

# Thesis Reflection

Complex Project Milan

Site: University of Bocconi

Topic: "Univer-sity"

Tutors: Olindo Caso, Jan van de voort, Maruli Heijman

Question: How to facilitate the integration of Bocconi and Milan through the control of boundary in favour of knowledge exchange?



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## Project Description

The project's theme is a discussion of the boundaries of the university's educational space. Based on the University of Bocconi in Milan, the project explores possible new forms of university architecture/educational space. University Bocconi is an academically conceptually advanced and inclusive modern school of management, business and law, but architecturally the university, filled with 20th-century teaching buildings, bears the distinctive characteristics of a last-century university, shown by its tall iron walls, heavy facades and lands filled with cement and concrete.

The 15,000 square meter site, close to the periphery of Milan's city centre, is located at the northwest corner of the Bocconi University complex, facing one of the busiest street corners in the neighbourhood, two tram stops, a bus stop, and boasting a dense flow of people. It is also the first building students are most likely to see and pass by when they arrive at the university. The original building, designed by Grafton architects, has an iconic indoor aula Magna and offices for all university teachers.

The original building was seen by students as a building for important

school events and teachers only, and during the regular times, students were not able to enter it freely. This is rather common at traditional universities. Beginning with Mies van der Rohe's Illinois Institute of Technology, universities tended to move away from the busy, chaotic centers of cities to the more space, less expensive, and less populated outskirts of cities. Buildings within universities are also subdivided by function or majors; if I'm an architecture student, for example, I probably won't visit the aerospace engineering building once in my entire academic career.

Therefore, from the beginning of this project, we wanted to refocus on the relationship between the university and the city and the relationships within different university buildings. In addition to traditional design research aspects such as the natural conditions of the site, the urban environment, and user profiles, the project also focuses on the firm or fragmented boundaries between the university and the city and the impact that the university can have on the community. Aiming at using different boundaries to control the relationship between university and city.

## Design-Research relationship

The project originated from a discussion to the original design, which was a closed, heavy, tightly regulated concrete solid. So the new design would be in some ways the opposite, i.e. an open, light, loosely managed space. So from the beginning, my design was closely related to the research direction. My research question was how to integrate the University of Bocconi with the city of Milan. The corresponding design question was how to make the new bocconi building open, light, and appropriately managed so as to encourage interaction between the city dwellers and the university, spatial integration, and the sharing of

knowledge.

This research starts from the facts of the site to the field interviews and documentation (images and texts) of the types and qualities of the boundaries inside and outside the University of Bocconi. One of the most interesting aspects was the face-to-face interviews with local students and users, in which an interesting question was forwarded to the students: "Start from where do you consider yourself to be within the boundaries of the university?". To some extent, as predicted, students always consider themselves within the university boundaries in places where they can make a conscious or visual connection to the university's elements. For example, getting on a tram line heading to the university, seeing the university logo, or even more dramatically, some students felt that even at home, hearing the alarm clock set for the weekday meant that they had entered the university. This awareness and visual influence on people's perceived boundaries inspired me to consciously reinforce the role of visually defined boundaries in my designs, such as using greenery and wooden corridors to represent more open public spaces, using sharp and glazing elements to define interior and private area, using larger signs to draw attention to them, and so on.

Despite having a clear research direction and design inclination, some problems were encountered during the actual design process. For example, when creating the blurred boundary between indoor and outdoor spaces, one has to consider issues of architectural enclosure and environment. When creating the boundary between public and private space, security and access control problems often have to be considered, and these means depend heavily on the building structure and the management style of the building users and cannot

be perfectly solved by imagination and speculation.

### **Value of research / design approach**

I believe that the focus on spatial boundaries increased the level of design concentration, as well as the efficiency of the discussion. In this process, fieldwork was conducted to count the various typologies of local spatial boundaries, and interviews were conducted, in which we learned about the boundaries in people's consciousness, but at the same time, such an interview process also evoked the interviewees' thoughts, and made some of the interviewees realize that in fact, the boundaries of the school are not only the physical spatial boundaries, but it could be the moment when they walk down the door of the tram, or wake up to hear the the sound of the alarm bell when they wake up. Such a two-way, interactive research process not only contributes to my study, but also helps more people to think about their everyday spaces in a new light.

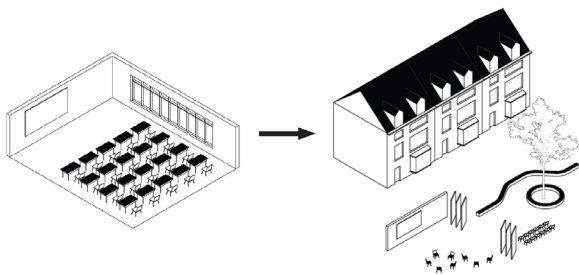
At the same time, the focus on spatial boundaries allows for greater versatility in design, as spatial boundaries focus on the most basic language of architectural space, such as walls, railings, and glazing. Accumulating possibilities for combinations of the most basic elements also allows for greater flexibility in the future design process.

### **Greater value of research / design**

Around the world, there are still a significant number of universities with walls. In China, many universities are trying to establish "campuses without walls", but in fact, many universities seem to eliminate the walls, but use small ditches, hedges, or gates to separate the campus from the city streets, which is essentially the administrators' distrust of



the urban environment and the concern about the possible dangers, which is not unreasonable. But in fact the university can weaken its boundaries through more detailed management tools and a gradual transition of spatial relations. This is also the case in Europe, where the European University Association published in 2021 its vision for the development of universities in 2030, which also emphasizes the idea of open campuses without walls. Not just in terms of physical space, of course, but also in terms of knowledge transfer and community connections. This design explores how university spaces can become more open through spatial language and research.



### Transferability of the project

This project's research methodology and design approach are transferable. The theme of this project challenges the façade-ism and closure of university buildings, and as we look to the future of university architecture, we do not have to continue to use the design paradigms of the last century. Instead, we can change the degree of openness of the university educational space by constructing a variety of multi-type, multi-level architectural boundaries so that the university building is no longer a closed glass or concrete box, but rather a public space that all types of people can utilize.

Unfortunately, this project doesn't have enough time to develop a flexible "toolbox". Although the overall architecture uses some of the concepts from the toolbox, but it is

closer to a regular architectural project. Nonetheless, I hope that in my future career, I can gradually deepen the idea of the boundary toolbox and develop more tools to give designers or clients a pool of options, giving them the flexibility to change the boundary permeability of university buildings according to different site conditions.

In East Asian architectural cultures, the discussion of boundaries has been present throughout history, such as in the *In Praise of Shadows* (Tanizaki, 1977) about the space created by the shadows cast by the extended eaves. The design language of this year's Pritzker Prize winner, Liu Jiakun, is about utilizing the boundaries of architectural space to influence people's perception of space, to bridge the gaps between public and private space, indoors and outdoors, and between man and nature.



Neighborhood-Songyang Three-Temple Cultural Communication Center by Jiakun Liu (Arch-Exist, 2025)



House NA by Sou Fujimoto (Baan, 2012)





Public space visual concept



General visual concept

## Reference list

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