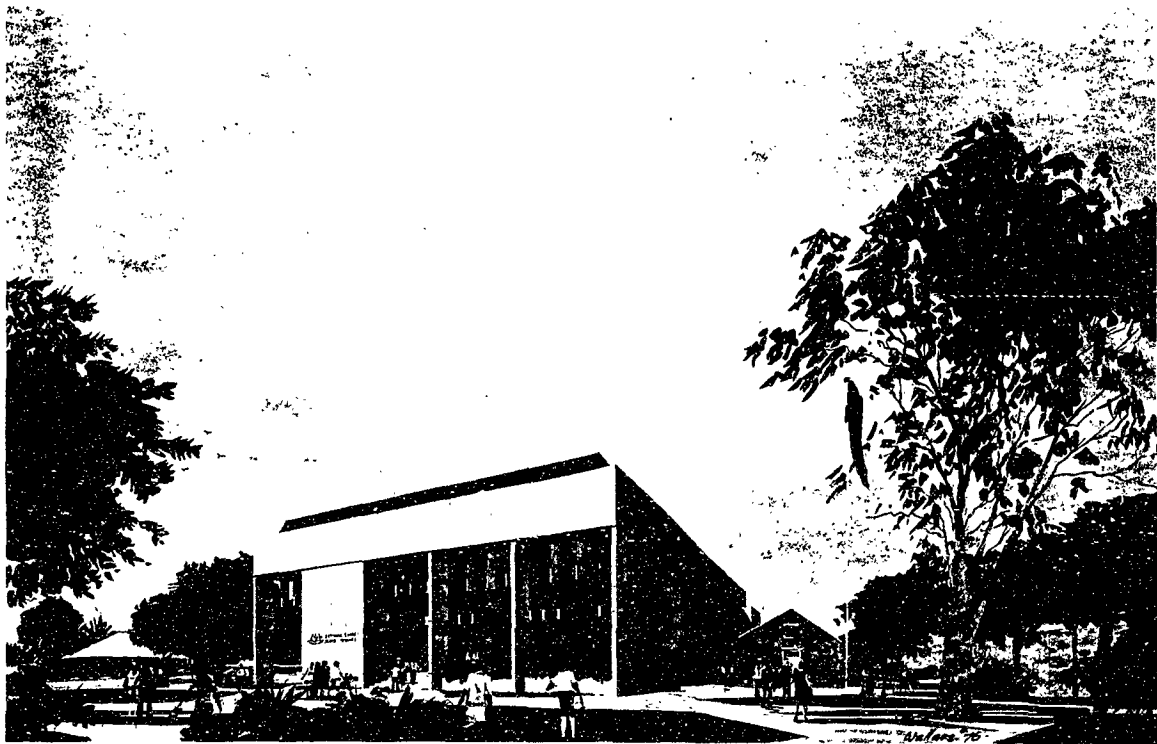
67. The summary of recommendations and conclusions is set out below. Alongside each is shown the paragraph in the report to which it refers.

|    |                                                                                                                                                                      | <u>Paragraph</u> |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. | THE EXISTING LAW COURTS FACILITIES IN ALICE SPRINGS ARE INADEQUATE AND OUTDATED.                                                                                     | 22               |
| 2. | THERE IS A NEED FOR A NEW LAW COURTS BUILDING.                                                                                                                       | 22               |
| 3. | THE SITE SELECTED IS SUITABLE.                                                                                                                                       | 26               |
| 4. | THE COMMITTEE CONSIDERS THE WORK PROPOSED IN THE REFERENCE WILL BENEFIT JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS IN ALICE SPRINGS.                                                       | 35               |
| 5. | THE COMMITTEE RECOMMENDS THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE WORK IN THIS REFERENCE.                                                                                             | 58               |
| 6. | THE DEPARTMENTS CONCERNED SHOULD CONSULT AND DETERMINE WITHOUT DELAY THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CONTROL AND MAINTENANCE OF THE OLD CELL BLOCK AFTER ITS RESTORATION. | 64               |
| 7. | THE ESTIMATED COST OF THE WORK AT THE TIME OF THE PUBLIC HEARING IN FEBRUARY 1977 WAS \$3.1 MILLION.                                                                 | 65               |

  
(C.R. KELLY)  
Chairman

Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works,  
Parliament House,  
CANBERRA, A.C.T.

24 February 1977.



Law Courts Building, Alice Springs.