



INTIMIDATING BUILDINGS: CAN COURTHOUSE ARCHITECTURE AFFECT PERCEIVED LIKELIHOOD OF CONVICTION?

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DESIGN ISSUE

The goal of this study was to examine whether court buildings can be perceived as intimidating and if they affect the mental processes of users vis-à-vis their expectations of trial outcomes. The study compared reactions of the public to a new courthouse designed along principles of the modernistic era and an old courthouse building with a traditional Italian style.

The authors hypothesized that:

- The new courthouse would be perceived as more intimidating, although not necessarily less attractive.
- The new courthouse would produce greater discomfort for users.
- The new courthouse would evoke an expectation of a higher chance of conviction.

BACKGROUND

Although challenging to prove, it is argued that Christian churches, built in Europe after the Romanesque period, were designed to be perceived by onlookers as highly intimidating. Modern or “high style” buildings could be perceived similarly, given the extremities in their dimensions and usage of “cold materials and color”.

The questions that emerged from the above notions were:

- Whether buildings portray an aura of intimidation.
- “Whether architectural styles affect the cognitive processes and expectations of users”.

RESEARCH METHOD

The authors compared two courthouses in Padova, Italy. The first was a 14th Century courthouse rebuilt (following a fire) in 1934. The second courthouse was built in 1991 to replace the first one. Physical attributes of the old courthouse included small scale, residential appearance, warm color, large windows, and a large wooden door. In contrast, the new building is characterized by massive scale, a semi-circular form, gray color, narrow windows, and a not-so-visible entrance sandwiched between two massive walls.



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The research process required participants to respond to questions and rate the appearance of the buildings on a five-point scale after being shown photographs taken of the two courthouses from different distances. The participants were asked to think of a hypothetical situation where they were accompanying a wrongly accused friend to a trial at each of the two courthouses. The one hundred and twenty volunteer participants were university students who were studying subjects other than law or architecture. In addition, half of the participants were familiar with the two courthouses, while the rest had never seen the buildings before. Based on this situation, they were asked to rate:

- Their own level of discomfort.
- The imagined level of discomfort of the friend and the likelihood of their conviction.
- Aesthetic impression of the two buildings and their psychological impact.

FINDINGS

The following findings emerged from statistical analysis of the responses of the participants:

- Discomfort: no statistically significant difference was observed between the old and the new building regarding the level of perceived discomfort. This was true for both the participants and the presumed discomfort of their hypothetical accused friend.
- Aesthetic judgment: Both buildings were rated as equally positive in aesthetic values.
- Intimidation: the new building was rated significantly more intimidating than the old.
- Intimidation and discomfort: a significant positive correlation was observed between participants' ratings on "discomfort" and "intimidation". Higher levels of perceived discomfort were associated with higher levels of intimidation.
- Conviction: participants estimated a higher probability of conviction associated with the new courthouse as compared to the old.
- Conviction and discomfort: a significant positive correlation was observed between participants' ratings on "discomfort" and "likelihood of conviction". Higher levels of perceived discomfort were associated with higher estimates of conviction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN PRACTICE

For design teams embarking on a new or renovation courthouse project, consider the following:

- Public perception regarding trial outcomes may be influenced by physical environment attributes of courthouses, irrespective of the actual fairness of trial proceedings.
- "Aesthetics" and "psychological comfort" are not synonymous. Buildings perceived as "beautiful" can also be "intimidating". Intimidating buildings may be perceived as settings leading to negative trial outcomes.
- Since architectural style is a factor influencing user/public perceptions and expectations of trial outcomes, consider design strategies that emphasize welcoming and visual accessibility, including the following factors:



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- ✓ Scale. Human-scaled buildings may be perceived as less intimidating. For large courthouses, attempt to break down the form to the human scale.
- ✓ Style. Modernistic styles may be perceived as intimidating.
- ✓ Color. Warm colors may be perceived as less intimidating. Gray colors may accentuate the feeling of intimidation.
- ✓ Transparency. Small, narrow openings in the exterior envelope (low transparency) may contribute to the feeling of intimidation. Design for enhanced visual contact between the interior and the exterior.
- ✓ Entrance. A visible public entrance may reduce the feeling of intimidation.

LIMITATIONS

The following limitations could have impacted the findings of the study, as reported by the authors: (1) the photographs of the courthouses may have lessened the actual impact of the buildings' designs, and (2) it was not known as to how exposed the participants (with prior knowledge of the buildings) were to the buildings. The participants who had no prior exposure to the buildings saw only the facades of the buildings on the photographs. Further, this study involved only two particular courthouses, which constitutes a very small sample, and these courthouses may not be especially representative of either historic or modern buildings of this type. Finally, this study may be relevant to the cultural context of Western Europe only.

ADAPTED FROM

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