BALANCING TRUST

Navigating Security and Accessibility in Courthouse Design
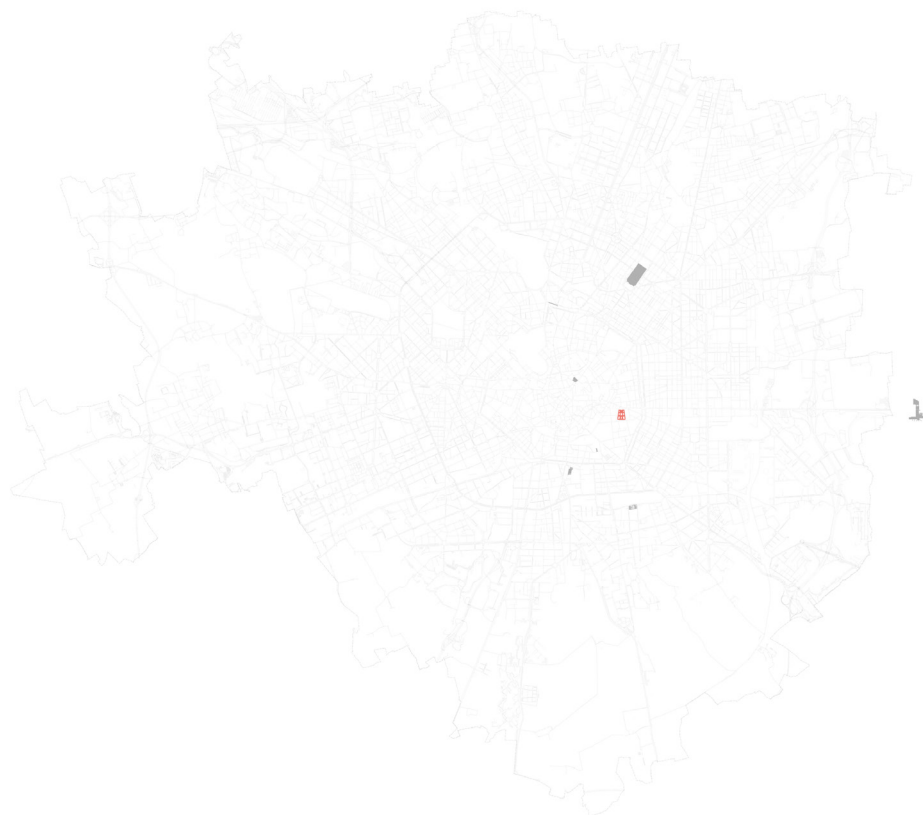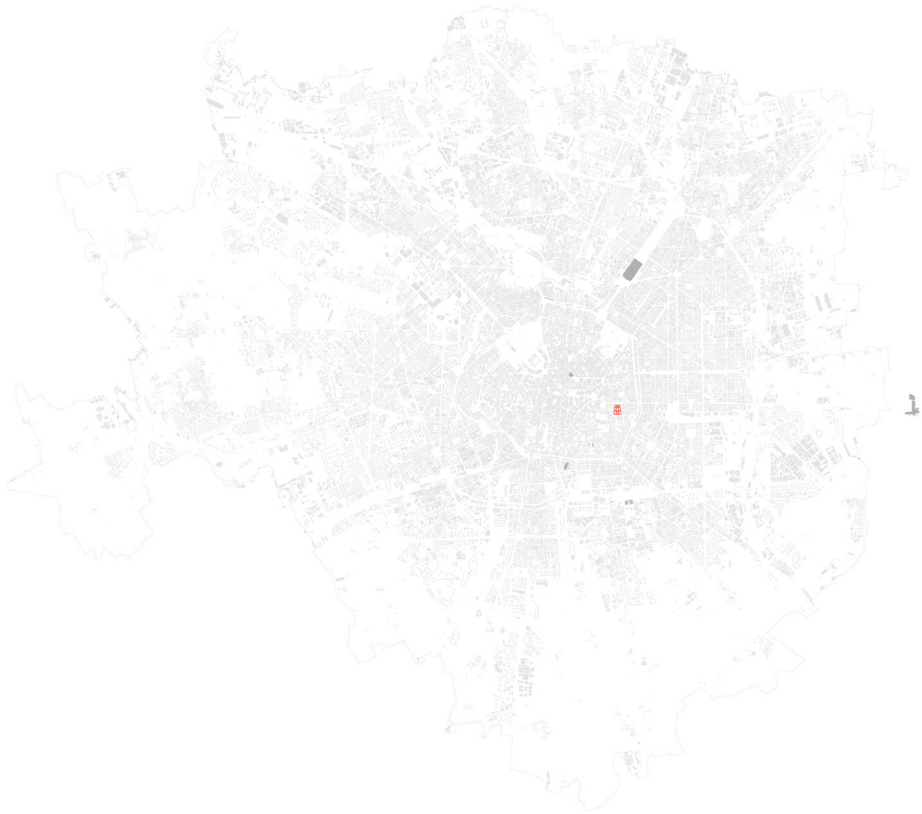
Complex Project Graduation Studio
Bodies & Buildings 2024/2025
Maksymilian Janus

