

Graduation Project

JUST. MILANO.

Justice, Understanding, Solutions, Transparency

The Posed Problem

The traditional image of courthouses has often been one of monumental, imposing, closed-off structures to express power and authority. These buildings were mainly built to reflect the seriousness of the justice system and are typically characterized by closed-off façades and restricted access, separating the public from the inner workings of justice. This physical and symbolic separation between the public and the justice system has made it feel disconnected and unapproachable to the people it serves, leading to diminished public trust in the system.

Research Question

How can the design of a contemporary courthouse transform traditionally closed-off spaces into areas that mediate between different user groups and the city to rebuild trust and openness in the justice system?

What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

My graduation project aligns with the Complex Projects studio topic, which emphasizes designing architecture that addresses societal complexities and future challenges. The relation within my Architecture (A) track, my project pushes the boundaries of design by developing innovative solutions that integrate the spatial, functional, and symbolic aspects of architecture. The connection to the MSc Architecture, Urbanism, and Building Sciences (AUBS) is the emphasis on critical thinking and addressing global architectural challenges.

How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

My research began with an investigation into the Italian justice system and the challenges they face. Key issues such as a lack of public trust, the slowest judicial system in the European Union, and the relationship between judges and lawyers directly informed my design approach. These findings led to interventions that emphasized layered transparency and the creation of mediation spaces within the courthouse. The integration of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) programs further shaped the spatial zoning by introducing semi-formal areas that act as transitional zones between public and judicial spaces. Furthermore, spatial experimentation during the design phase raised new questions about privacy, visibility, and the symbolic thresholds of justice which refined my research focus on the courthouse as a mediator between the justice system and society.

Through one-on-one sessions with my tutors and conversations with fellow students, my field of research and understanding significantly increased, which I was able to incorporate into my design. The feedback I received consistently challenged me to critically reconsider design decisions, often leading to more thoughtful and spatially refined outcomes. Looking back, there is one aspect of the design I remain somewhat unsatisfied with. One of my design intentions was to create a compact courthouse, as a direct response to the scale and inefficiency of the existing courthouse in Milan. While I attempted to pursue this principle, I found myself caught between the goal of compactness and the desire to maintain spatial quality and meaningful integration with the urban context. With more time and in-depth exploration, I believe this aspect could have been developed further and more effectively resolved.

How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

I assess the value of my approach as effective in transforming research findings into design interventions. By combining qualitative methods such as field observations, case studies, and massing studies, I was able to build a deeper understanding of courthouse architecture and its spatial and societal complexities. This flexible and responsive approach allowed research to continuously inform the design process. The use of diagrams helped clarify the relationships and boundaries between public, private, and secure circulation routes. Looking back, I realize that starting the detailed design too early in Archicad may have limited my creative exploration at certain moments. A later start in digital modeling could have allowed for more spatial experimentation in the earlier design phases.

How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

The academic value of my graduation project lies in its contribution to the ongoing discourse on justice architecture, particularly reframing the courthouse as an open, mediating space, rather than a closed fortress. By doing research on the Italian Justice System, the project offers a multidisciplinary perspective that links architecture to institutional reform and public trust. On a societal level, the project responds to a real and pressing problem: the erosion of public trust in the legal system in Italy. To be specific, it addresses contemporary challenges such as Italy having the slowest justice system in the European Union and overcrowded prisons. The design aims to rebuild the relationship between citizens and the justice system, while also promoting alternative forms of conflict resolution. Ethically, the project is about the belief that justice must not only be done, but also be seen to be done. This includes the responsibility to ensure accessibility for all users, while carefully balance openness with privacy and security.

How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

The outcomes of this project hold strong transferability potential due to the strategic spatial and programmatic principles employed. For example; the linear stacking of courtrooms, offers an efficient organizational model that minimizes travel distances while ensuring high levels of flexibility and security. This spatial organization is not tied to the scale or the location of a courthouse and could be effectively applied to courthouses of different sizes or in other urban contexts. Furthermore, the integration of alternative forms of conflict resolution, such as mediation and ADR, contributes to a more accessible and human-centered justice system; an approach that can inspire broader judicial reform. These methods support a shift towards a justice system that is more transparent, inclusive, and responsive to the public, and can serve as a valuable example for other courthouse designs globally.

OWN QUESTIONS

In what way has your personal perspective on justice and public architecture evolved throughout your graduation project?

Before my graduation project, I experienced courthouses as formal, detached institutions that are not inviting to enter. Throughout my graduation project, this idea shifted to understanding them as spaces that can actively foster trust and a civic connection. I believe, that if it's done the right way, architecture can play a crucial role in making justice more visible, accessible and human-centered and I hope that I achieved this goal within my design.

How do you envision the future development of your project if I would be further researched, or even build in real life?

On an academic level, the project could evolve through a deeper investigation into user experience and behavioral patterns within judicial architecture. This could include in-depth interviews, surveys, and sessions with judges, lawyers, administrative staff and even the public. Furthermore, in professional or real-life context, a collaboration with engineers, urban planners and the justice system representatives would bring the project to a higher level.