



A NEW EXPERIENCE OF TRIALS

THE BERLIN REGIONAL CRIMINAL COURT



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INTRODUCTION

The Criminal Court building (completed 1906) in Berlin's district Moabit is where all criminal proceedings of the Berlin Local Courts and the Regional Court of the city are conducted. (Mielke, 2011) The Regional Court serves as a court of appeal, but also as the first instance for particularly severe criminal offenses. This is the case if a prison sentence of more than four years or an order for preventive detention or placement in a psychiatric hospital is to be expected. (Handschumacher, 2009, pp. 241-243) "The Grand Criminal Chamber" and the jury court consist of three professional judges and two lay assessors, and rules in the first instance, while the "Small Criminal Chamber" is composed of one professional judge and two lay assessors and decides in appeal cases. (Matthiessen, n.d.)

Currently, the criminal justice system of Berlin and the Criminal Court Moabit are experiencing several different

challenges, which concern capacity issues and obsolete, unfavorable spatial qualities. The legal system is confronted with a disproportionate quantity of cases compared to the number of its workforce. The amount of offences as well as the number of hearings are continuously rising as the city expands (Knispel & Gronemeier, 2021, pp. 15-60) Consequently, a restructuring of the spatial distribution of the departments of the Criminal Court needs to be implemented. (Joeken, 2022)

RESEARCH SUMMARY

A court building can be described as a machine, whose architecture must facilitate fluid, efficient operations to ensure the correct, fair execution of justice. The performance is strongly impacted by the compositions and characteristics of spaces and their perception by the occupants. Decisive factors are stress, concentration, and possible conflict between parties, which are either alleviated or intensified by the



Criminal Court Berlin Moabit

conditions of the rooms and in turn greatly affects the procedures. It is essential that the spaces enable the participants to focus on their duties with full composure and concentration over a long period of time. Otherwise, the conduct of the court hearings might be disturbed, and legal

errors might occur. (Tait, et al., 2014) For a courthouse of this type, adequate security control, such as a security gate, is important given that the risk of conflict is very high. The safety precautions in a courthouse are essential, including adequate security checks in the form

of a lock with bullet-proof glass. (Knispel & Gronemeier, 2021, pp. 123-124) However, a major architectural challenge is influencing and managing the people inside the building to prevent confrontations between parties. From an architectural point of view, the public spaces and waiting areas are of particular relevance in that respect. At the same time, these zones offer the potential to restore concentration and relieve stress through the implementation of different strategies such as natural features. (Tait, et al., 2014) In addition, the clarity of a building can affect a court participant's stress level. (Ho & Chiu, 2021)

DESIGN BRIEF SUMMARY

The design brief defines the requirements of a courthouse in terms of program, site and stakeholder, as well as the design ambitions.

PROGRAM

A courthouse can be divided into three areas, one public, one restricted and one secured. Each of these zones requires

entrances to the building that meet its particular security requirements.

Whilst an entrance check is mandatory for a Regional Criminal Court building, the spaces beyond such as the courtrooms, cafeteria and library are accessible to the public. The restricted access area contains all areas associated with the employees, such as offices, archives, but also technical and service rooms. In the secure area, the defendants, if in custody, are delivered by the officers via a security lock and remain waiting in cells before the trial and during breaks. It is critical that the users belonging to these three different security levels each have their own circulation system and meet only within the courtroom.

SITE

The project is part of the vision of Berlin and the Environment group as it is located within a green space along one of the green corridors which link the city center with the natural areas of the countryside. The site is chosen based on the primarily functional constraints of a courthouse

regarding accessibility, but also its symbolic responsibility. It is located in the historic center of Berlin along the Spree River. Surrounded by monumental buildings from different decades and adjacent to Museum Island, it is a touristic place with many pedestrians. According to the requirements, the site is perfectly



Satellite view of site

connected to the main road network and the public transport, as well as to the pre-trial detention centers.

In the design, the fifth facade, namely the roof, is of great importance, since there is a direct view onto the project from the television tower and the dome of the cathedral.

CLIENT

For a Regional Criminal Court, there are several stakeholders to consider in the design process: the courthouse users, the Berlin Senate Administration, and the citizens and pedestrians.

The ultimate goal of a court is the fair and appropriate delivery of justice, therefore it is the responsibility of the building to ensure this is achieved through its architecture. The courtrooms are the heart of the building, where all court attendees assemble and it is of absolute importance that the design of the rooms allows for a concentrated and composed fulfilment of the individual roles in the trial, so that no judicial errors occur. In the public area, there may be increased psychological

stress and conflict between parties, to which architecture can respond with various measures of spatial organization.