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Balancing Trust

Plot Location

INTRODUCTION

01

Palazzo di Giustizia, Milan,1932-1940 Marcello Piacentini

Courthouses have historically reflected the power structures and societal values of their time, as seen in Italy's 20th-century architecture. Following Mussolini's rise to dictatorship in 1925, the regime employed various instruments of state control - police, military, and legislative measures - to reinforce its authority. This era, marked by a climate of force and punishment, influenced the architectural landscape, particularly the construction of civic buildings. Among these is the monumental Palace of Justice (Palazzo di Giustizia), built between 1932 and 1940 in central Milan. Designed by the politically influential architect Marcello Piacentini, this building was not only the largest constructed in Milan during the inter-war period but also served as a symbol of fascist power and central secured authority. Its construction reflected the regime's desire to demonstrate strength and control, especially in a city that held considerable wealth and security influence, which posed a threat to the authority of Rome.

This research plan focuses on the intricate relationship between courthouse design and its broader social implications. A courthouse is not just a building where legal proceedings occur; it is a civic institution that embodies the principles of security and community engagement. Functioning as the physical manifestation of the judicial system, courthouses play a crucial role in upholding the safe rule of law and ensuring that justice is accessible to all. These architectural structures are characterized by their grandeur and symbolic significance, often featuring seciurty designs that communicates authority and stability. Courthouses serve as prominent landmarks within a city, reflecting the beliefs, priorities, and aspirations of the communities they represent.

Modern courthouse design seeks to strike a balance between this need for security and the growing demand for accessibility. A courthouse is not merely a venue for legal proceedings; it is a civic space meant to uphold justice, inclusivity, and public trust. Contemporary courthouses are therefore designed to communicate authority and stability while remaining open and accessible to the public, reflecting an evolution from past models of intimidation and exclusivity. As prominent civic landmarks, these buildings aim to be both symbols of the justice system and welcoming spaces that foster community engagement.

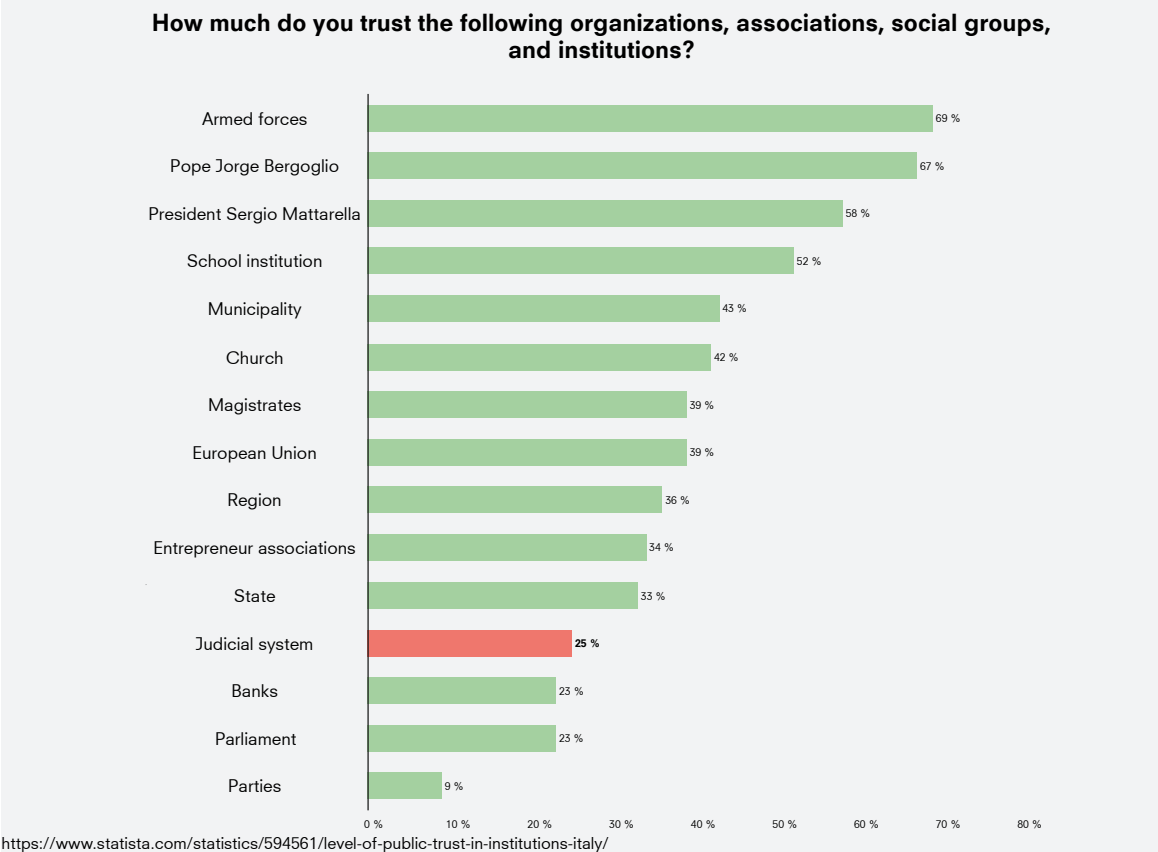This research plan will lead to an exploration of how the design and function of courthouses have evolved. By analyzing contemporary courthouse projects alongside historical examples like the Palazzo di Giustizia, this study aims to uncover the complexities of courthouse design as a reflection of safety, secureness, and the ongoing dialogue between accesebility and the justice system.

