

Intermission

Between city and stage.

Complex Projects

Reflection Paper

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2025

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COMPLEX PROJECTS
Bodies and Building Milan
AR3CP100

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Research Question:

How can a performance centre participate as an extension of the public realm enriching its civic depth?

This research explores how a renewed performance centre can move beyond being a static inward facing cultural monument to become an active civic participant, by rethinking its thresholds to create an open, porous, and responsive interface with the city.

1. The Relationship Between Research and Design

The Complex Projects graduation studio has an emphasis on research-led design, beginning with a strong conceptual position grounded in critical observation and theory. The project, *Intermission; between city and stage*, takes a position which revolves around the principle that opera houses must move beyond their traditional identity as monumental cultural icons to instead act as porous civic interfaces in order to become accessible civic spaces that encourage daily interaction, cultural exchange, and a visible connection between artistic process and public life. The title *Intermission* references the architectural and programmatic in-between: spaces that occur before, after, or around the performance, and how these can become civic stages of spectacle in their own right. The position is less about reimagining what we directly attribute to opera as a spectacle; it is about exposing, extending, and engaging the already rich spatial infrastructure and unseen processes with public life.

This framing emerged through an understanding that civic architecture is not defined solely by program or ownership, but by the presence of civic elements. The civic environment should be imagined as a continuum of diverse settings, not as a binary quality; it should integrate multiple scales within architecture to enhance the psychological and social significance of structures. In this project, the design explores how the thresholds of the building can serve as invitations; moments where the boundary between city and institution becomes porous. Thereby extending the presence of the building outward, encouraging lingering, observation, exploration and informal gathering, while simultaneously offering glimpses into the internal processes of the opera house.

The design strategy reconfigures the performance centre's programme composition by fragmenting the building volume into a series of distinct yet connected parts. Each volume is dedicated to a specific programmatic function, such as rehearsal, backstage, and workshops, that are interspersed with public amenities, making the inner workings of the institution more legible and accessible. This breaking down of mass introduces a more relatable, human-scaled environment, but also increases the building's envelope, thereby, multiplying the opportunities for visual and physical thresholds between the public and the internal processes. The orientation of the opera hall has been rotated, placing the traditionally hidden backstage spaces along the public edge of the site. This inversion has a strong connection to the project concept, manifesting the change in the dynamics between the functions and the public realm in physical form. By positioning these operational elements at the interface between the city and building, the project encourages curiosity, movement, and informal interaction throughout the day. Thereby, creating a building that is not static but a porous, and dynamic participant in the civic continuum, an architecture that invites exploration and fosters a sense of participation in the cultural processes it houses.

2. The Relationship Between the Graduation Topic and the Studio

The Complex Projects graduation studio centres on the building as an active participant in civic and human life, one shaped by and for the body. This graduation project, *Intermission; between city and stage*, aligns closely with this ambition by exploring how a large cultural institution like an opera house can evolve from a static, formalised monument into a civic interface that better accommodate movement, encounter, and public presence.

The project investigates how opera house architecture, often defined by an internal focus can be reconfigured to engage with the city through architectural thresholds and porosity in the building. The thresholds serve for access, pause, and interaction, turning the building envelope into an inhabited spatial area.

The project's methodology compliments the studio's approach, the method addresses different scales. The theme of the project engages with the relationship between program and perception, and by challenging the traditional divide between front and back-of-house spaces. By exposing rehearsal rooms, backstages, and logistical processes to the public through spatial transparency and visibility. Ultimately, the project contributes to the studio discourse by questioning how cultural buildings might better support collective civic experience. Importantly, this has also been a personal challenge for me; the project has pushed me to step outside conventional approaches and explore unfamiliar territory. That challenge has been essential, not just for the development of the work, but for my growth as a designer. The process has served as a reminder that university is not only a place to refine skills, but to test ideas, take risks, and rethink what architecture can do, an ethos present throughout all of university, particularly during graduation.

