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MSc4 Complex Projects

P5 Research Reflection

1. Introduction

Balancing Trust is a graduation project developed within the Complex Projects graduation studio at TU Delft, under the theme *Bodies & Buildings*. The design proposes a new courthouse in the center of Milan. The project explores how institutional architecture can balance authority with openness, rethinking the courthouse as a civic space embedded in the urban fabric. Through spatial, typological, and material investigations, the design aims to create a justice center that feels accessible and dignified, rooted in Milan's architectural identity while responding to contemporary demands of public trust and institutional clarity.

Aspect 1: The Relationship Between Research and Design

Looking back, the relationship between research and design has been dynamic—sometimes aligned, sometimes out of sync. In the early phases, especially in P1, research played a crucial role in framing the project. I began with a broad investigation into courthouse typologies and Milan's civic architecture, using mapping, typological analysis, and material studies to build a foundation. These methods helped me contextualize the project historically and spatially, and gave me useful references from which to work. So yes, in that sense, the research method was appropriate for the goals I had at the time.

However, as the design progressed into P2, I began to notice a gap between research and what I was producing. I focused so heavily on functionality—planning flows, accessibility, and security—that the conceptual depth I had started with faded somewhat into the background. It felt like I had temporarily let the design lead without returning to question it through the research lens. This disconnect made that phase feel more mechanical, and in hindsight, I think a clearer research question could have helped guide me through it with more intention.

That said, the research I had done was not lost. It resurfaced in later phases, especially in P3, when I began to re-engage with ideas of public space, access, and the Milanese urban character. It helped me reframe the project and reconnect with the idea of a courthouse as more than just a functional container, but as a civic experience shaped by trust and openness. The earlier material research also became more valuable again when deciding on the construction logic and atmosphere in the final proposal.

Could it have been done differently? Yes—absolutely. I think I would benefit from treating research as an ongoing and iterative part of the design process, not just something front-loaded at the beginning. Setting clearer research intentions in P2 and checking back in with them more regularly would have helped maintain a stronger conceptual thread throughout. At times, I treated design and research as two separate tracks, when in fact they should have been feeding each other continuously.

3. The relationship between your graduation project, the studio topic, and the master track architecture.

The way I approached the courthouse assignment both aligned with and challenged the broader ambitions of the *Complex Projects* studio. The studio's focus on the intersection of typology, thematic lens, and urban context encouraged a multi-layered way of thinking—something that resonated with me from the beginning. Milan, as the chosen context, presented an ideal testing ground for negotiating between history, function, civic symbolism, and contemporary urban dynamics. In that sense, the graduation project—Balancing Trust—fits well within the framework of the studio: it took a charged typology (the courthouse), placed it in a highly sensitive location, and used that juxtaposition to test how architecture can embody institutional authority while remaining civic, porous, and human.

However, as the project developed, I started to realize how difficult it was to keep the studio's ambition fully alive within the constraints of the courthouse brief. The studio promotes negotiation within complex operations—between programmatic needs, urban pressures, material logics, and conceptual intentions—and the project certainly dealt with those tensions. But at times, especially during the more technical phases, I felt I may have leaned too heavily into problem-solving and functionality, rather than holding onto the narrative strength that the studio encourages. There were moments when the complexity felt overwhelming rather than generative.

One critical reflection is that the studio topic itself, while conceptually rich, can sometimes feel abstract when applied to such institutionally rigid programs like courthouses. The risk is that the typological constraints can overshadow the broader thematic explorations. I noticed that some of the early conceptual ambitions were temporarily put on hold while trying to “solve” the building as a courthouse. I wonder if, in hindsight, I could have challenged the typology even further—perhaps not by radically redefining what a courthouse is, but by rethinking how it might perform in a city like Milan that thrives on layering, in-between spaces, and slow reveals.

Overall, I believe the project fits within the ethos of the Architecture master track: it is situated, concept-driven, and attempts to operate on multiple scales at once. It touches urbanism, program, and public space, while staying grounded in tectonics and material specificity. It taught me not just how to design a building, but how to navigate complexity, not to reduce it, but to shape within it.

4. Elaboration on research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work.

Looking back at the research process, I realize now how non-linear it truly was—sometimes out of necessity, and other times out of instinct. While the graduation studio promotes a structured method of inquiry, working through typology, lens, and context, I found that in my case, research did not

unfold as a sequenced progression. Instead, it came in loops—periods of deep investigation followed by fast-paced, intuitive decisions, and then moments where earlier research re-emerged and became newly relevant.

