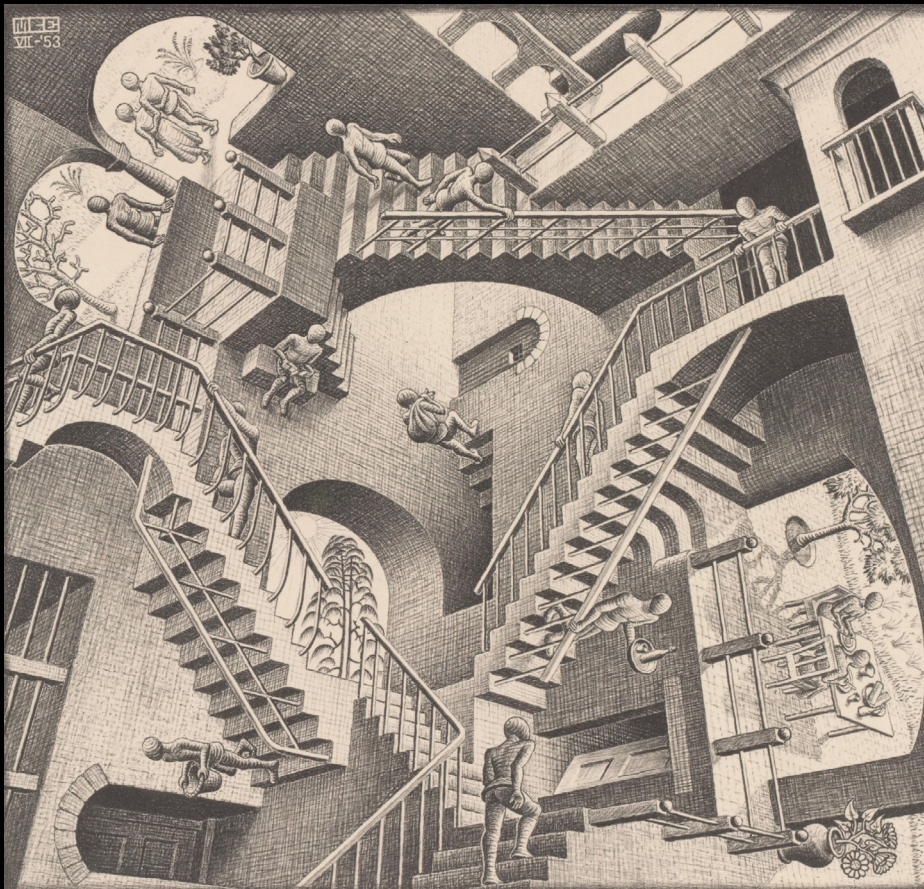


PORTA VOLTA **CULTURE HOUSE**



MILAN'S PUBLIC LIBRARY: THE PLACE WHERE STORIES MEET

2024

COMPLEX PROJECTS
Bodies and Building Milan
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Bodies and Building Milan
Porta Volta Culture House

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INTRODUCTION

01

Thesis topic

In recent decades, public libraries have found themselves in a difficult position. The library, known as a reference center for accessing knowledge through books and preserving cultural heritage, appears inadequate to maintain relevance in the contemporary digital age (Smith, 2019). Furthermore, libraries must continually meet the evolving needs of the communities they serve. Libraries are addressing this by integrating new technologies into the physical library, offering online information services, and expanding their offerings and their program (Foskett et al., 2024).

Despite these initiatives aimed at attracting larger audiences, civic engagement remains insufficient (Smith, 2019). Additionally, these recent advancements impose financial strain (Van Melik & Merry, 2021). Consequently, libraries must transform into social infrastructures that facilitate the convergence of diverse social spheres. Cigarini et al. (2021) envisions a communal meeting space that accommodates a wide range of interests and remains open to the entire community.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of new libraries that position themselves as cultural centers. A cultural center serves as a platform that significantly contributes to the economic and social advancement of the cultural sectors (Flego & Tei, 2024). As “cultural hubs,” they bring communities together and facilitate access to, sharing, creation, and appreciation of cultural resources and materials (Summers & Buchanan, 2018). By establishing many ultimate destinations, visitors are offered the opportunity to extend their stay beyond their initial intentions (deMunnik-deJong architects, 2019).

