

Thresholds of Power: Reconfiguring Justice Through Architectural Transparency

1. Introduction – Project Topic and Relation to the Track

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My graduation project, *Thresholds of Power*, examines the contemporary perception of justice and how it is shaped by the architectural environments in which justice is performed. The Palazzo di Giustizia in Milan serves as the primary case study; not only because of its monumental Fascist-era legacy, but because its architectural language continues to frame how institutional authority is understood today. As one of the largest buildings in Milan at the time of its construction, it remains a physical manifestation of centralized power, opacity, and symbolic control. This legacy still influences how citizens and users relate to the judicial system.

The project also asks a broader disciplinary question: what is changing in the courthouse as a building type, and what new challenges must architects and designers address? Judicial institutions today face digitalization, AI-supported procedures, data transparency, environmental responsibility, and increasing public scrutiny. Courthouses are no longer isolated monuments of authority; they are expected to function as secure, technologically advanced, and civically accessible infrastructures. Designers must therefore negotiate openness and protection, permanence and adaptability, symbolic gravity and democratic inclusivity.

The project aligns closely with the Architecture Master and the Complex Buildings studio, where flows, civiness, and institutional performance are central themes. Few building types accommodate such a diverse and segregated range of users such as judges, defendants, victims, lawyers, staff, police, journalists, and the public. This complexity makes the courthouse a critical site for rethinking how architecture mediates between security, procedure, and civic engagement.

From the outset, I sought to examine how thresholds - physical, symbolic, and procedural - structure power relations within judicial environments. Through historical research, field observation, and analysis of artworks, inscriptions, and media representations, I investigated how architecture and ritual together produce institutional subjectivities. Simultaneously, I explored decentralized and more transparent models of justice that respond to Milan's judicial inefficiencies and contemporary demands for accessibility, data literacy, and civic participation.

My methodology combined theoretical inquiry with spatial experimentation. Desk research established the sociopolitical and historical framework, while user-flow mapping and iterative design testing translated abstract concepts into architectural strategies. The project ultimately bridges history and innovation, theory and practice, and monumentality with civic openness.

2. Reflection on Process and Methods

The process began with gathering evidence: historical documents, political commentaries, publications about Milan's judicial shortcomings, and a rich archive of artworks and inscriptions inside the Palazzo. These materials helped me understand how justice - its authority, rituals, and moral weight - has been visually and spatially represented. From them, I constructed an understanding of the thresholds that shape user experience: entrances, waiting areas, checkpoints, the monumental atrium, and the long corridors that separate and hierarchize the flows of people.

Although this theoretical base was strong, I quickly faced a challenge. Much of the judicial system operates behind layers of confidentiality and strict procedural control. As a result, I could not rely solely on theoretical speculation; I needed a method that acknowledged the realities of security, surveillance, and operational constraints. This led me to adopt a more comparative approach, studying other contemporary democratic courthouses to understand how they negotiate transparency and safety.

At the same time, the existing building imposed significant spatial limitations. Its scale, structural rigidity, and highly compartmentalized program required me to repeatedly test and adapt my ideas. I engaged in many rounds of trial and error, adjusting circulation routes and spatial hierarchies to find solutions that could realistically function within a courthouse's strict framework.

This iterative process - moving between research, observation, design testing, and critical reflection - became essential. It helped me discover that the problem is not simply a lack of courtrooms, but a lack of functioning, human-centered judicial environments. This shifted my focus from pure spatial efficiency to a deeper question: How can a courthouse embody democratic values through its architecture while still performing its institutional duties without compromise?

3. Reflection on Feedback and Learning

Throughout the project, I received substantial feedback from mentors and peers. Much of it revolved around the challenge of translating the theoretical framework - Foucault, assemblage, subjectivity, thresholds of power; into a clear architectural proposal. Mentors encouraged me to refine not only the conceptual narrative but also the practical implications: Who benefits? Who is empowered? Who remains excluded?

One recurring difficulty was aligning my vision with the expectations of the studio. I was often thinking about justice in a broad sociopolitical sense, while my mentors were asking for a more focused engagement with immediate global issues in judicial architecture while keeping an eye on the local challenges of Milanese challenges. This created a productive tension. It forced me to articulate my ideas more clearly and to demonstrate how notions such as civicness, transparency, and decentralization could manifest materially and programmatically.

To address this, I repeatedly reworked the design - sometimes radically. I explored different configurations of public and secure areas, different distributions of courtrooms, and multiple interpretations of how thresholds could become sites of reflection rather than mere barriers. Each revision brought me closer to a shared language with my mentors, allowing the architectural form to resonate with both my theoretical intentions and practical requirements.

I also learned new methods of representation. Physical models, sectional narratives, and spatial maps proved especially effective in translating theoretical ideas into visual and material terms. These tools helped me understand the courthouse as a spatial system - one that could be reorganized to prioritize transparency, accessibility, and civic awareness.