The state as a client requires a durable building with a well-organized logistic system, which enables smooth court processes. For the residents and pedestrians, on the other hand, the enhancement of the outdoor space is of primary interest.



PROJECT

The project “A New experience of Trials. The Berlin Regional Criminal Court” proposes to separate the Regional Court from the Local Courts and to relocate it to another site. This offers the possibility to improve the spatial conditions compared to the currently occupied courthouse. The goal of this graduation project is to investigate what spatial qualities influence the user’s experience in a manner that improves the efficiency of processes in a courthouse. In this context, the separation of the Regional Court of the criminal jurisdiction division opens the possibility to focus entirely on its unique characteristics, requirement and program.

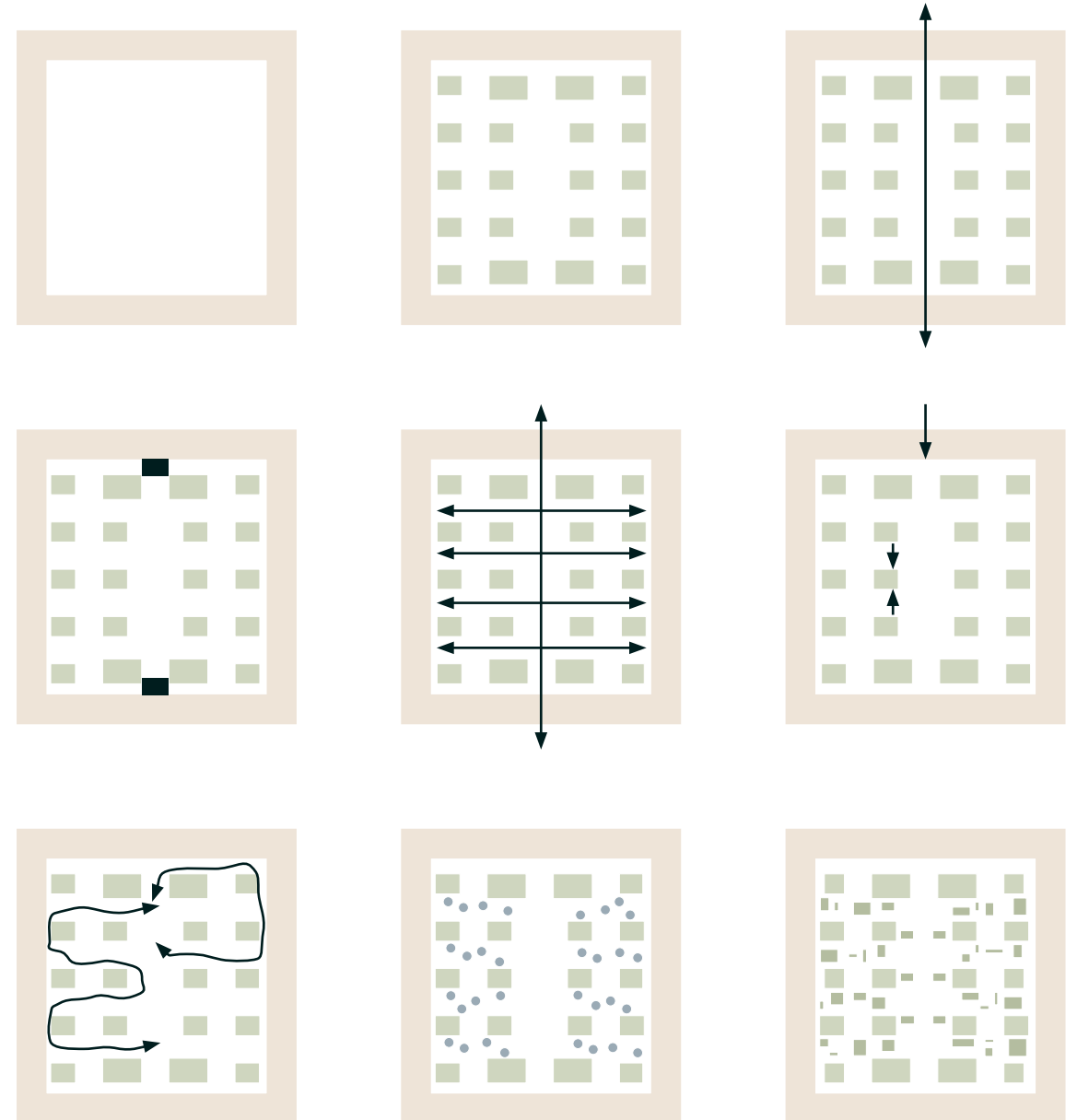
CONCEPT

As previously stated, stress, conflicts, and the ability to concentrate have a great influence on court proceedings. The project considers these three circumstances and, as a concept, aims to minimize these impacts through various

architectural measures. In accordance with the research, from the very beginning the project imposed clear design rules in its concept, which had to be followed in order to successfully meet and respond to the research question and requirements of a modern courthouse.

