

130 years of the Palace of Justice

Presentation by the Secretary General of the Curia of Hungary

Your Excellencies, Honourable President, Distinguished Colleagues, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Former Building of the Curia

The Hungarian Royal Curia as a supreme court that was to function on a permanent basis and that was entrusted with powers enshrined in law commenced its operations in 1724 in Pest. At the end of the 1700s, it was moved to Buda for a short time, then in 1804 it was relocated back to its former building in Pest.

The severe floods of the Danube in 1838 impacted a considerable part of Pest and did not spare the building of the Curia, either. It took two years to repair the damage caused by the floods. In 1845, a proposal was drafted to demolish the existing Curia building and construct a new one on the same site. Due to events unfolding during the revolution and freedom fight of 1848-1849, the construction matter of the Curia was suspended. In the aftermath of the freedom fight, the Curia was disbanded, and the Austrian Imperial Supreme Tribunal took residence in the building. Only after the re-establishment of the Curia in 1861 could the institution reoccupy the building.

Background to the Construction of a New Building

Following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, the then-Justice Minister articulated the imperative for the construction of a new palace of justice. Plans were actually drawn up, but the execution of the project was ultimately precluded. After several failed construction ideas, in the Spring of 1891, Curia President Miklós Szabó engaged in lengthy consultations with Alajos Hauszmann, an architect and professor at the University of Technology, regarding the construction of an “ornate palace” for the Curia and the Royal Appeal Court of Budapest. Construction finally commenced in the Summer of 1893, opposite the new parliament building.

The Opening of the Palace of Justice

The building was handed over on 1 May 1896, and its cornerstone was laid on 20 October of the same year. This event took place as part of the millennium celebrations that were organized to commemorate the thousandth anniversary of the establishment of the Hungarian state.

“The New Home of Justice”

The construction of a monumental entrance hall was undertaken, and a statue of Lady Justice was positioned within this hall. The statue was carved from blue-and-white Carrara marble in Italy and was modeled after a design by Alajos Stróbl. The artist chose not to utilize a conventional representation of Lady Justice as his model. Instead, he decided to carve a young, beautiful, seated female figure in a simple pose. The female figure of justice was seated on an antique chair crafted from yellow polished marble. The imposing statue, measuring 3 meters in height and weighing 12 tons, greeted visitors entering the building.

In addition to the Curia, the Palace of Justice also served as the premises of the Royal Appeal Court of Budapest, the Crown Prosecutor’s Office, and the Royal Prosecutor General’s Office. On the first floor and the second floor, there were courtrooms, panel and judges’ chambers, as well as

rooms for “receiving” lawyers, parties, and witnesses, grouped according to whether they served the purposes of the Curia or the Appeal Court. The halls were decorated with “sculptures and gilding.” The president’s chambers were located on the first floor, and the vice-president’s chambers on the second floor.

The Palace of Justice in the Post-World War II Era

The Palace of Justice sustained damage during World War II and was restored by the Central Museum Directorate following the war. The Soviet-style dictatorship abolished and evicted the Curia in 1949 and replaced it with the Supreme Court. Then, the building was converted into a museum of ethnography. During the construction, the foyer, the central hall, and the ceremonial hall remained untouched. The statue of Lady Justice was, however, removed in 1951. The edifice was used as an exhibition venue first in the Spring of 1952.

In 1957, the newly established Hungarian National Gallery relocated to the building. In 1959, a government resolution designated the Buda Castle as the permanent location of the National Gallery. However, due to the protracted restoration of the Buda Castle, the museum remained in the building until 1973.

The southern part of the building housed the Institute of Party History, then the Institute of Political History from 1957 to 2018.

In the meantime, the Supreme Court operated in the building of the abolished Administrative Court in Buda, then in 1980, it took up residence in a building on Markó Street, a location it continues to utilize at the present time.

In 2012, the Supreme Court of Hungary reverted to its original appellation and has since been operating under the name “Curia”. The idea of moving back to the former Palace of Justice was brought up, but its implementation was shelved. Following the planning phase that began in 2019, construction works began in 2022. The objective of the reconstruction was twofold: first, to accurately replicate the building’s original layout and architectural elements, and second, to establish functional workspace for the Curia that aligns with contemporary requirements. This reconstruction also constitutes historical redress. Following the restoration process, the statue of Lady Justice and the original furniture preserved by the Curia will be returned, and the original inscription on the main façade will also be restored: „Iustitia Regnorum Fundamentum”. Following the renovation, the central part of the building, the well-known central hall, the ceremonial hall, which was previously only open to the public on exceptional occasions, and the historic courtrooms will be open to visitors in the future. However, authentic reconstruction comes with the challenge of preserving the spatial structure and architectural details while also meeting the requirements of today’s judicial system. Accordingly, during the renovation, the Curia paid special attention to ensuring modern infrastructure, particularly in terms of security, IT, and building services. Kossuth Lajos Square can thus once again be interpreted as a public space where the three branches of power are represented side by side: the Parliament building represents the legislative branch, the renovated Ministry of Agriculture stands for the executive branch, and the Curia, which is to be moved back into the Palace of Justice, represents the symbolic and real seat of the judiciary.

A cornerstone laying ceremony for the refurbished building is scheduled to take place on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone of the original Palace of Justice in 1896. It is our hope that, in the wake of this, the Curia will be able to commence its return to the

Palace of Justice – its former dignified location – as early as this year. The renovated building will have five floors with an area of nearly 25,000 square meters where the Curia's staff could occupy almost 200 offices.

In the renovated Palace of Justice, in cooperation with the Office of the National Assembly, there will also be a Visitor Center open to the general public, where those interested can learn about the history of the building and gain insight into the Hungarian justice system through an exhibition on the history of the courts. We hope that by this time next year, we will be able to show you the old-new seat of the Curia.

Thank you for your kind attention.