PROBLEM
STATEMENT

02

This research plan will use the Palace of Justice (Palazzo di Giustizia) in Milan as a primary reference, focusing on its dual role as a secure, large-scale courthouse and a public civic space. While analyzing this monumental building within its historical and architectural context, we aim to delve into how its design balances security with accessibility and the implications this balance has for those who enter its halls. Constructed during Mussolini's dictatorship, the Palazzo di Giustizia embodies the era's emphasis on authority and control, with its imposing architecture serving as a visible symbol of state power.

Given recent data indicating that only 25% of Italians trust the judicial system, there is a clear need to bridge the gap between public access to legal institutions and robust security measures. Over the coming weeks, I will focus on researching how accessibility can be balanced with security to make courthouses more approachable while ensuring safety. This research aims to restore public trust by fostering transparency and accessibility, reinforcing the legal system's integrity, and demonstrating a commitment to justice and public service in courthouse design.

How much do you trust the following organizations, associations, social groups, and institutions?

Institution	Trust
Armed forces	69 %
Pope Jorge Bergoglio	67 %
President Sergio Mattarella	58 %
School institution	52 %
Municipality	43 %
Church	42 %
Magistrates	39 %
European Union	39 %
Region	36 %
Entrepreneur associations	34 %
State	33 %
Judicial system	25 %
Banks	23 %
Parliament	23 %
Parties	9 %

https://www.statista.com/statistics/594561/level-of-public-trust-in-institutions-italy/

"Court security is a balance. A courthouse is a place where people are supposed to come to find justice" (Murez, 2005)

We aim to investigate how to create secure yet accessible spaces that invite public participation in the justice system while simultaneously preventing feelings of intimidation or alienation. By examining the unique challenges related to flow, circulation, and the overall impact of courthouse design on public perception of justice, this study seeks to understand how architectural solutions can effectively reconcile these demands. Ultimately, we aspire to contribute valuable insights into the design of courthouses that embody both security and openness, fostering trust and engagement within the communities they serve.

This research will explore how the building's formidable scale and design elements communicate authority while assessing the impact these choices have on accessibility for all users, including defendants, lawyers, staff, and the public. We seek to investigate how elements of monumentality and security shape the public's perception of justice and contribute to the emotional experience within the space. For instance, does the design foster an intimidating atmosphere, or does it also provide accessible, welcoming elements that affirm civic inclusion and transparency? By examining layers of symbolism, structural layout, and security features, we aim to understand how the architecture of the Palazzo di Giustizia balances the need for safety with the goal of creating a space that is accessible and open to the community.

In the understandable move to raise the bar for court security, however, little formal evaluation has been conducted of the effects of heightened security on court operations or court users, including judges, litigants, lawyers, jurors, and the general public. To be sure, the effects of security measures may be an informal component of the decision to purchase a new security system or adopt new security protocols. Given the special nature of the judiciary as an open arbiter for the general public, the measures must be adopted by the courts to protect themselves and their users.

Exploring the rejection of the trivialization of courthouses and the fear of too much likeness with office buildings, coupled with the increasing judicialization of society, which undermines its exceptional symbolic weight, are compelling the judicial institution to envision a new evolution in courthouse design, shifting towards modern spaces that achieve optimal performance while possessing a contemporary monumentality that restores the sense and sacred dimension of the "time of justice."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

03

Palazzo di Giustizia, Milan,1932-1940 Marcello Piacentini

This research will utilize several key theoretical perspectives to inform the architectural analysis:

- Architecture of Fear (Nan Ellin, editor):

Multiplication and Subdivision: A Paradox of Danger and Safety (Jane Garrison): Garrison's concept will help explore the paradoxical nature of courthouse spaces, where designs must accommodate both danger (through security measures) and safety (by promoting public openness). The courthouse must simultaneously subdivide space to manage risks and multiply access points to ensure public inclusion.

Walls of Fear and Walls of Support (Peter Marcuse): Marcuse's analysis will contribute to understanding how courthouse walls function not only as physical barriers for security but also as psychological symbols. Some walls generate fear and exclusion, while others provide support, reinforcing a sense of safety and inclusion for public users.

- Habermas and the Public Sphere (Jürgen Habermas):

The public sphere is seen as a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed. (Habermas, 1991, 398) It can be seen as the breeding ground if you want. Habermas declares several aspects as vital for the public sphere. Mainly it is open to all citizens and constituted in every conversation in which individuals come together to form a public. The citizen plays the role of a private person who is not acting on behalf of a business or private interests but one who is dealing with matters of general interest to form a public sphere. This will explore how courthouse architecture enables public participation and trust in judicial processes by creating transparent, accessible spaces.

