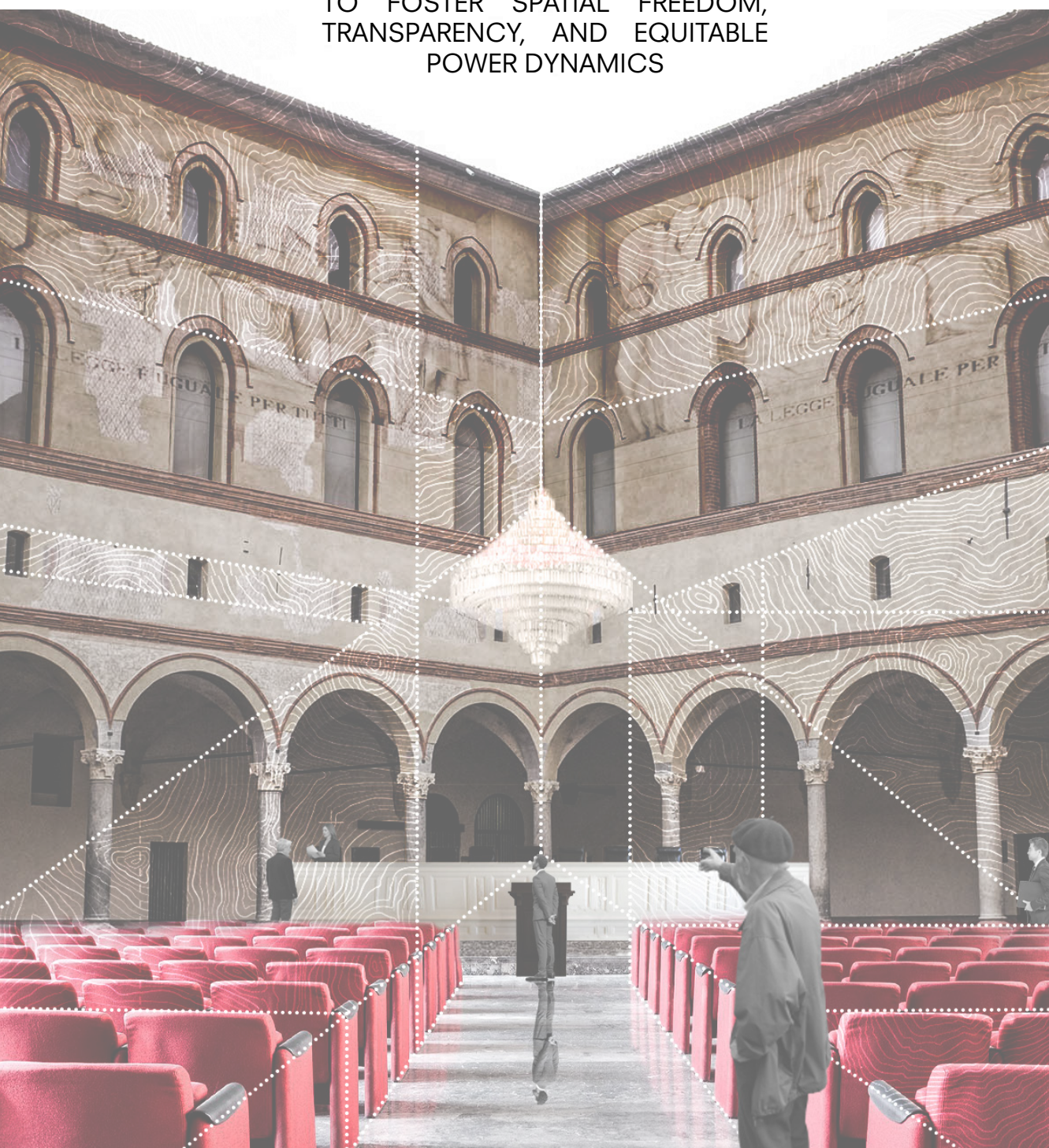


## RESEARCH PLAN

# TERRITORY ON TRIAL

REDESIGNING THE COURTHOUSE  
TO FOSTER SPATIAL FREEDOM,  
TRANSPARENCY, AND EQUITABLE  
POWER DYNAMICS



**2025**

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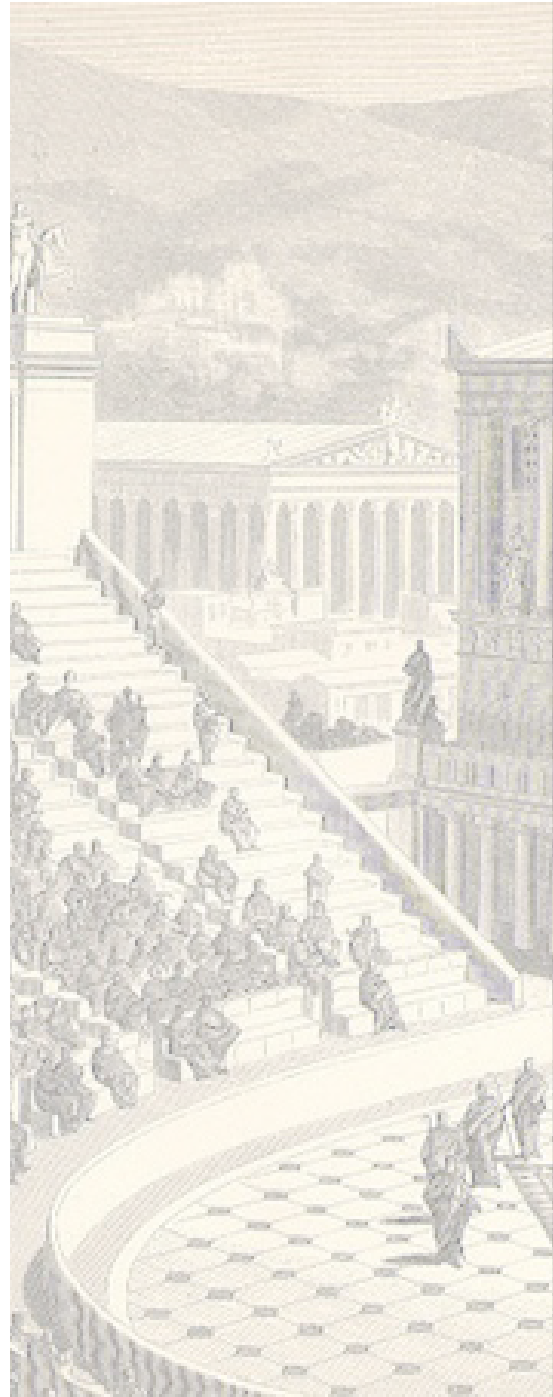
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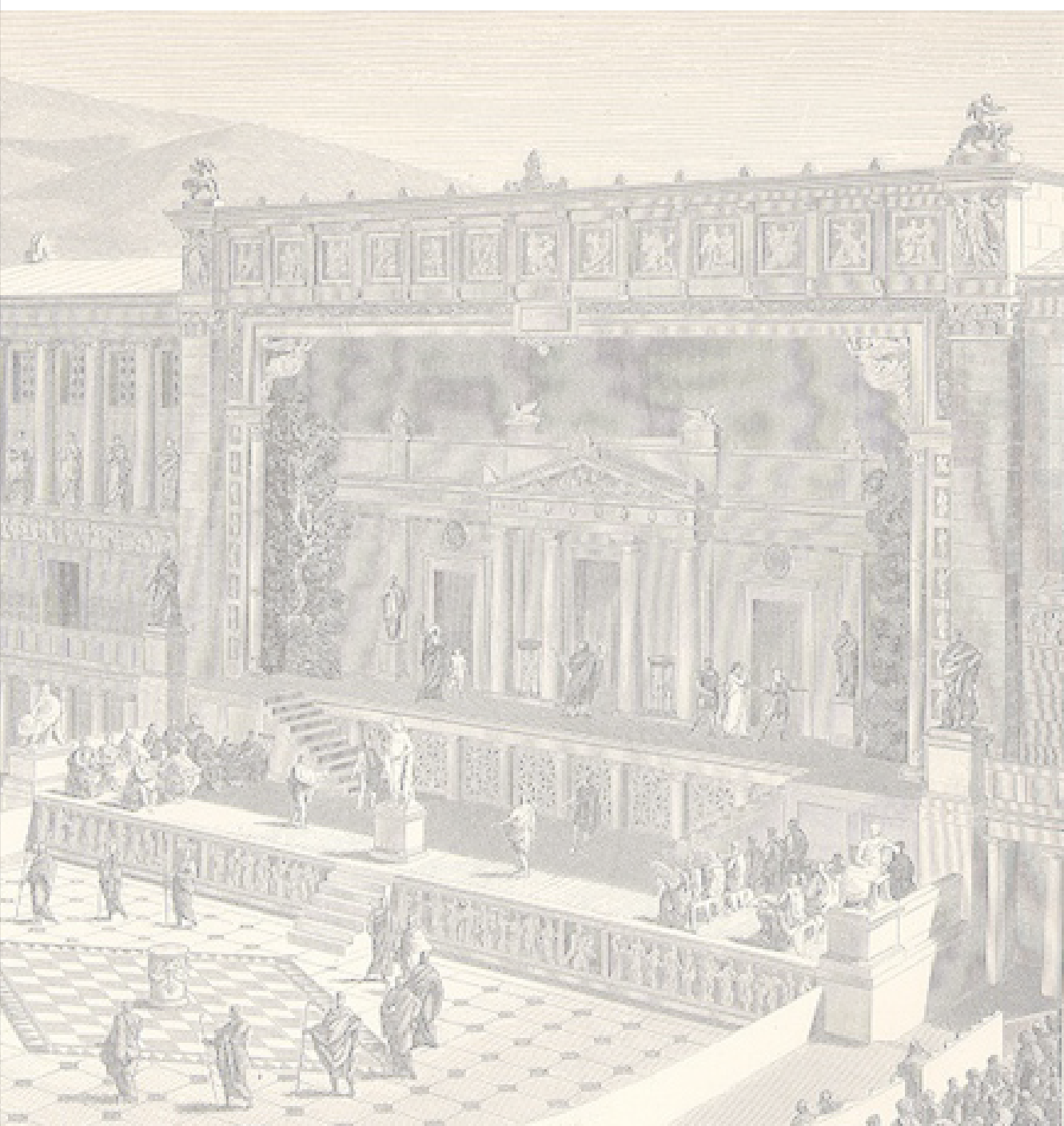
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This thesis explores the struggle for territorial control within the courthouse landscape, with a particular focus on the courtroom as a microcosm of these spatial dynamics. The courtroom, in its complexity and scale, serves as a concentrated reflection of the broader territorial tensions that exist throughout the courthouse building. Unlike other spaces, where specific actors are confined to particular roles or areas, the courtroom is unique in that all key players simultaneously present, each claiming and negotiating their spatial territory. Furthermore, the thesis will examine the inherent lack of freedom in these spatial arrangements, tying this to the broader question of what it means for a public building to be truly open, accessible, and democratic. As Mulcahy (2010) argues, “while it may be the case that much more dignity is accorded participants in the trial, over time we have not yet reached a state in which the courthouse can be described as genuinely open.” This statement highlights the ongoing tension between the ideals of public accessibility and the realities of courthouse design, which often prioritizes security and authority over openness. Drawing on various case studies and legal precedents, this research aims to explore how spatial design within courthouses, particularly the courtroom, can either reinforce or challenge these territorial struggles. By doing so, it aims to offer a new perspective on how public buildings can evolve to become truly open and accessible, and how architectural design can influence critical aspects of justice and civic engagement. In addressing the territorial complexities of the courthouse, this research aims to not only consider the architectural typology of the courthouse itself but also explore how spatial design can impact the broader social and civic functions of public buildings, influencing how we experience justice in our daily lives.



