



# The Supreme Court of New Zealand

TUITUI TANGATA, TUITUI KOROWAI.

WEAVING PEOPLE TOGETHER IS LIKE WEAVING A KOROWAI.

## The Supreme Court of New Zealand

The Supreme Court is the final court of appeal, meaning it is the highest court in the land. The Court – and the land it rests on – has a long and fascinating history...

### The history

The court that rose out of the sea

More than 150 years ago, the land upon which the Supreme Court sits today was very different. On either side sat two pa (Maori villages) – Kumutoto and Pipitea – and on the site itself waves lapped over what is now the commercial hub of Wellington.

That all changed in 1855 when a major earthquake shook the city. Buildings were razed but, amazingly, only one person in the whole city was killed by the magnitude 8.2 earthquake. In another strange turn of events, the earthquake raised the ocean floor by up to 1.5 metres at some Wellington shores.



With a growing metropolis and cramped quarters, the government saw the value of this unexpected gift from the sea. It decided to undertake a major project to reclaim more land.

This time it was done by hand. Great wooden piles were driven into the seabed and then filled in with earth. By 1878, the last truckful of earth was tipped in.

Soon, builders were busy erecting new government buildings, including the Old High Court Building.

### VISIT THE SUPREME COURT

**ADDRESS:** 85 Lambton Quay, Wellington

**TELEPHONE:** (04) 918 8222

**WEBSITE:** [www.courtsofnz.govt.nz/about/supreme](http://www.courtsofnz.govt.nz/about/supreme)

### Opening hours

9am–5pm, Monday to Friday. Closed on public holidays.

### Tours of the Court

Guided tours of the Supreme Court and the Old High Court Building are available. If you would like to find out more about the tours, please let us know. Email us: [tours@justice.govt.nz](mailto:tours@justice.govt.nz)

Lambton Quay and Thorndon c.1852 from the Terrace.  
The wharf in the foreground is believed to run out between present-day Whitmore and Ballance Streets.



## THE SUPREME COURT SPANNING THE YEARS

1830s

Te Atiawa Māori occupy the land close to where the Court stands today. Two pā (Māori villages), Kumutoto and Pipitea, sit on either side of the current location of the Court.

1855

A major earthquake hits Wellington, raising land by up to 1.5 metres along the foreshore.

1874–78

More land is reclaimed – this time by hand, rather than the forces of nature – creating room for a cluster of new government buildings, including the Old High Court Building.

1879

The foundation stone of the Old High Court Building is laid with much pomp and ceremony.

# Restoring our Old High Court

The Old High Court Building is a heritage building of national significance. It contains many beautiful features and superior craftsmanship that are rarely seen in buildings today.

These include a curved gallery, decorative mouldings in the shape of acorns, an intricately-crafted English coat of arms and wooden panelling throughout the interior.

The entire building had fallen into disrepair over the years so restoration was a colossal undertaking which involved many hands. The interior was meticulously restored along with the essential building work, like strengthening the foundations, fixing leaks, and plastering inside and out.



### *Preserving a dying art*

*The restoration of the Old High Court Building helped preserve some dying arts and developed the skills of craftspeople around the country – from solid plasterers to moulders and woodworkers.*

## Bricks and mortar

The Old High Court Building was designed in 1878 by the renowned architect and draughtsman P.F.M. Burrows. He was inspired by the court buildings of the old country, England, and designed a grand edifice made from bricks and mortar.

The laying of the foundation stone was celebrated with impressive fanfare and 2,000 people flocked to the site to watch.

On Monday 11 April 1881, the Old High Court Building officially opened its doors for business. The classical columns and masonry made it stand out amongst the wooden buildings which primarily occupied the city after the earthquake of 1855.

### *The coat of arms*

*A new English coat of arms was made for the Old High Court Building with painstaking care. Model-makers used old photos to replicate the original details of the crest.*



## At the centre of legal life

The Old High Court Building was at the centre of legal life in the capital city. Many historic cases were heard in the courtrooms over the years and, in the days before television, these proceedings were almost entertainment for the public.