Overall, the feedback process taught me the value of negotiation: between theory and space, between vision and feasibility, between institutional demands and public needs. It also showed me how architectural thinking can evolve when confronted with multiple forms of critique.

4. Influence Between Research and Design

The relationship between research and design was highly reciprocal. My research on power, symbolism, and public perception directly influenced how I positioned different programs and how I imagined the courthouse functioning as a civic institution. For instance, understanding the duality between civil and criminal courts helped me articulate two wings with distinct spatial identities, yet united under a common language of transparency and civic responsibility.

As I investigated thresholds more deeply, I began to reinterpret them not as leftover or secondary spaces but as primary carriers of meaning. Waiting areas, corridors, and the transitional spaces between security and courtrooms became moments where justice becomes legible. This shift fundamentally altered the design. These zones were transformed into places where users can access information, engage with artistic interpretations of justice, and encounter public media reporting—thus making the judicial process part of a shared civic experience.

The ground floor and the roof became crucial in this translation. The ground floor operates as a civic plane: open, permeable, and filled with public-facing functions such as art exhibitions, data centers, press rooms, restaurant and educational spaces. These programs communicate justice beyond the courtrooms, turning the courthouse into a living archive of its own processes. Meanwhile, the roof connects the two wings across the monumental scale of the building, offering public terraces and gardens and art platforms while preserving the main north-south axis that aligns with Milan's urban fabric.

Conversely, design choices repeatedly informed research directions. Questions about circulation efficiency pushed me to learn more about judicial pacing, security requirements, and user behavior. Early design sketches raised new inquiries about how transparency can function without compromising privacy or safety. This ongoing dialogue between design and research allowed the project to evolve with conceptual clarity and technical precision.

5. Assessment of Value – Academic, Societal, Ethical, and Transferability

Reflecting on the process, my approach combined systematic research with iterative design exploration. The project developed through continuous testing between theory and spatial strategy. If refined further, an earlier integration of conceptual and architectural decisions would have allowed more time for detailed spatial development.

Academically, the thesis contributes to the discourse on judicial architecture by engaging posthumanist and Foucauldian theories of subjectivity, power, and institutional space. It reframes transparency not as a purely visual attribute, but as a multi-layered civic condition embedded in thresholds, circulation, program, and material expression. Rather than focusing solely on the binary outcome of justice - guilty or not guilty - the project investigates the transitional core of judicial processes. By reinterpreting the monumental legacy of the existing Fascist-era structure, it transforms a symbol of centralized authority into a framework for civic accessibility and critical engagement.

The proposal establishes a civic environment where transparency operates across different layers: visual access, public involvement, research, and publication. Through integrated data centers, archives, media platforms, and a public legal library, citizens are enabled not only to observe justice, but to study, question, and understand it. The thresholds between public and institutional zones become spaces where the complexity of judicial processes is revealed. In these in-between layers, justice is presented as a continuum rather than a black-and-white verdict, encouraging deeper reflection on procedure, evidence, and accountability.

Societally and ethically, the project responds to public distrust, unequal access to legal knowledge, and institutional opacity. By embedding art, education, press functions, and research facilities within the courthouse, it repositions the building as a democratic forum instead of an isolated fortress. At the same time, it critically acknowledges that transparency is not inherently neutral; it can empower, expose, or bias. Addressing this tension through spatial gradation and layered access is central to the project's ethical stance.

In terms of transferability, the modular and decentralized strategy offers a framework applicable beyond the Milanese context. It demonstrates how monumental institutional buildings can be reconfigured into adaptable civic infrastructures; capable of responding to technological change, political instability, and evolving societal expectations while maintaining architectural integrity.

6. Looking Ahead

In the final phase, the project will be consolidated as an adaptable civic infrastructure rather than a fixed object. Only half of the site is built upon, while the remaining half is preserved as a public piazza; an open civic ground that allows gatherings, debate, and future expansion. This

deliberate spatial restraint leaves room for unpredictability, acknowledging that justice and its institutions must evolve over time.

The constructed volume is conceived as a modular, disassemblable system that can be reconfigured, expanded, reduced, or even mirrored in the future according to emerging needs. Instead of a static monument, the courthouse becomes a reversible framework capable of responding to technological shifts, legal reforms, and changing societal expectations.

Further development will clarify the integration of digital infrastructures and environmental systems, ensuring a balance between transparency and security. Renewable strategies, including BIPV-integrated structural elements and a GSHP system, will support energy self-sufficiency and institutional resilience.

Finally, I will strengthen the representational clarity of the proposal through detailed sections, refined models, and a cohesive narrative linking the civic ground plane, the public roof, and the continuous north–south axis that anchors the project within Milan’s monumental context. Drawing on research, feedback, and iterative testing, the final proposal aims to be technically rigorous, socially responsive, and architecturally expressive - a courthouse that frames justice not only as a legal process, but as an evolving civic experience.