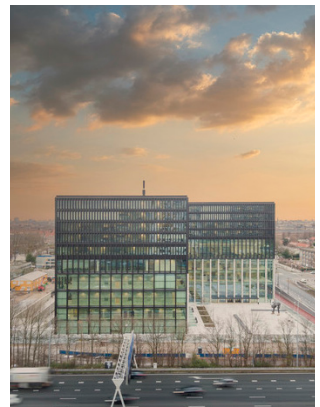
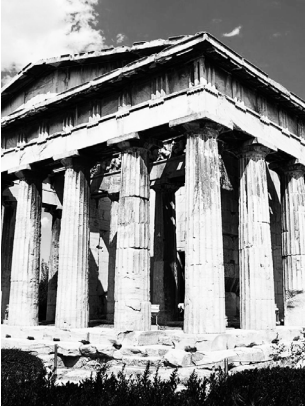




# PROBLEM STATEMENT

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Historically, courthouses were not just places of legal proceedings, but open spaces that fostered civic engagement and dialogue. In ancient times, justice was often dispensed in public, with early courts held outdoors under trees or in open air assemblies. For instance, the Athenians and medieval European societies practiced law in public spaces where trees, symbolizing wisdom and stability, stood as natural sentinels to the law. These open-air courts embodied impartiality and a direct connection to the natural world, ensuring that justice was not hidden behind walls but accessible to all. The lack of physical and social barriers in these spaces also reflected a more communal, egalitarian approach to justice, where transparency allowed the public to actively observe, engage, and hold the system accountable. However, as the legal profession became more specialized, so too did the spaces in which it operated, with courts gradually moving indoors and taking on increasingly imposing forms. Hierarchical spaces such as court houses significantly impact behaviour, social interactions, and perceptions of power. The design and layout of a space such as the positioning of individuals, the size of their surroundings, and their proximity to authority reinforce social and power structures. For instance, in a courtroom, the judge's elevated position signals authority, while defendants are placed lower, emphasizing their subordinate role. As the role of the courthouse expands, there is a pressing need to rethink how these environments can accommodate the principles of equity and justice while addressing the territorial dynamics at play. This thesis will explore how architectural and spatial design can effectively address dynamics of authority and hierarchical relations within courthouses, fostering a more equitable distribution of influence among all participants and uphold the foundational ideals of justice and equality for every actor involved.



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HOW CAN COURTHOUSE DESIGN  
ADDRESS TERRITORIAL DYNAMICS AND  
HIERARCHICAL RELATIONS AMONG KEY  
ACTORS?

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● THE JUDGE




● THE JURY



● THE LAWYER




● THE PLAINTIFF




● THE DEFENDANT



● THE PUBLIC



● THE PRESS



# RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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The following theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for exploring how courthouse design influences power dynamics, interactions, and the experiences of individuals within legal settings. Each framework focuses on key elements, spatial arrangements, institutional structures, social justice, and human behaviour that together shape the architecture of a court house.



**Spatial Theory** suggests that physical spaces are not neutral but infused with social meaning, shaping interactions and reinforcing or challenging hierarchical relationships. In courthouses, the design of spaces can influence participants' sense of agency, authority, and equality.

- **Proxemics:** This concept examines how spatial arrangements impact the dynamics of personal relationships and interactions within the courtroom, determining how people navigate and engage with each other.
- **Place-making:** Focuses on how thoughtfully designed environments can foster community involvement, inclusivity, and a sense of shared responsibility, promoting democratic ideals in legal proceedings.

**Institutional Theory** highlights how organisational structures influence behaviour and relationships between different actors. In the context of courthouses, this theory examines how architectural choices either reinforce or challenge established power structures and norms.

- **Institutional Critique:** Courthouse designs such as the elevated judge's bench signal authority and power. By redesigning spaces to reduce hierarchical physical distance, courthouses can create a more egalitarian and participatory legal process.
- **Adaptive Reuse:** Repurposing older courthouses to align with modern democratic values challenges outdated designs that reflect historical power imbalances, making legal spaces more relevant and inclusive.





**Environmental Psychology** explores how the physical environment influences human emotions, behaviours, and perceptions. In the context of the courthouse, it examines how spatial design impacts stress levels, perceptions of fairness, and overall participant experiences.

- **Reduced Psychological Distance:** Adjusting spatial configurations can help reduce intimidation and increase feelings of empowerment among participants. By fostering a more open, balanced atmosphere, this approach can lead to a more transparent and equitable legal process.
- **Increased Trust and Inclusivity:** Well designed, accessible spaces help break down territorial boundaries and make participants feel more connected to the legal process. This inclusivity reinforces the idea that the justice system is a space where all voices matter, especially those of marginalized groups.

**Social Justice Framework** focuses on fairness, equity, and inclusion within public spaces, particularly how courthouse design can reflect democratic values and ensure that all participants feel respected and empowered.

- **Access and Inclusion:** Evaluates how universal design principles can remove barriers to accessibility, ensuring that the courthouse is welcoming and navigable for all individuals, regardless of their role within the legal process.
- **Empowerment:** Explores how the spatial arrangement can enhance the sense of agency and participation for marginalised groups within the courtroom, ensuring that voices are heard and valued.



**Territorial Dynamics** focuses on how individuals or groups claim and control space, which in turn affects their interactions and sense of authority. Courthouse design plays a key role in either reinforcing or challenging these territorial dynamics.

- **Territorialisation:** The spatial allocation of judges, defendants, and the public often reflects and reinforces power imbalances. Redesigning these spaces to be more fluid and integrated can reduce territorial claims and encourage more equal participation.