One of the most notable cases heard in the Court was the trial of an Italian named Louis Chemis in 1889. It was said he shot Thomas Hawkings and stabbed him 21 times with a weapon like a stiletto. The case aroused great public interest, growing even more intense when the defence counsel was struck dead by typhoid fever just two days before Chemis was sentenced to death. This sentence was later changed to life imprisonment but, after Chemis was pardoned 10 years later, he blew himself up with dynamite.



### *The curved staircase*

*This is the original curved staircase leading to the public gallery in the Old High Court Building. It was meticulously restored by craftspeople.*

## Big changes at the Court

By the early 1900s, the small size of the building became an increasing issue. Over the years, builders made regular appearances in the Court – not to attend court cases, but to try and create more space to accommodate the burgeoning court.

Then, in 1993, the High Court moved to a new building in Molesworth Street and the old building was left vacant. There were many attempts to find new tenants but the cost of restoration put off any of the contenders.

The building stayed empty – with the exception of occasional squatters and many generations of pigeons – until 2009, when the restoration was completed.

### *The twin heritages of New Zealand*

*Displayed in the courtroom of the Supreme Court are two cherished items that represent New Zealand's twin heritages – a 1702 silver inkwell which once belonged to Queen Anne and was gifted to the Court by the Privy Council in 2004, and a carved Māori waka huia (a treasure box).*

1881

The Old High Court Building opens for business.

1993

The High Court is relocated to Molesworth Street and the old building starts to fall into disrepair.

2004

The Supreme Court is established and the right of appeal to the Privy Council in London ends.

2007

Construction of the Supreme Court building starts.

2009

The new building and restored old building are completed.

2010

The Supreme Court complex is officially opened.

# Construction of the new Supreme Court building

## Something old, something new

The new Supreme Court complex brings together two unique buildings: the classical elegance of the Old High Court Building and the unique contemporary design of an entirely new structure. The two sides of the complex contrast each other in age, aesthetics and form.

The new construction borrows elements from the old building to harmonise the two different styles. Continuity between the two sides is also created by the bronze façade, which matches the height of the Old High Court Building.

## Inspiration for the design

The rich cultural history of New Zealand and its natural beauty were the inspiration for the new Supreme Court building.

At the centre of the building is the courtroom. It is designed to be visible from the street, symbolising the idea of transparent and open justice.

Its exterior is made from copper and the interior features panels of silver beech, which together form a diamond pattern that was inspired by the kauri cone.