-Practical Guidelines from Courthouse Planning (www.ncsc.org/courthouseplanning/the-courthouse):

This resource from the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) will guide the practical aspects of courthouse design, focusing on how space can be organized to support security, accessibility, and functionality. It provides essential insights into courthouse layout, security zoning, and public circulation, grounding the research in both theoretical and applied contexts.
`
Courthouse design can incorporate transparency while simultaneously maintaining essential security measures by employing strategic architectural elements that balance openness with safety. The visual transparency of courthouse spaces significantly influences public perception and trust in the justice system, as open and welcoming environments can enhance confidence in judicial processes. Design strategies can be implemented to ensure that courthouse architecture conveys a sense of dignity while remaining approachable to the general public, fostering a welcoming atmosphere for all users. Additionally, modern courthouse layouts effectively manage flow and circulation to support security needs while ensuring public accessibility, creating a harmonious balance between safeguarding the judicial process and serving the community.
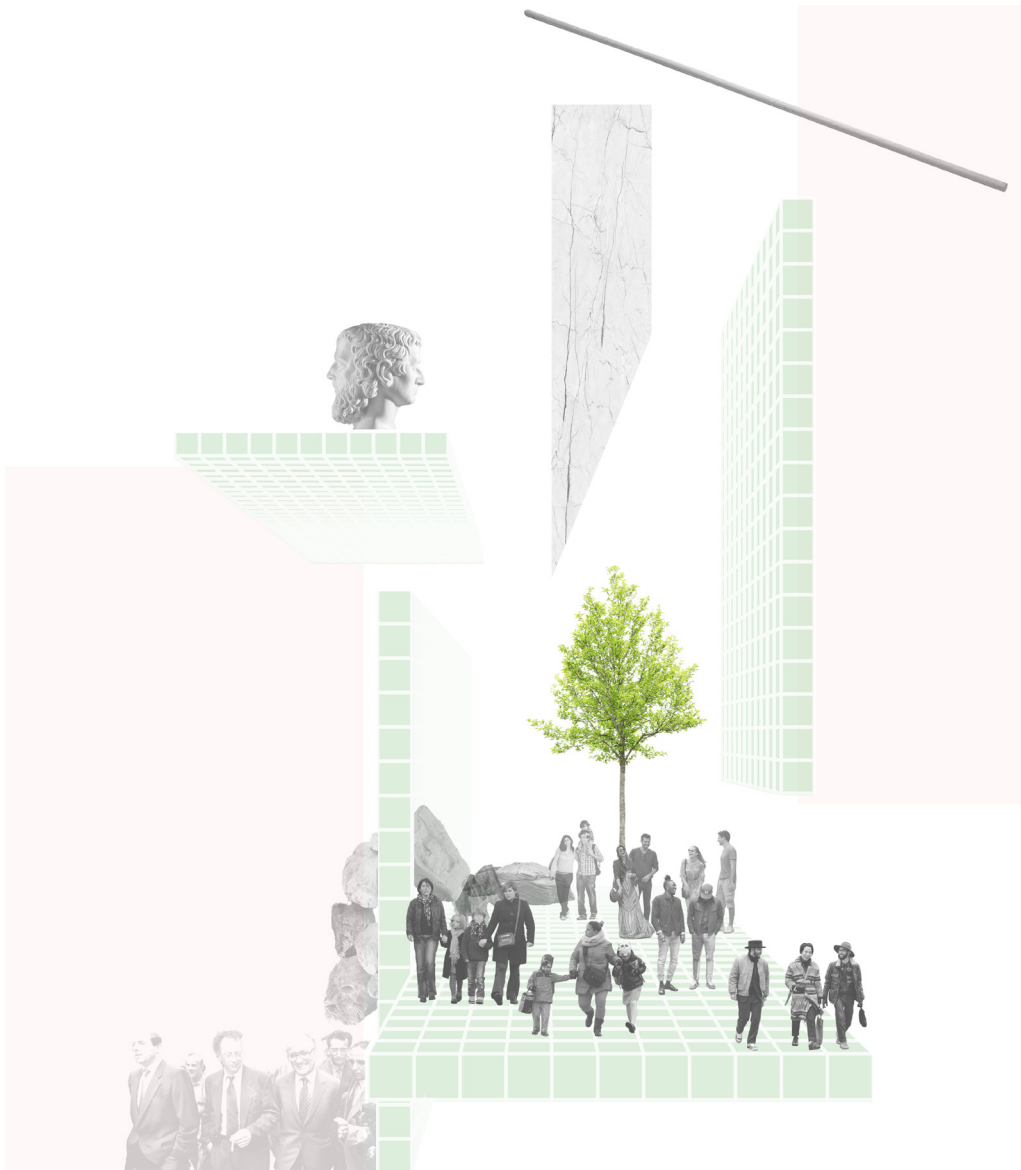
RESEARCH
QUESTION