**Hierarchical Relations** addresses the established power structures within a courthouse, such as the roles of judges, lawyers, and defendants, and how these spatial hierarchies influence interactions and various processes.

- **Hierarchical Relations:** Through re-organisation of courtrooms for example by lowering the judge's bench or altering seating arrangements physical hierarchies can be minimised, creating a more egalitarian environment that fosters mutual respect among all parties involved.



The theoretical framework aims to provide the starting point for exploring how courthouse design can address territorial dynamics and hierarchical relations and how architectural choices can:

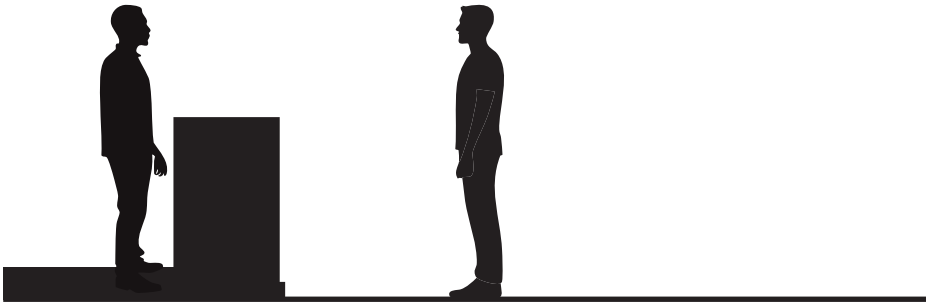
- **Define** how the architecture of courthouses shapes interactions, power dynamics, and participants' sense of agency.
- **Establish** a coherent structure for understanding how spatial configurations can either reinforce or challenge institutional hierarchies.
- **Provide** sub-questions (see the examples below) to guide research, with the aim to contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable courthouse designs that reflect democratic ideals and promote fair legal proceedings.

## SUB-QUESTIONS

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- **How** has the law been conceived and how is it being conceived in current times? How have courthouses been recognized throughout the times and across cultures?
- **What** actors, objects, processes & requirements (and their portrayal) make up the current hierarchical courthouse landscape?
- **How** do these characteristics enforce or break-down hierarchical aspects within courthouses?
- **How** open can we design courthouses to still maintain authority while instilling more equal dignity on all participants involved?
- **To what** extent do spatial changes and modifications undermine the right to the presumption of innocence?
- **What** part can architecture play in undermining the alienating tendencies of the modern trial?
- **Is** it necessary for the judge to sit on an elevated podium?
- **How** does this spatial arrangement influence perceptions of authority and equality in the courtroom?



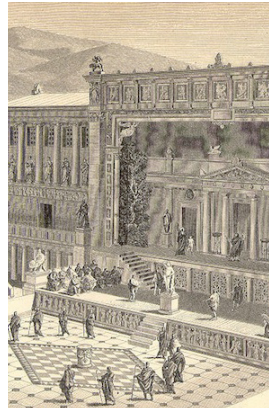
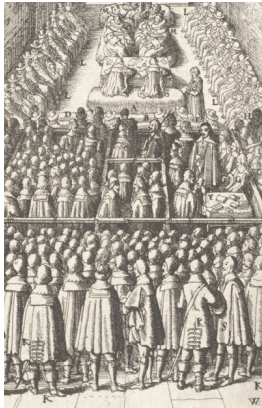
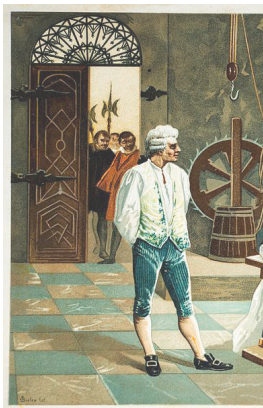


By the 20th century, modernist movements and postcolonial independence reshaped courthouse architecture once again, favouring functionality over grandeur. Today, contemporary designs have increasingly shifted toward closed and segregated environments as a result of a combination of factors such as security, authority and efficiency as well as evolving legal processes, this change often obscures the principle of justice as a transparent and communal process. The elevation of the judge's bench as previously mentioned, symbolizes authority and order while physical barriers between participants reinforce these roles. This shift towards more isolated and controlled elements and spaces has, in many ways undermined the ideals of accessibility and public engagement, making the courthouse a more intimidating and less democratic environment. Similar spatial and behavioural aspects can be found in other institutional settings like churches, offices, and schools. In each of these environments, the physical design reinforces power dynamics, social roles, and emotional responses from the individuals within them. In workplaces, executives in large corner offices are visually distinguished from employees in smaller or open-plan spaces. In churches, the elevated altar and pulpit position clergy act as authority figures, creating a physical distance between them and the congregation. In schools, the layout of classrooms with teachers at the front and students facing them positions the teacher as the central authority figure, while students are placed in passive, subordinate roles. These spatial cues influence how people interact, with subordinates often feeling marginalized or voiceless, while authority figures may feel more empowered. Overall, hierarchical spaces shape not only how individuals perceive their own status but also how they engage with others, either fostering formality and distance or