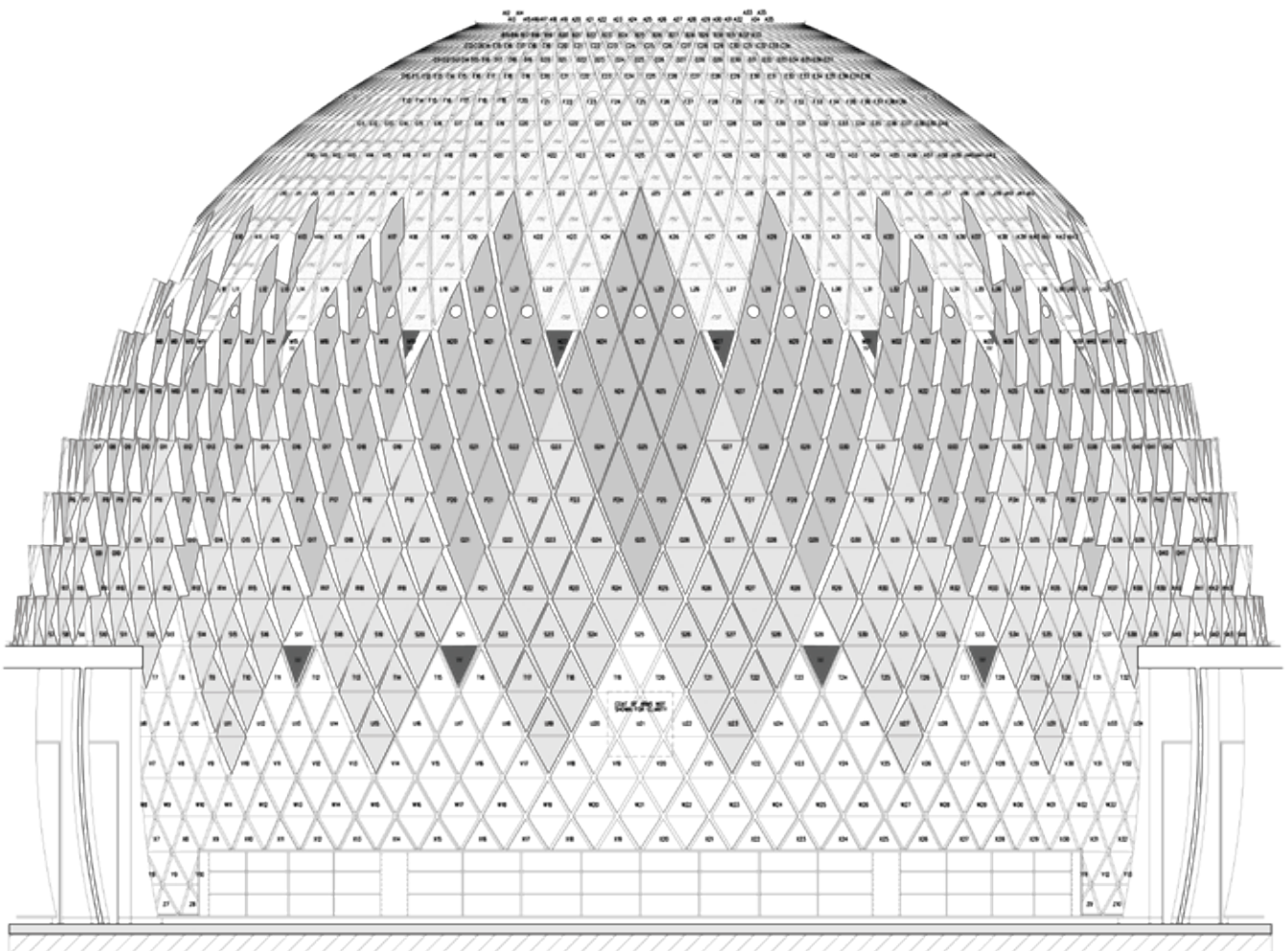
A bronze screen envelops the exterior of the new building. The forms were inspired by the intertwining of rata and pohutukawa trees. Red cut glass is set behind the bronze, representing the berries and flowers of both trees.



*The bronze screen  
The pattern on the bronze screen symbolises pohutukawa and rata branches. The two trees are indigenous to New Zealand.*



*The kauri cone and the courtroom  
The new courtroom draws inspiration from the cone of a kauri tree. Its ovoid shape is made up of thousands of panels which mirror the texture of the cone.*



*The architect's drawing of the panels on the new courtroom.*

# The workings of the Supreme Court

Today, the Supreme Court is the highest court in the land. It recognises New Zealand as an independent nation with its own history and traditions. It is New Zealand's final court of appeal.

The Supreme Court generally hears appeals of considerable public interest, commercial significance, substantial miscarriages of justice or significant issues relating to the Treaty of Waitangi.

The Supreme Court is headed by the Chief Justice and sits as a bench of five permanent judges.

## To London and back

Before the Supreme Court was established in 2004, the Privy Council in England was New Zealand's highest court of appeal.

There were some difficulties with this system. Sitting in London, the Privy Council dealt with only a small number of appeals each year – usually far fewer than ten.

Further, criminal cases could only be appealed with the permission of the Privy Council and this was rarely given. For civil cases, they had to be worth more than \$5,000 to be considered.

After extensive public consultation, legislation to create the Supreme Court of New Zealand was passed in October 2003. The Act came into force on 1 January 2004, officially establishing the Supreme Court.

