

Graduation Plan

Master of Science Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences

Graduation Plan: All tracks

Submit your Graduation Plan to the Board of Examiners (Examenscommissie-BK@tudelft.nl), Mentors and Delegate of the Board of Examiners one week before P2 at the latest.

The graduation plan consists of at least the following data/segments:

Personal information	
Name	Laura Simonsen
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Studio	
Name / Theme	Complex Projects Bodies & Buildings Studio
Main mentor	Hrvoje Šmidihen
Second mentor	Jan van de Voort
Third mentor	Martin Grech
Argumentation of choice of the studio	The Bodies and Buildings Complex Studio 2024/2025 explores the relationship between architecture and its occupants, focusing on how spatial design influences behaviour, interactions, and broader societal dynamics. The studio aims to offer a new perspective on how public buildings can evolve to be more open and accessible, while also examining how architecture can shape critical aspects of today's society.

Graduation project	
Title of the graduation project	Territory on Trial
Goal	
Location:	Milan, Italy

The posed problem, 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

	<p>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.</p>
<p>research questions and</p>	<p>"How can courthouse design address territorial dynamics and hierarchical relations among key actors?"</p>
<p>design assignment in which these result.</p>	

The 'Territory on Trial' Project seeks to challenge and redefine traditional courthouse design through the development of a new courthouse for the City of Milan, Italy. The existing Palazzo di Giustizia, which serves as the venue for both First Instance and Appeal courts, will be envisioned as a new structure, serving as a prototype for future courthouses, through testing and refining strategies that promote more equitable and balanced interactions among all users.

The proposed courthouse will encompass approximately 33,550 square meters (GIA) and will be divided into the following key areas:

- **Judicial:** 6,300 sqm
- **Administration:** 3,700 sqm
- **Support:** 1,600 sqm
- **Security:** 650 sqm
- **Staff & Employees:** 1,500 sqm
- **Alternative Dispute Resolution:** 1,500 sqm
- **Public (Internal):** 2,900 sqm
- **Public (External):** 3,600 sqm
- **General:** 11,800 sqm

The design will place special emphasis on the shared theme of health and well-being through enhancement of both internal and external public spaces.

The project will serve multiple clients and stakeholders, including the Ministry of Justice, and the Local Government of Milan / Lombardy Region. Additionally, the design will address the changing needs of seven key participants who shape the courthouse experience:

- The Judge
- The Jury
- The Lawyer
- The Defendant
- The Plaintiff

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Public • The Press <p>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. 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.</p>
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Process

Method description

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

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.

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.

Literature and general practical references

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.

Reflection

The research question "*How can courthouse architecture address territorial dynamics and hierarchical relations among key actors?*" explores the profound impact that architectural design can have on shaping power structures and social interactions within the courthouse.

Traditional courthouse layouts often reinforce hierarchical relationships by positioning judges in elevated spaces above defendants, while the public and press are relegated to more passive, distant roles. These spatial arrangements inherently suggest and enforce power dynamics, signalling authority and control, while potentially alienating those in less authoritative positions.

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.