encouraging collaboration and equality. Hierarchical spaces, such as those found in courtrooms, profoundly influence behaviour, emotions, and perceptions of justice. The design and layout of these spaces are not just functional—they play a role in legitimizing legal proceedings and shaping the experiences of those within them. While grand courthouses can instil a sense of dignity and formality for some, for others, particularly defendants, they may amplify feelings of vulnerability or humiliation. The physical separation between participants, such as the isolation of defendants from their legal counsel or the public, can hinder communication and exacerbate feelings of disempowerment. Furthermore, the public's role in trials, though intended to promote transparency, is often curtailed by spatial practices that control access and movement within the courtroom. These designs reflect a distrust of the public and, at times, undermine the principle of open justice. In extreme cases, such as when defendants are placed behind screens or elevated in the dock, the courtroom layout can further strip away the presumption of innocence, reinforcing their status as outsiders or criminals. Overall, hierarchical space in the courtroom not only shapes the formal process of justice but deeply impacts the emotional and psychological experiences of those involved, highlighting the tension between dignity, authority, and control.

Thereby the following argument is made and will be further assessed through the below mentioned research methods:

**Courthouse design plays a key role in shaping the relationships and roles of those involved in the legal process. The organization of space influences how individuals experience the trial and can impact the perceived fairness of the judicial system.**



## PROGRAMME

**Literature Review:** Reviewing existing literature on courthouse design, territorial dynamics, and hierarchical relations. Provide a foundation of knowledge on the evolution of courthouse design, territorial dynamics in public spaces, and the relationship between architecture, justice, and public engagement.

**Case Study Analysis:** Analysing existing courthouses, legal cases and legal systems and the resulting spatial implications.

**Spatial Analysis:** Examining of existing courthouse layout to understand how space is allocated to different actors. Identifying areas designated for public access versus restricted areas, and how this affects perceptions of power and hierarchy.

**Power Mapping:** Creating interactive maps that show the flow of people, the designation of spaces, and the physical barriers within the courthouse. Thereby subtle forms of power, such as who gets access to what spaces, and how this aligns with social hierarchies, dignity, and agency within the judicial system can be explored.

**Comparative Analysis:** Comparing of findings across different case studies to identify common themes and variations.

## CLIENT

**Stakeholder Interviews:** Conducting interviews with judges, lawyers, jury, and members of the public to understand how spatial design influences their behaviour, comfort, and participation in legal proceedings. Questions will include how the design of the courtroom affects their sense of dignity, accessibility, and engagement with the legal process.

**Actor Analysis:** Analysing the various actors act in a courthouse setting, how these interact and the relational dynamics involved and the various spatial implications.