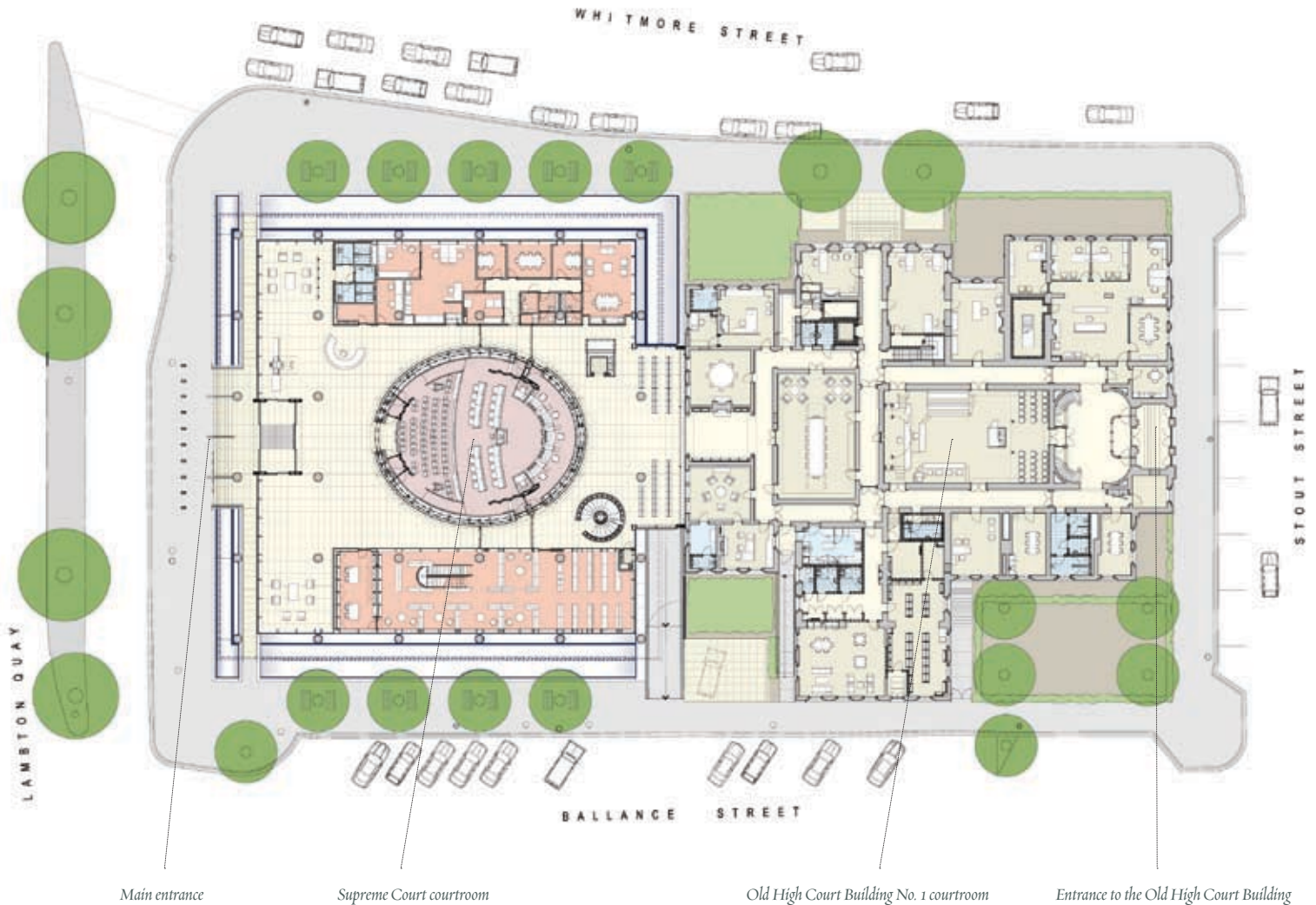
## The Supreme Court in action

From 2004 to 2009, the Supreme Court received more than 500 applications and more than 125 appeals were heard.

These cases covered a huge spectrum – including contract and criminal cases and appeals about employment, family issues and intellectual property.

## Did you know?

- \* There are **2,294 panels** in the inside of the main courtroom.
- \* The bronze screen has **88 panels** and weighs **90 tonnes**.
- \* The English coat of arms on the outside of the Old High Court Building weighs around **240 kg**.



THE SUPREME COURT BUILDING

THE OLD HIGH COURT BUILDING