The Fondazione Feltrinelli library in Milan has expanded its role as a library and now identifies itself as a research center. It promotes research and discussion on contemporary pressing issues, disseminating findings to the public through various initiatives, publications, exhibitions, and performances. They aim to enhance visitor engagement and overall quality of life (Il Gruppo Feltrinelli, 2020).

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However, the ‘Porta Volta’ project includes not only the Research Center but also the National Museum of the Resistance and the Microsoft House Offices. All three organizations feature an emphasis on society in their programs and aim to engage a diverse array of target demographics. Consolidating the organizations and establishing connections among them can significantly enhance participation in the program by attracting a larger audience (Cigarini et al., 2021). Not only is cultural participation increased, but it significantly contributes to individual self-development by broadening knowledge across various domains and promoting overall health and well-being (McMenemy, 2009).

In addition to the library’s educational initiatives, the museum and the Microsoft House have also incorporated social interest into their programs. The museum exhibits historical material inherent to the period of liberation and the immediate post-war period. The debate about the history of Milan indirectly fosters an informed citizenry within the community, which is essential for national identity and the democratic republic (Museonazionale resistenza, 2024). Conversely, Microsoft emphasizes future-oriented initiatives, promoting public innovation and collaboration to enhance the benefits of digitalization for individuals and businesses. Enhancing the population’s understanding of emerging technologies positively impacts Milan’s future, thereby fostering economic and social advancement in Italy (Purassanta, 2018).

The three organizations are crucial for Milan’s identity and global standing. Consolidating all three of these entities into a single edifice enables them to provide more benefits to society. This building can be an example of how libraries can collaborate with other organizations.



Figure 1. British Library, the UK
Figure 2. Calgary Central Library, Canada

Problem statement

The three organizations will together form a culture house for the benefit of Milan and its community. Nonetheless, each institution operates autonomously and possesses its own programs. Unlike the Culture Center Rozet's Library in Arnhem, a public space that unites all institutions and welcomes visitors, the culture house boasts private areas that either charge for entry or are exclusive to invited guests. Integrating three distinct entities that operate independently yet will strengthen each other in the program aimed at fostering visitor engagement and expanding the audience requires a new approach.

The dual objectives of uniting these diverse organizations—enhancing visitor engagement and expanding audience reach—necessitate distinct measures that determine architectural decisions in the design. A society's social engagement takes place when debates emerge around various issues occurring within the building. Interaction within the community initiates a debate; transition areas between different spaces can stimulate these discussions (Peterson, 2023). Reaching a wider audience depends on the accessibility of a space and the curiosity that can arise in the visitors. The emotions experienced by a visitor stem from the physical transitions between the different spaces (Kenett et al., 2023). The topic of interest relates to the formation of these transitional zones and physical transitions within the culture house.

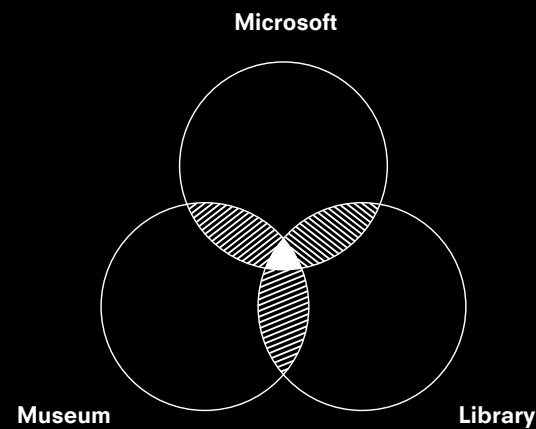
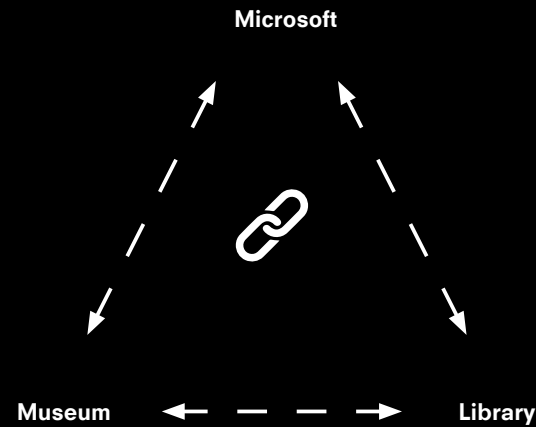