04
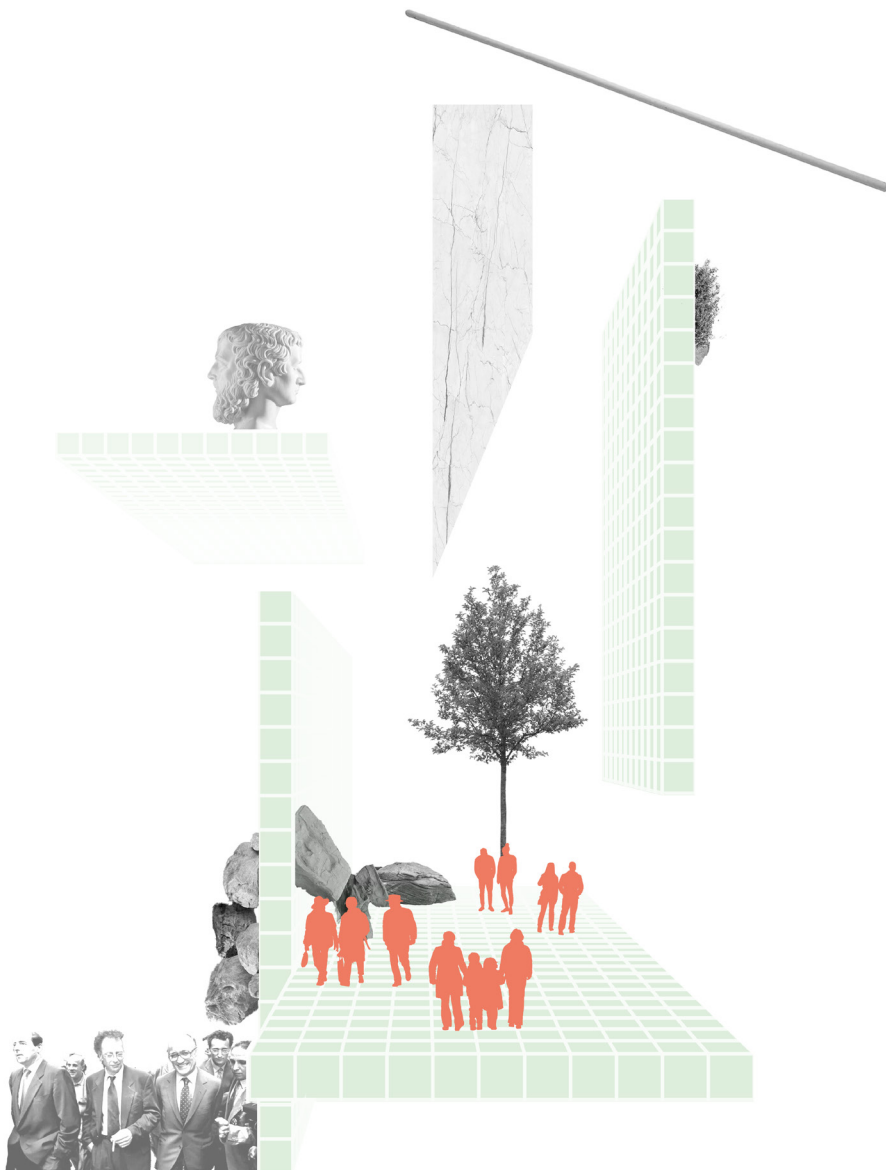
Loss of Public Trust by Walls of Fear

HOW CAN COURTHOUSES BALANCE SECURITY AND ACCESSIBILITY TO FOSTER PUBLIC TRUST IN THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM?

Reclaming Pubic Trust by Walls of Trust

HOW CAN COURTHOUSES BALANCE SECURITY AND ACCESSIBILITY TO FOSTER **PUBLIC TRUST** IN THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM?