3. Research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio

The research combines theoretical grounding, contextual analysis, site observation, and an iterative design process. Theoretical insights from Patrick Lynch, Richard Sennett, Herman Hertzberger and Aldo Rossi support the idea that civic space is not limited to designated public squares but can emerge from in-between conditions that encourage appropriation, encounter, and presence. These readings were instrumental in identifying which spatial qualities enable civic meaning beyond symbolism or formality as well as establishing a position for the project.

After establishing a position, an architectural analysis of other buildings, predominantly cultural, civic or more specifically opera houses, helped to identify opportunities which aligned or were in contradiction with the intent of the project. The contextual study of Teatro alla Scala's physical and historical setting aimed to understand its spatial disconnect from the surrounding civic environment. This was enriched by a site visit, where I observed public behaviours and spatial habits, as well as experiencing the presence and influence of the building in its site. The contextual study of La Scala's physical and historical setting aimed to understand its spatial disconnect from the surrounding civic environment.

The design response emerged through iterative tests with massing strategies such as breaking down the singular volume, creating porosity, and repositioning programmatic elements like rehearsal rooms and workshops at the building's thresholds. These moves supported the research ambition of creating porous, inviting thresholds that engage with the surroundings. The approach is a continuous loop between research and design, where critical reflection and spatial experimentation guide the development of architectural strategies, with an intent to create a building which is an active civic participant, beyond its physical internal influence.

4. Relationship Between the Graduation Project and the Wider Social, Professional, and Scientific Relevance

This graduation project contributes to the architectural discussion on civic infrastructure by re-evaluating the opera house as more than a container for scheduled cultural events. It proposes a shift in perspective, from a closed, symbolic monument to an open and engaging. The institution's spatial and functional layers can be engaged with on a daily basis. The project questions the separation between what is traditionally presented and what is hidden, formality and informality, and instead investigates how revealing and extending these boundaries can give civic buildings new public meaning.

From a social perspective, the project addresses how cultural buildings can better serve the everyday life acting as an extension of the public realm, particularly in dense urban environments such as Milan. The opera house can become a space for public activity, not only during performances but throughout the day, accommodating moments of waiting, gathering, resting, and observing. This approach prioritises accessibility and transparency.

Professionally and scientifically, the project repositions cultural buildings as active civic platforms by redistributing internal functions to the building's edge and exposing the infrastructure of performance. This approach not only suggests how architecture can support both spectacle and public life, but also reframes performers, technicians, and other roles as participants in the civic identity of the institution. This challenges the approach to public space, and building thresholds, the work explores how informal interaction with the built environment can create a sense of belonging, shared ownership, and deeper engagement with cultural spaces. The project questions the need to completely uphold pre-existing notions of cultural institutions, something which should always be considered outside of university too. Architecture should evolve and adapt in both educational and professional settings, to conduct science is to question, to hypothesise, to respond, and to be open to the outcomes we uncover.

5. Ethical Issues and Dilemmas encountered during graduation

This project engages with the ethical dilemma of intervening in an established cultural tradition such as opera, an art form historically rooted in hierarchy and exclusivity. By proposing a more open and democratic architectural approach, the project inherently questions whether such traditions should be spatially protected or progressively transformed; advocating for accessibility and civic presence without compromising what might be perceived as the art form's identity. In doing so, it raises important questions about who cultural buildings are for, and how architectural design can be a tool for inclusion, dialogue, and renewal. Rather than offering fixed answers, the project sees this tension as productive; inviting discourse on how institutions evolve, and how architecture can support that evolution without erasing legacy.

At the same time, it recognises that accessibility must account for all users. What may appear as an engaging or interactive spatial moment for some might create obstacles for others, these obstacles may be both physical and psychological. Rather than offering fixed solutions, the project invites reflection on how architecture can support cultural evolution without erasing identity or limiting access.