Figure 3. The three organizations within one building form a cultural center.
Figure 4. As 'culture hubs', different organisations bring communities together.

Research question

The primary objective of this research is to enhance the community engagement of the public library, the museum, and the Microsoft House through the design of a culture house. It is essential to examine the design of physical transitions and intermediate areas between different spaces. This brings us to the central question of this thesis: How can the transitions between spaces within a cultural center in Milan activate diverse communities?

The design brief that emerges from this research will delineate the crucial elements for the design of the cultural center. We will create the criteria based on the program, the client, and the location. We will segment the research question into several sub-questions across three categories: vision, relation, and community, to gain a deeper understanding.

The subquestions are formulated as follows: The overall **vision** of a cultural center will be analyzed. The organizations operate independently and have their own programs; however, they ultimately converge under a single entity. Furthermore, it is essential to consider, with all the current events in Milan and the potential inflow and outflow of organizations, what does the future of a cultural center entail?

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Secondly, the **relation** between the spaces will be examined by initially analyzing how the organizations relate to each other. The individual programs can also be divided into public, semi-public, and private, whereas the interaction of the programs among themselves and their connection to other organizations are crucial for the sociability of a space. In this regard, we may inquire how these relationships are formed, but especially what kind of transitions exist between linked spaces?

Finally, the cultural center includes multiple entities aiming to engage a wide audience. To gain a clearer understanding of how a diverse **community** is stimulated to participate and how this relates to the physical space, the following question must be addressed: what target groups do they aim to engage, and with which spaces are they associated?

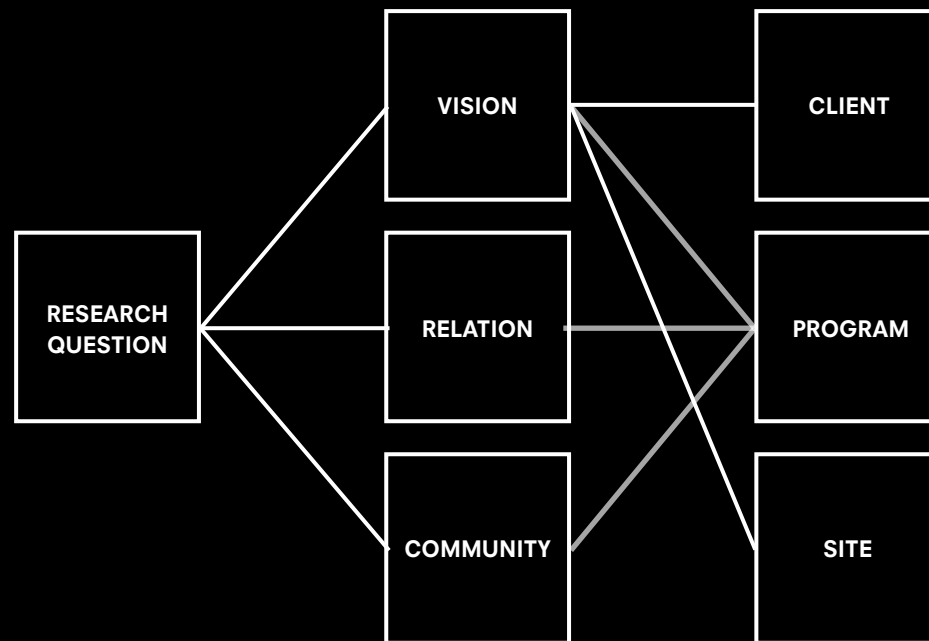


Figure 5. Research diagram

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

02

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework will contextualize the design research and offer an overview of the relevant existing literature for the study at hand. This literature relates to the subsequent subtopics: the vision of a cultural center, the substantive and architectural relationship between spaces and their functions, and the significance of the community.