METHODOLOGY

05
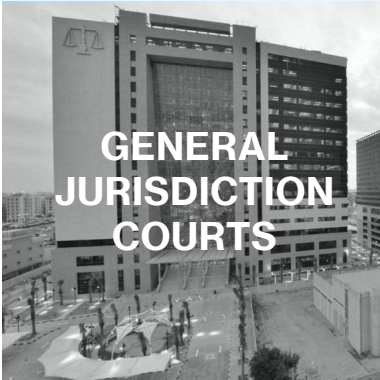
GENERAL JURISDICTION COURTS

AL-REGGAE AND AL-JAHRA COURT COMPLEXES - KUWAIT

COUNTY OR LOCAL COURTS

CALGARY COURTS CENTRE - CANADA

SUPREME AND APPELLATE COURTS

NEW SUPREME COURT BUILDING - SINGAPORE

FEDERAL COURT

VICTORIAN COUNTY COURT - AUSTRALIA

FEDERAL COURT

ROMA MITCHELL COMMONWEALTH - AUSTRALIA

SUPREME AND APPELLATE COURTS

BROOKLYN SUPREME AND FAMILY - USA

COUNTY/ LOCAL COURTS

SAN BERNARDINO COURTHOUSE - USA

Selected case studies

GENERAL JURISDICTION COURTS

COURTHOUSE AMSTERDAM - THE NETHERLANDS

GENERAL JURISDICTION COURTS

PALAZZO DI GIUSTIZIA - ITALY

The research will adopt a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative data to explore how courthouse designs affect security, openness, and public trust. The methods include:
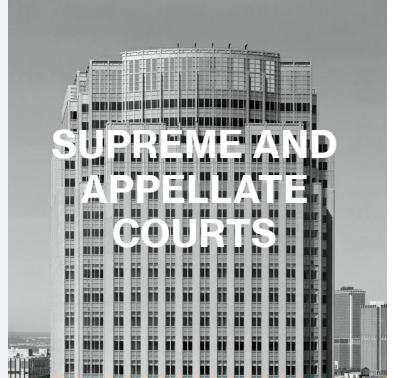
- Case Studies: A comparative analysis of courthouse designs in Italy and other countries, focusing on spatial organization, public accessibility, and security protocols. The research will include a comparative analysis of notable large-scale courthouses to examine architectural and symbolic challenges in contemporary courthouse design. Case studies will include:

United States Courthouse in Phoenix - USA
Supreme Court of Singapore - Singapore
San Bernardino Courthouse - USA
Brooklyn Supreme and Family Courthouse - USA
Victorian County Court - Australia
Roma Mitchell Commonwealth Law Courts - Australia
Calgary Courts Center - Canada
Al-Reggae and Al-Jahra Court Complexes - Kuwait
Amsterdam Courthouse - Netherlands
Palazzo di Giustizia in Florence - Italy

- Interviews and Surveys: Gathering perspectives from architects, courthouse officials, and the general public allows for a well-rounded assessment of courthouse design and functionality. This qualitative data can reveal insights into how various stakeholders perceive the effectiveness of design elements, the importance of transparency, and the relationship between design and public trust in the justice system.

- Site Analysis and Observation: Conducting on-site evaluations of courthouse flow and circulation will provide empirical data on how well current designs accommodate security measures while ensuring accessibility. This observational approach can identify potential inefficiencies in the physical layout and suggest improvements that enhance user experience.

- Architectural Plan Analysis: Critically reviewing architectural designs in terms of flow, transparency, and space allocation enables you to assess their effectiveness systematically. This analysis will help determine whether existing designs meet the needs of users and stakeholders, and how they align with contemporary standards for courthouse functionality and aesthetics.

- Historical Analysis: Examining the evolution of courthouse architecture will contextualize current design practices within a broader historical framework. Understanding how architectural styles and functions have changed over time can reveal shifts in societal values, security needs, and access to justice, informing future design decisions that reflect current demands.

- Italian Judicial System Analysis: Investigating the challenges faced by the Italian judicial system, particularly the prolonged duration of proceedings, will highlight the critical need for

Italy is known for having one of the longest durations of judicial proceedings among European countries, significantly affecting both civil and criminal cases. This prolonged timeline poses challenges to access to justice and undermines the overall effectiveness of the legal system. The complexities inherent in the Italian judicial process, combined with an overloaded court system, contribute to delays that can erode public confidence in judicial outcomes.

In response to these persistent challenges, the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), approved by the European Commission, requires Italy to meet specific binding targets and milestones related to judicial efficiency. Achieving these targets is crucial for Italy to access European funds intended to support various sectors covered by the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility.

Disposition time in days, NRRP 2021
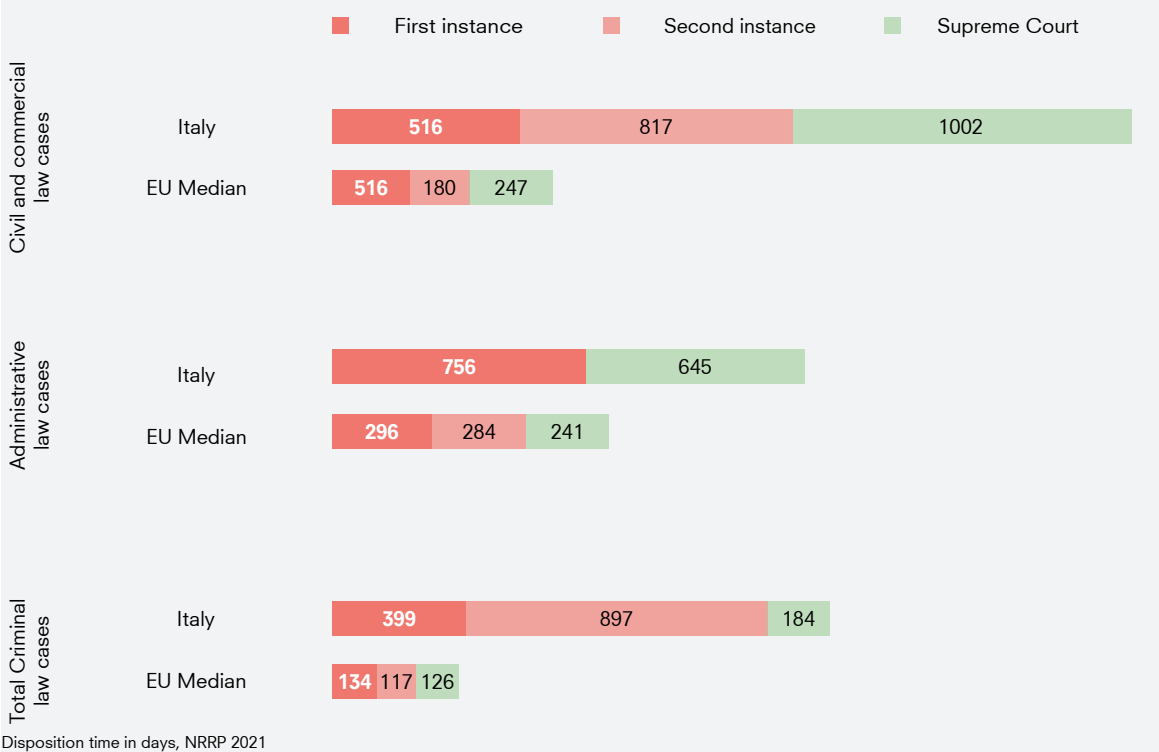
By focusing on these elements, the research will assess the implications of courthouse design on the Italian judicial system's efficiency and effectiveness. The findings will aim to inform future architectural projects, ensuring they align with the goals of the NRRP and contribute to a more accessible and responsive legal environment. Ultimately, this research will highlight the critical intersection between judicial processes and the built environment, offering insights that can shape the future of courthouse design in Italy.