**Behavioural Observations:** Observing how different actors navigate the courthouse and interact in various spaces.



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## SITE

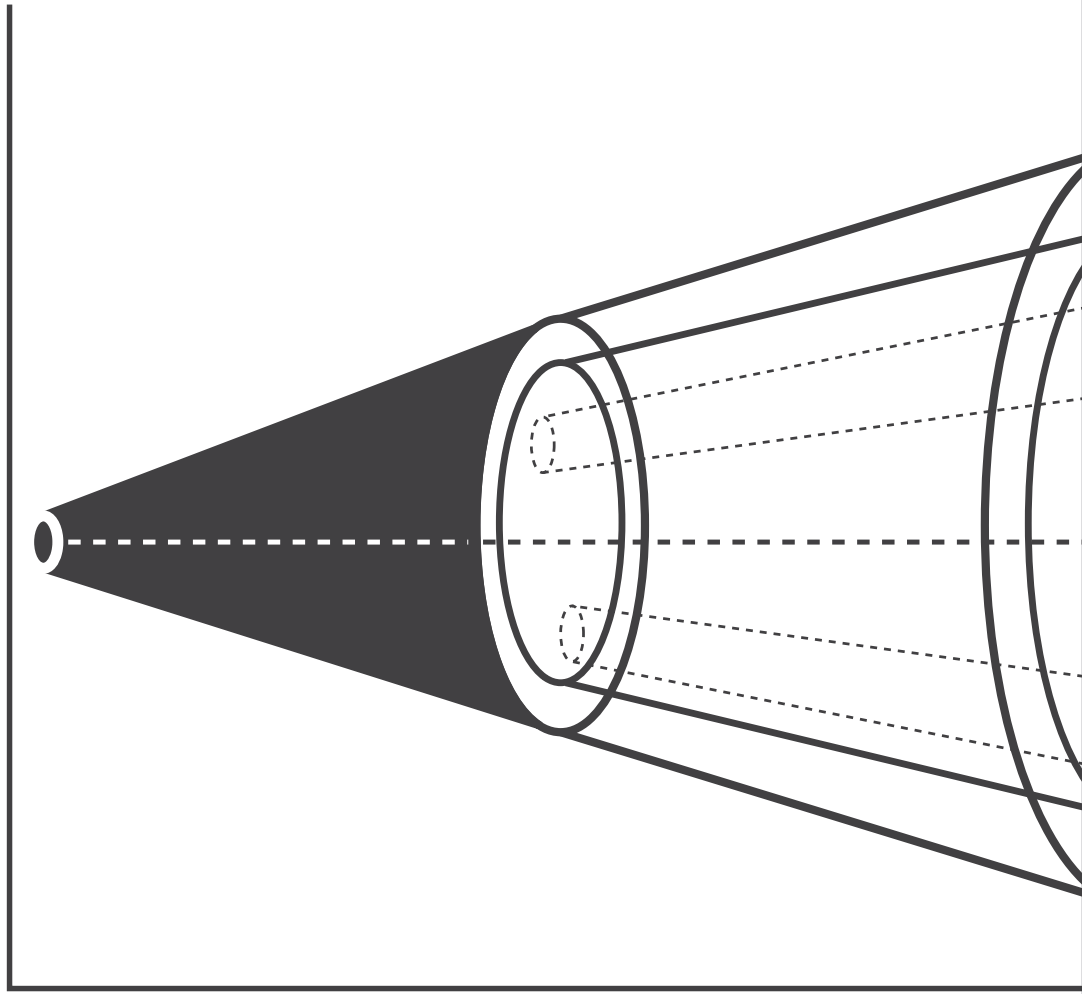
**Site Analysis:** Conducting an in-depth analysis of selected courthouse sites through site visits and observations. Taking detailed notes on space usage, circulation patterns, and the territorial separation between different actors within the building. Furthermore sensory experiences of sound, light, texture and temperature creating sensory maps that highlight how these sensory aspects contribute to perceptions of power, hierarchy, and comfort within the courthouse.

**Mapping Relationships:** Creating spatial maps to illustrate the relationships within the courthouse. Analysing how the design facilitates or hinders access for different actors through user centric spatial mapping, visual connectivity analysis, comfort assessment etc.

**Contextual Analysis:** Analysing how the design interacts with existing territorial boundaries and whether it reinforces or disrupts hierarchical relations among different actor groups.

# CONCLUSION

This research seeks to challenge traditional courthouse design by developing an Assessment Tool and Spatial Toolbox to evaluate existing courthouses and inform the creation of future spaces that promote more balanced and equitable interactions among all users. The goal is to disrupt the outdated notion of the courthouse as a “frozen site of nostalgia,” where design choices are limited to maintaining the status quo rather than embracing fundamental change (Graham, 2003). By questioning the conventions of courthouse architecture, this research aspires to create spaces that are not only functional, but also fair, inclusive, and reflective of modern democratic ideals. The findings will be applied to a prototype architectural design, serving as a testbed to implement and refine the tools and strategies developed throughout the study. Ultimately, aiming to address the complex issue through spatial considerations such as the judge’s placement on a podium, the defendant’s position in the dock, and the public’s ability to actively engage in the trial.