Vision

The vision of a cultural center includes the development of the library into a cultural hub to meet the evolving needs of the public. Consequently, it is essential for the library to adopt a distinct role within the community, offering a gathering space rich in opportunities and services. Lesneski and Bray analyze the collaboration among several organizations within the Missoula Public Library, which is reestablishing itself as a cultural center. The Missoula Public Library, awarded the 2022 IFLA/Systematic Public Library of the Year, is addressing the growing demands of contemporary libraries by forging partnerships and enhancing services to support community prosperity in the 21st century (Lesneski and Bray, 2023).

Additionally, Palmer examines how the growing demand for spaces that facilitate work, study, knowledge sharing, social interaction, and learning impacts the physical environments of libraries. Palmer suggests the frequent use of the Four Spaces model in the design of these spaces. The theory outlines four intersecting domains: inspiration space, learning space, meeting space, and performative space (Palmer, 2021). It is crucial for the space to possess sufficient flexibility to adapt to the inevitable changes that will take place (Gisolfi, 2015). Moreover, Milan hosts numerous spontaneous and uncoordinated events that emerge throughout Fashion and Design Weeks, among others. Conducting such activities in the library can foster unforeseen relationships and enhance its position within the city (Leveratto & Gotti, 2022). These sources offer guidance on a sustainable concept of the cultural center.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Relation

The second sub-question concerns the interaction of the program. The study of Askarizad and Safari on the function of semi-open spaces in public libraries demonstrates that areas partially enclosed by partitions within an open setting enhance sociability. Askarizad and Safari (2019) applied the Space Syntax methodology, which predicts human behavior and the social dimensions of architectural environments, in the case studies of Sunrise Mountain and Desert Broom Libraries. This methodology is advantageous for assessing the openness among different spaces, and the case studies may provide several insights into its implementation.

Community

The concluding segment of the research emphasizes enhancing the engagement of a diverse community and its relationship with physical settings. Hapel views the library as a communal structure that strives to strike a balance between open areas and programmed spaces, with the open areas fulfilling multiple functions and providing opportunities for visitors to contribute. Ultimately, in a contemporary library, it is essential to emphasize the structure as a foundation for various degrees of human engagement. The previously mentioned Four Space Model also plays a role in this, as the four spaces—inspiration, learning, meeting, and performance—possess distinct objectives and establish a basis for user self-development and innovation. The model encompasses both physical and virtual spaces, providing a foundation for conversations (Hapel, 2020). This model can assist in delineating the various transition zones and their possible use.



Figure 6. The Missoula Public Library
Figure 7. The Desert Broom Library

Relevance

Research into the relationships between different organizations and the transitions between their spaces, which should culminate in a successful cultural center, holds significant importance for both the district and the city. As part of the district's urban renewal, the culture house significantly contributes to the district's economic and social growth. Milan's regeneration project sets a new global benchmark for health and sustainability (COIMA, 2023).

Over the past two decades, a growing number of libraries have established themselves as cultural centers. These cultural centers encompass libraries that serve additional functions or integrate with other organizations within a single facility. This paper presents a study that could potentially serve as a model for future cultural centers.



Figure 8. Global impact of the research on cultural centers.

RESEARCH METHODS

03

A comprehensive methodology is established to create a design brief for the culture house in Milan, serving as the foundation for the next phase of the design process. This chapter delves into the various research methods required to define the program, including an explanation of the clients and the location.

