

**BRUSSELS, BELGIUM**

## DID YOU KNOW?

*The Brussels Palace of Justice is a victim of its enormous size that long caused it to be seen as a folly and needs a guarantee of its future and a ground-up rehabilitation.*

## A CLOSER LOOK

## Brussels Palace of Justice

When demand for a new courthouse arose in newly independent Belgium in the middle of the nineteenth century, the result was one of the most monumental buildings ever constructed in Europe. The Brussels Palace of Justice was built on a colossal scale, on a high plateau overlooking the historic center of Brussels. The first half of the nineteenth century had seen Belgium grow into a major economic power after becoming the first country in continental Europe to embrace the Industrial Revolution. The new Palace of Justice became an opportunity to proclaim Belgium's accomplishments on the world stage. A vast area in the Marolles district was expropriated and

demolished, and the first stone of the building was laid in 1866. The city architect, Joseph Poelaert (1817-79), followed a famously chaotic creative process that exasperated many of his collaborators. The building was completed in 1883, four years after Poelaert's death.

A monument to nineteenth-century eclecticism, the Palace of Justice was built to a Neo-Baroque style, with classical as well as ancient Near Eastern architectural details that hark back to the world's oldest known legal systems. In the central portico, statues of great orators and lawmakers of antiquity—Demosthenes, Lycurgus, Cicero, and Ulpian—greet the visitor. Because the building was so

massive, eight courtyards had to be included in order to bring in natural light and air to all areas. The central feature of the building is the Salle des Pas Perdus, or Hall of Lost Footsteps, a space of unequalled monumentality located under the dome.

At first considered a folly due to its great size, the building has long been underappreciated. Its pioneering iron frame has not been well protected from the infiltration of water. As a consequence, the iron has rusted, growing in volume and pushing away the stone masonry. To protect the public from falling masonry, scaffolding was installed on the front façade three decades ago—which has by now become rusty and

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unusable itself. Many spaces in the building are unoccupied, while at the same time space is rented in nearby buildings to fulfill judicial functions. Meanwhile, as separatist ideas have gained popularity in the country, the Palace of Justice—a symbol of unified Belgium—is left without many vocal champions. In response to these challenges, in 2011 the Dutch- and French-speaking bar associations of Brussels created the Poelaert Foundation, named after Joseph Poelaert, to advocate for the rehabilitation of the building and the consolidation of judicial functions in the area. The 2016 World Monuments Watch seeks to raise awareness and calls for the government to act to protect a monument whose future has hung in the balance for too long.



*Join us in keeping watch over mankind's greatest achievements, and support this call to action.*

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