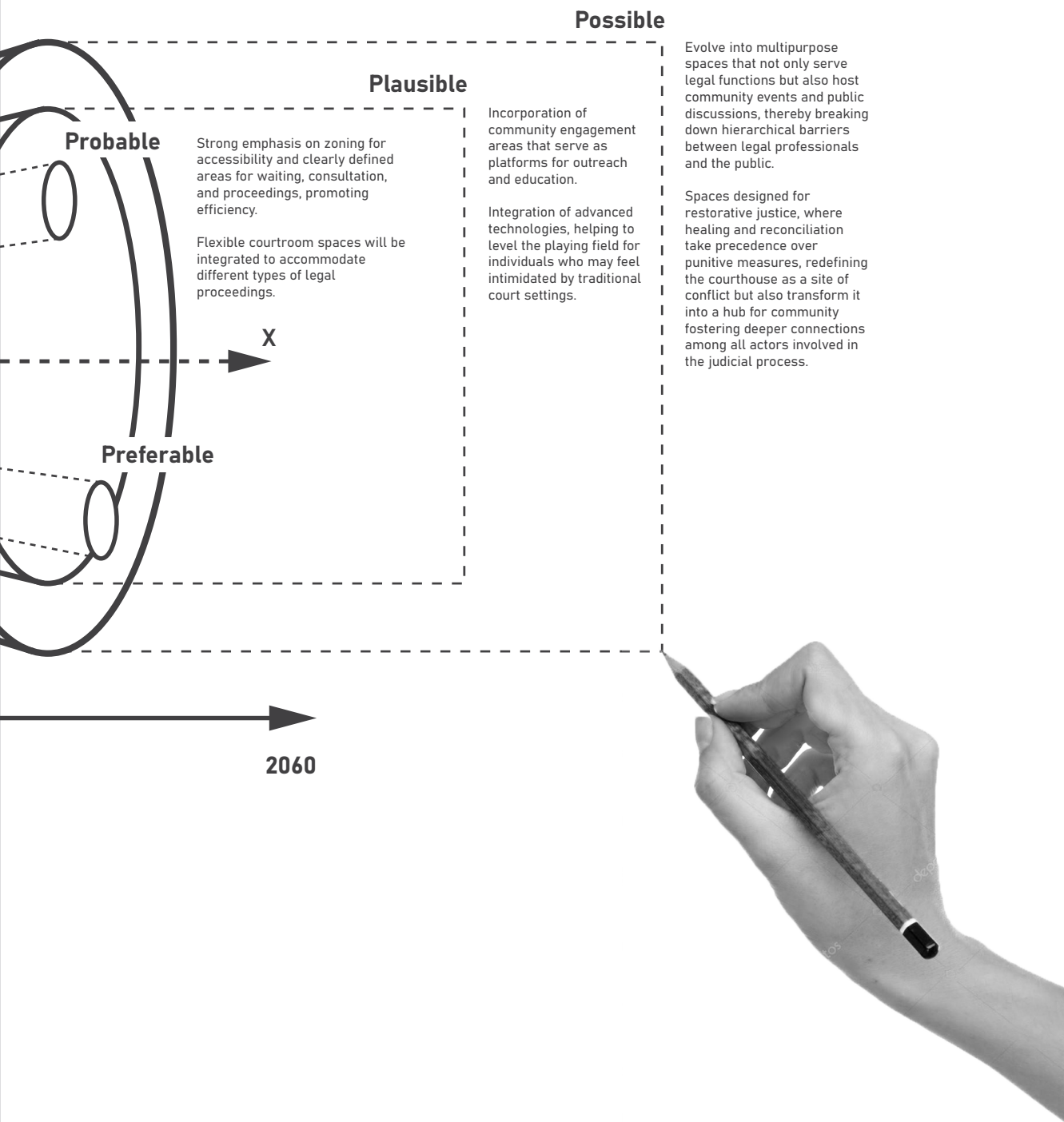


### TODAY

The Bodies and Buildings Complex Studio 2024/2025 will explore the relationship between architecture and its occupants, focusing on how the design of spaces influences behavior and interactions. The research will examine how elements like layout, materials, and lighting can either promote or obstruct a sense of authority, dignity, and accessibility. Social and spatial hierarchies play a significant role in shaping interactions within institutions. In spaces such as courthouses and classrooms, design often reinforces power dynamics—such as judges being elevated above defendants or

teachers positioned at the front. By studying environments like these, the research aims to create spaces that are not only functional but also inclusive and responsive to the needs of the community, contributing to a more equitable and just society.

As society increasingly values equality and inclusivity, architecture must challenge these traditional hierarchies. By prioritizing accessibility, fairness, and the equitable distribution of power, architects can design spaces where all individuals feel valued and empowered.



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