Client

The research method used to define the client includes an analysis of the current institutions located in the 'Porta Volta' project. The identification of ambitions, aims, target demographics, and geographical context led to the determination that these existing clients are primarily appropriate for the culture house due to their social engagement, which fosters both individual development and the overall advancement of Milan.

However, a renewed vision of the program may facilitate the establishment of spaces for temporary clients. These spaces can accommodate a variety of activities, including showrooms, fashion or design week events, performances, and more. Research on past cultural events in the city will be conducted, including their various sites and associated clients, to gain a clearer understanding of these activities aligning with the culture house's mission.

Program

Various methods are used to define the building's program. First, the initial analysis focuses on the original program of the three building types: library, museum, and Microsoft House. The suggested initiatives of these groups will also be analyzed to gain a clearer understanding of the social interest of their programs. The integration of these programs provides an initial framework for the comprehensive program of the cultural center. The relation among these programs will be clarified by addressing the sub-question about vision: 'What does the future of a cultural center entail?'

This question will be answered by studying literature on redefining a library as a culture house and studying five relevant case studies, including public libraries that have been provided with additional functions and public libraries that operate with other organizations within a single facility. Additionally, the current programs and activities of the cultural centers in Milan will be analyzed to understand how this cultural center might add more value to the city but also differentiate itself within the city. Case studies and Milan's culture centers will offer valuable insights into adapting specific areas for diverse purposes and accommodating diverse groups.

Subsequently, the interactions among the organizations and their spaces will be examined, focusing on the sub-question: 'How are relations formed between spaces, and what types of transitions exist between interconnected spaces?'. A catalog will be established documenting the numerous physical transitions and transition areas identified through the analysis of case studies. The collection of databases and the relational schemes can offer valuable insights for design decisions.

Lastly, the enhancement will focus on the key spaces, particularly the public shared spaces. The sub-question of 'community' pertains to these spaces: 'What target groups do they aim to engage, and with which spaces are they associated?' The question will be addressed through the analysis of case studies, library visits, and literature studies on the use of public spaces, especially the library, and different target groups.

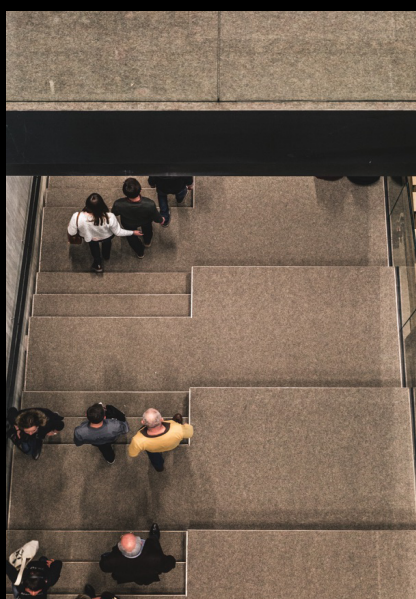
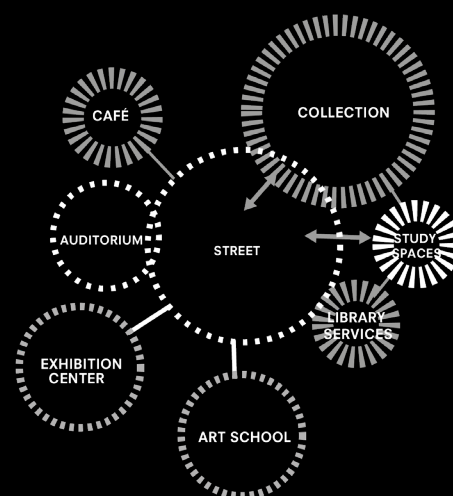
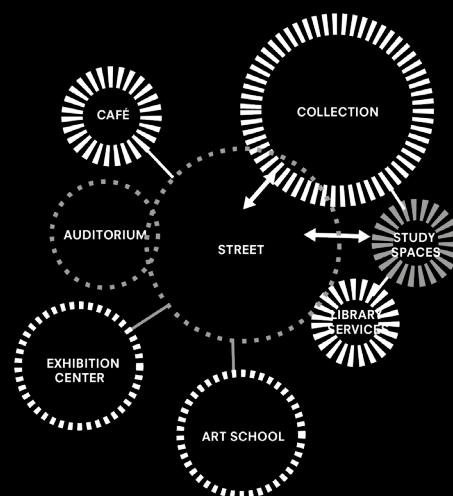