STRESS

The center of the design is a large public hall, which contains twenty-six courtrooms. The hall is framed with functions that can be described as supportive, such as the offices, and holding cells but also the public canteen and library. The clear layout helps to facilitate orientation, which in turn gives court participants a sense of security and thus relieves stress. Another measure to assist orientation upon arriving is the marking of the main entrances with raised glass cubes. After passing through security, people enter the hall on a mezzanine level overlooking the main axis, allowing them to rapidly survey the layout of the courtrooms in the hall. Consequently, much of the building is underground. The courtrooms are each



arranged as individual volumes to the side of the central axis, creating side corridors from which one enters the courtrooms through various doors assigned to the different litigants.

CONFLICT

The building is divided into three distinct zones with different security systems: public, restricted, and secure areas. Each area has its own access points with individual security measures. With these precautions, groups that may be in conflict can be separated immediately upon arrival. Another point of the concept is the duplication, so there are always two entrances, to the building, as well as to the courtrooms. Additionally, there are no dead ends in the hall, so different parties can take separate paths. Thus, users can escape people with whom they may be in conflict and do not experience a sense of being trapped and intimidated. Furthermore, there are several waiting areas so that conflicting parties can continue to

distance themselves from each other.

CONCENTRATION

Due to the framing part of the building

with its relatively closed facade, it is a rather introverted design that clearly separates itself from the surroundings and its distractions such as noise. The

approach emphasizes the inner focus on the court processes.

Daylight and greenery are crucial for restoring concentration during breaks



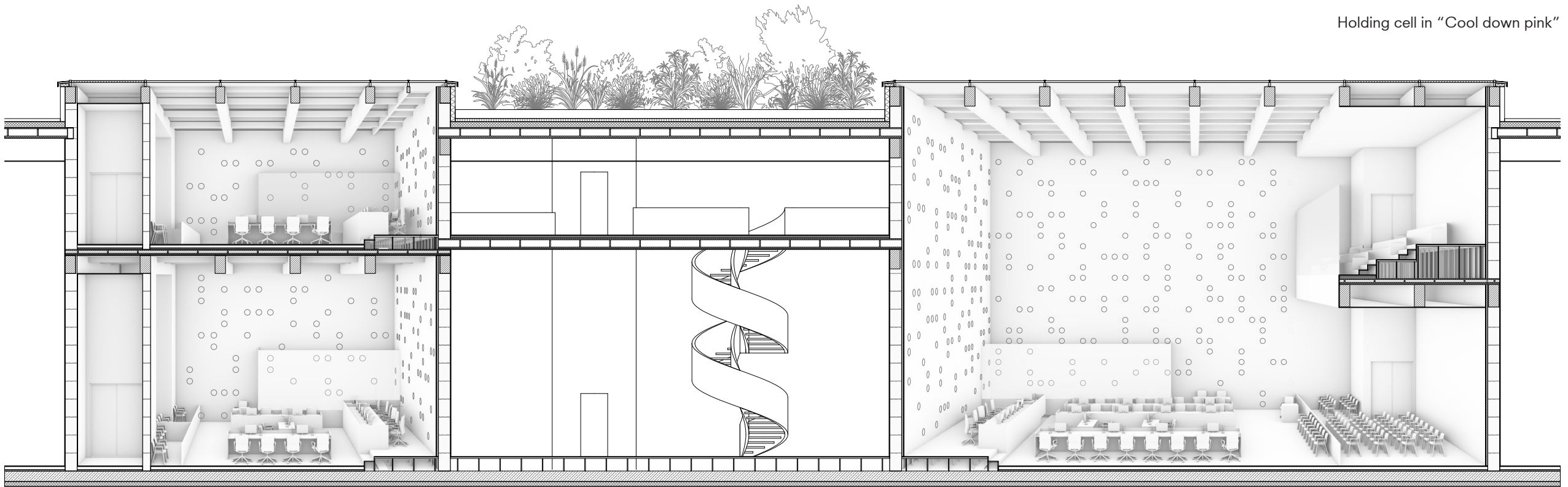
Waiting area between courtrooms and atria

and between court proceedings. Therefore, there are several glass atria introduced in the main hall that bring sunlight into the building and at the same time add natural elements as well as the possibility to step outside for fresh air. The sight of plants helps to restore concentration and relax mentally. Therefore, organic shapes are found in numerous parts of the project, which is otherwise mostly rectangular. While the courtrooms are arranged in an orderly manner, the light

shafts differ in their size, arrangement, and program in each side corridor. This enables the building to be easily comprehended, but at the same time stimulates the curiosity to explore it.