The Evolution of the Three-Year Plan

Digital Identity for all

Useful resources

Open data as a common good

Aware, informed citizens

Improving accessibility and inclusiveness

the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) 2021
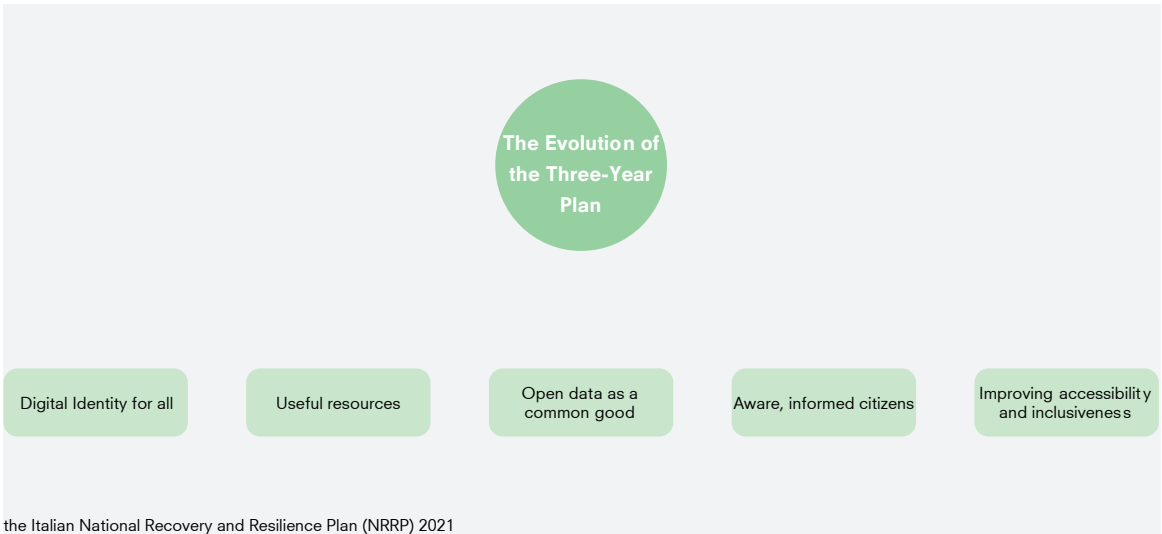
RELEVANCE

06

In the context of Italy's ongoing judicial crisis, marked by resource limitations and slow case processing, I seek to understand how these systemic issues influence the design and accessibility of courthouses. This study will focus on achieving a balance between robust security features and open, welcoming spaces that maintain a connection with the surrounding city. The goal is to prevent the courthouse from becoming isolated or intimidating, instead fostering an atmosphere of inclusivity and transparency.