Figure 9. A example of physical transitions - Lilavati Lalbhai Library (2017)

Figure 10. A example of transition areas - The Krook (2017)



Site

To determine the site for the culture house, the following research methodologies will be applied: conducting analyses on the location itself through a site visit, a historical analysis, and studying the municipal ambitions. Given that the building already has a designated location in the city, the investigation will concentrate specifically on the plot itself.

The municipality of Milan has been actively developing the site's surrounding districts for several years, focusing on enhancing the area's greenery and fostering economic and social growth (Deerns, 2024). The design of the site will integrate the municipality's guidelines.

Furthermore, archaeological findings at the site, including remains of the Spanish walls, have been unearthed, which constitute cultural heritage and must be preserved in their existing condition. In order to gain a better understanding of the plot, research will be conducted through site visitation and historical analysis of the area.



Figure 11. Project Porta Nuova and the Biblioteca degli Alberi Milano
Figure 12. Remains of the Spaniss wall on site

CONCLUSION

04

A culture house in Milan provides a venue for envisioning the future while also contemplating the past and present. Diverse organizations that unite can enhance their contribution to society.

Client

The new design will incorporate the current Porta Volta project clients, and it will also include provisions for accommodating temporary clients during major city events.

Program

The program will be derived from the original programs of the existing organizations. This program will be updated to reflect Milan and the future. Furthermore, the transitions between the spaces are crucial in determining the interrelations of the program and the capacity of organizations to attract varied communities.

Site

The specified location is a component of the Porta Nuova initiative. The project's notions will be taken into account, and the archaeological finds will also be significant.

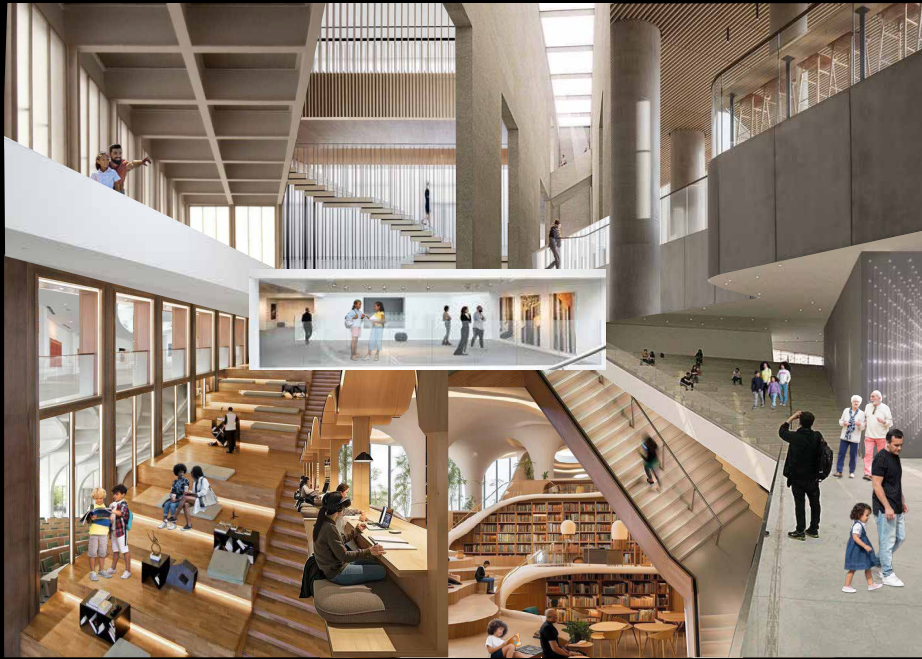


Figure 13. Inspiration collage of the Porta Volta Culture House

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