Holding cell in "Cool down pink"



Section of three courtrooms. Detail scale 1:50

REFLECTION

The intent of the paper is to reflect on the final design product and critique the process in order to ultimately assess the architectural response to the research question.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH & DESIGN

This graduation studio demonstrates that research and design are inseparable. A design can only be successful if one has extensive knowledge about the subject of the design, such as mandatory functional requirements, architectural liberties, the different stakeholders, as well as historical and potential future developments, but also the current circumstances. Based on this, well-founded design decisions can then be made.

Extensive research with a variety of methods was necessary for this project in order to understand the complexity of a courthouse and to be able to develop a design based on the collected information. The leading question initially arose from

personal interest, while the final design was informed by the researched data.

Thus, the research question “what spatial qualities influence the user’s experience in a manner that improves the efficiency of processes in a courthouse?” was the constant guidance during the development, complementing creativity with rational design decisions.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRADUATION & STUDIO TOPIC

The theme of the Graduation Studio 2023 of Complex Projects, entitled “Bodies and Building”, deals with the relationship of bodies and a large, complex building with a particular function. The aim is to investigate how the requirements of a body in terms of dimensions, movements, perception, security and safety influence the building.

The project “A New experience of Trials” also deals with the connection between people and the building. Since the correct execution of justice is the key purpose of a courthouse, it is imperative that this be ensured. However, the

correct practice of law depends on the people involved in the proceedings. In this regard, the architecture can have a great impact on the users. Consequently, the individual needs of the groups of people must be identified. Especially the spatial perception and amenities, sense of safety, and security precautions play a significant role in a courthouse. In order to meet the diverse desires, a wide variety of measures have been implemented, as described in the concept section of this paper.

In summary, the design of this graduation project follows the same approach as the studio topic, the design is shaped by the users.

RESEARCH METHOD & APPROACH IN RELATION TO GRADUATION STUDIO

A diverse variety of research methods were used to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the structure and requirements of a courthouse. One aspect of the research was the theoretical literature, which was supplemented by analyses of case studies and visits

to several contemporary courthouses. Furthermore, the findings were complemented by interviews with stakeholders, judges, other workers in the judiciary, law graduate students, and employees of the senate administration. Regarding the site, it was analyzed including its surroundings and in the context of Berlin through mapping and fieldwork.

Since the topic of a Regional Criminal Court was chosen due to a personal fascination, the research was determined by an unbiased curiosity, which had no particular outcome in mind. The application of multiple methodologies was useful, as it allowed for a variety of different insights, which again opened new unexpected, relevant topics and fields.

The theme “Environment” of the group work was enriching for the project, because it introduced a deeper reflection on the implementation of nature in the project. If the design had been based on a different group theme, such as “Mobility”, it is likely that not only the location would

have been different, but also the overall architectural characteristics, such as the green courtyards and the accessible roof with insect-friendly plants.

In retrospect, the impact of the seminar focus on the “Area” was also very significant. Since the discussions mainly revolved around the horizontal section of a building, this among other reasons resulted in a relatively flat, expansive building.

THE PROJECT’S WIDER SOCIAL, PROFESSIONAL, SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

It is evident from the research that the Berlin-Moabit Criminal Court, like many courts in historic buildings in Germany, is not or no longer appropriate for its function. This results from contemporary theoretical research, but also the comparison with modern court buildings. The reason for this is often that these buildings were not planned as courthouses but were transformed into these. In the Moabit courthouse, for example, the security precautions are inadequate; for instance, due to heritage protection, it is not pos-

sible to install a security lock for checks of the public. Moreover, the conditions of the facilities of the Criminal Court do not meet the needs of the users. So, this project makes a proposal on how to counteract these problems, inspired by modern solutions.

The theme of the courthouse was surprising in its complexity. Although the awareness that it is a demanding program was present from the start, the scope exceeded expectations. This reflection has once again shown the relevance of the profession of the architect: one must delve deeply into a subject to be able to solve the challenges of such a building.

ETHICAL ISSUES AND DILEMMAS

Given that the building has several underground floors, the use of recycled reinforced concrete was necessary. While this design decision has a valid reason related to the need for easy orientation of the users, one can still critically question whether there would have been another solution with the same effect, which would have allowed to use even more

sustainable materials instead of recycled reinforced concrete.

The materialization presented another challenge. A compromise had to be found between the reduction of material for sustainability reasons and the necessary powerful expression of a courthouse. Nevertheless, a suitable solution was found in the use of rammed earth.

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