My research will prioritize the integration of advanced security measures that are discreet yet effective, combined with efficient spatial organization to streamline workflows and improve accessibility. Ultimately, this study will lead to a design proposal for a modern courthouse that upholds security while promoting openness and accessibility—a courthouse that embodies dignity and a progressive approach to justice, meeting the needs of both the judicial system and the communities it serves.
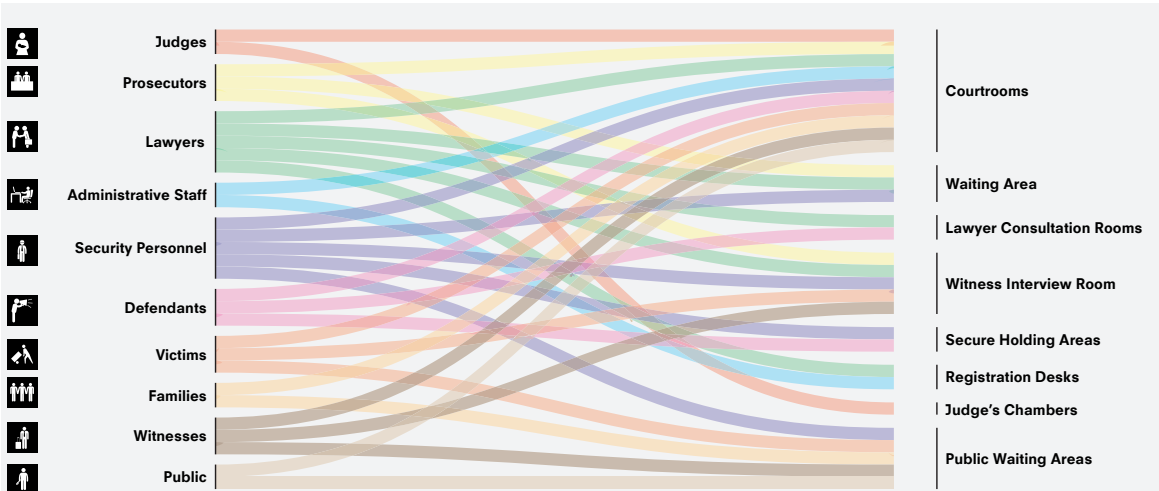
Initial Flow Analysis of Courthouse Users

In seeking Finding Architectural Responses to Symbolic and Practical Tensions, I will focus on creating a courthouse that is dynamic— not merely through its physical structure, but by developing an experiential space that engages the public on visual, physical, and psychological levels, all while maintaining a sense of security and authority. In doing so, the architecture of the courthouse must reflect the fluid and nuanced nature of the Department of Justice, offering a space that feels accessible while upholding the institution's dignity and gravitas.

This exploration will include the assertion of a "toned-down" monumentality, the embodiment of justice as care, and the pursuit of exemplarity. Modern courtrooms are no longer the dark, austere places described by Dickens, nor are they furnished in the lavish and majestic splendor of buildings such as the Palais de Justice. Instead, I would like to find out, that why the design of courthouses integrates open pathways, corridors, and glass facades that theoretically symbolize justice, borrowing architectural elements to represent strength and stability.

Moreover, the study has particular relevance in the context of Italy's judicial system reforms, which aim to reduce trial durations and increase public trust through modernization and digitalization. The research will provide insights into how architecture can support these reforms by improving public interaction, streamlining judicial processes, and enhancing both physical and symbolic accessibility in courtrooms.

Researching in the coming weeks will help guide the integration of these design responses within courthouse layouts, balancing accessibility with stringent security. This exploration will provide insights into creating a welcoming and safe public space, incorporating elements such as intuitive way-finding, secure perimeter setbacks, and trauma-informed areas. By refining these design choices, the aim is to ensure that courthouses remain approachable yet secure, reflecting the judiciary's commitment to both justice and community needs.

How can courthouses balance security and accessibility to foster public trust in the judicial system?

Design response Map

Separation of Parties

Way-Finding

Location and Proximity to Court

Materials

Transparency

Childcare

Wellness Inspired and Trauma Informed Spaces

Need for Space

Rhythm and Form

Reflects Values of Community and Judical System

Biophilic Design

Supervision Needs

Mediation Needs

Building Image

Workplace Effectiveness

Reduce Environmental Stress

Restorative Justice

Enhance Public Trust

Workplace Environment and Expectations

Team-Building and Cross-Training of Staff

Retain Staf

Transparency

"Hoteling" Workstations

Agile Staff and Workspace

Attract Millennials and Gen Z

Attract Staff

Security

Ample Security Queuing

Security Screening

Avoid Security Threats

Avoid Cyber Threats

Prepare for Emergencies and Natural Disasters

Smartphone Lockers or Sleeves

Interior Monitoring

Avoid Physical Threats

Redundant Systems

Conduct Strategic Planning

Security Control Center

Exterior Precautions and Monitoring

Off-Site Backup Servers and Record Storage

Protect People

Blast Mitigation

Perimeter Setback

Balance and Proportion

Decentralized (Satellite) Locations

Site Selection

Centralized Locations

Collegial Chamber

Maximize Efficiency Via Consolidation

Courtroom Schedule

Profile Customers and Identify Needs

Geographic Location

Realignment of Existing Facilities

Increase Access to Justice

Legal Portal Including Pro Se

Declining Caseloads

Accessibility

Online Dispute Resolution

Remote Access to Technology and Face-to-Face Assistance

Public Kiosks

E-Filing

Reduced Public Traffic

Face-to-Face Information Desk

Self-Help Capabilities Centers

Work Tables

Scanning Stations

Research Materials

Increased Electronic Documents

Reduce/Reallocate Building Square Footage

Adapt to Transporation Modes

Increased Multi-Modal Transportation Options

Reduced Parking

Reduced Record Storage

Reduced Public Windows

Reduce Negative Environment Impacts

Incorporate Sustainable Building Practices

Alternate Facilities

Cold, Warm or Hot Sites

Green Building Certification

Building Operations

Protect Equipment

Backup Power Generation

Exterior Environment

Building Site

Interior Environment

Locate Technology on Upper Floors

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