This wasn't because of disorganization, but rather because the complexity of the courthouse typology and the Milanese context kept pushing the project into new territory. I would investigate one topic, like circulation or public-private zoning, only to have material constraints or urban relationships challenge those findings.

One of the more defining elements of the studio methodology was the material lens, and for me, this was a particularly generative aspect. At first, I approached materials in a somewhat conventional way—through precedent studies and contextual references—but gradually, I began to see material not only as a construction question, but as a conceptual tool. Thinking through the lens of urban mining and the reuse of materials from Milan's existing layers allowed me to reflect on time, memory, and the politics of resource use. The material choices became both evidence of research and carriers of meaning. That shift—treating materiality as a narrative and analytical device—deepened the scientific relevance of the project. It moved beyond aesthetics or sustainability checklists into a critical approach about how buildings speak through what they're made of.

Was the project based on hard facts or intuition? Honestly, both—and I've come to appreciate the necessity of that duality. Early phases relied heavily on research: site conditions, typological standards, historical precedent, and spatial logic. But moments of real conceptual clarity came through intuition—spatial testing, sketching, even walking through Milan and sensing how justice might be spatialized differently. I didn't always realize in the moment what was “research” and what was “feeling”—but in hindsight, I can see how they interplayed. The hard facts often gave legitimacy to the design, while the intuitive moves gave it character and soul.

5. Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework.

One of the most formative aspects of my graduation year was experiencing it alongside my part-time work in an architectural office. This dual engagement—working professionally while also developing a graduation project—significantly shaped the way I navigated between conceptual exploration and grounded realism. In many ways, it exposed me more directly to the social and professional expectations architecture carries in the real world, especially for a programmatically and symbolically

That shift in perspective helped me avoid designing a generic or abstract “conceptual” courthouse—one that could be placed anywhere. Instead, I gradually built a project that *felt like it belonged in Milan* and that *performed like a courthouse*. It took on a civic gravity while still remaining accessible and engaged with the public realm. This was only possible by negotiating between architectural ambition and professional accountability—between imagination and responsibility. I came to see this negotiation not as a compromise, but as a condition of relevance.

In terms of the scientific and academic framework, the project contributes to ongoing conversations around institutional architecture, urban justice, and material reuse. Through its spatial strategies and material choices—rooted in research but tested through iterative design—it reflects on how justice spaces can be more inclusive, legible, and situated within the complexity of urban life. It asks how a

courthouse can communicate trust not just through symbolism, but through structure, threshold, and the rhythm of daily use.

Socially, the project responds to the civic role of the justice system and how architecture can either reinforce or soften its boundaries. By prioritizing accessibility, visible pathways, and layered thresholds, I tried to shape a building that offers dignity not just to authority, but to those who move through it—from visitors to staff, from witnesses to defendants. In that sense, the project engages with broader societal questions about transparency, power, and the role of architecture in framing collective life.

Aspect 5: ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered during graduation

Designing the courthouse made me think a lot about how architecture communicates—not always loudly, but sometimes through restraint and quiet gestures. I kept returning to Milan as a reference point, not just as a city, but as a state of mind. What I've always appreciated about Milan is how it reveals itself slowly. It doesn't demand attention like Rome or Venice. Instead, it invites you in—if you're willing to look past the surface.

I think that idea really stayed with me throughout this project. I didn't want the courthouse to be a grand, imposing monument. Instead, I wanted it to feel grounded, thoughtful, maybe even a little enigmatic at first glance—something that unfolds as you move through it. A lot like Milan itself.

Someone once described Milan to me as “a city of closed doors and beautiful interior courtyards,” and that image stuck. I found it incredibly evocative. It made me think about how we experience space—how the most meaningful places aren't always immediately visible or accessible. There's a kind of intimacy in discovering them. So, I started thinking: what if the courthouse could work the same way? What if, rather than presenting everything at once, it could encourage movement, curiosity, and quiet reflection?

That's how the idea of an interior courtyard became central. It's not just a spatial device—it's a moment of pause. A space of calm at the heart of a complex institution. It reflects the values I think a courthouse should embody: transparency, dignity, openness, but not spectacle. I also liked how it subtly reverses expectations. From the outside, the building might feel formal or even austere, but once inside, it opens up—literally and symbolically.

Every design decision - from spatial layouts to building materials - tells a story about societal values, human needs, and cultural practices.

Looking back, the process reminded me how important it is to design with layers—to allow for discovery, both visual and emotional. This wasn't just about arranging spaces efficiently. It was about crafting an experience that respects the individual and the collective; a place that doesn't shout, but speaks with quiet confidence.