

Too Good to Be True: the Savona Courthouse

Leonardo Ricci, Savona Courthouse, Savona, Project, City, Italian Architecture

/Abstract

The article analyzes the Palace of Justice of Savona designed and built by Leonardo Ricci between 1972 and 1987, highlighting its aspirations and design motivations. In particular, the main aim is to trace the reasons why both the building and the area it occupies are now so degraded in the surrounding conditions of the project.

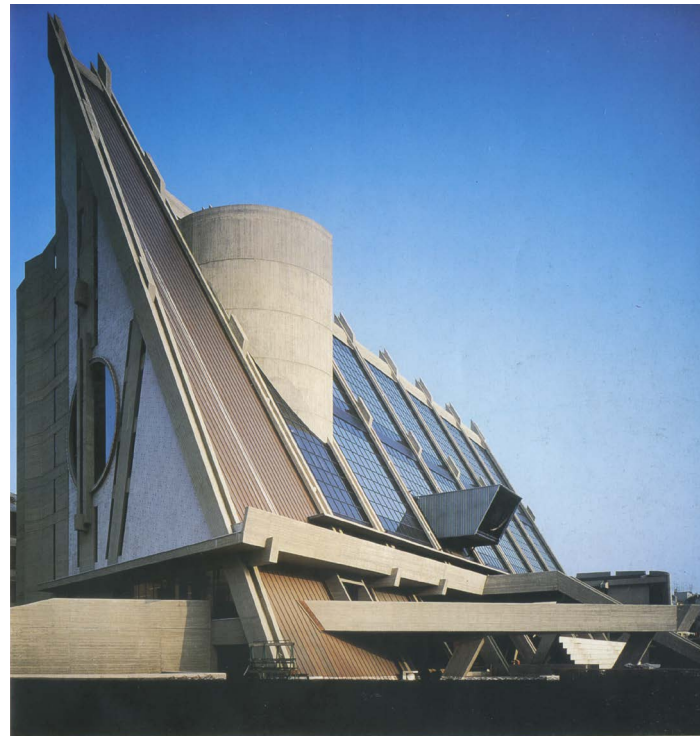
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The citizens of Savona see their city's Courthouse as a disheveled object of which they are ultimately somewhat ashamed. Many people know that it is an important work of contemporary architecture, but to everyone the state of disrepair in which the building and the area where it is located are evident. People often even go so far as to think that the courthouse is responsible for this degradation, and from time to time the city administration proposes to tear it down, thinking that it is thus interpreting a widespread desire in the citizenry. A paradoxical situation when one considers that Leonardo Ricci designed this intervention with the explicit purpose of revitalizing a long abandoned and neglected area of the city [Fig. 1].¹



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From 1868 to 1977 Piazza del Popolo was the square of Savona's railway station [Fig. 2], that is, from the time Savona was reached by the railroad until the station was moved further west, where it still stands today. Thus for more than a hundred years the city developed around the urban axis that, starting from the old railway station, intercepts Piazza del Popolo (formerly Piazza Umberto I), Piazza Goffredo Mameli (formerly Piazza Pietro Paleocopa), and reaches as far as the Leon Placido Tower and the port, along the street named today after engineer Pietro Paleocopa, the minister of public works who brought the railroad to Savona. Since the station was moved, the city administration has never expressed a clear program for this area, despite the fact that it constitutes a nodal point of the nineteenth-century city. Thus one of the most urbanistically important places in the city has remained a giant underused square, occasionally occupied by fairs and markets, but most of the time used only as a parking lot. The need to solve this urban problem was evident as early as 1972, when Ricci began the project in the area once occupied by the freight yard, and it became overt when the building was finished in August 1987.

In conceiving the Savona Palace of Justice, Leonardo Ricci set himself not only the task, albeit a very ambitious one, of solving this complex urban planning situation: he also wanted to intervene in the society of his time, changing the way one of the places in which the state exercises its power over citizens is perceived. In the project report he states that he wants to rethink the spaces of the administration of justice in order to make them more transparent and less authoritarian. He analyzes past projects and identifies two ways of approaching

1 The project for Savona immediately arouses controversy in the newspapers before even finding space in the more thoughtful publications cited below. On this subject see: Bruno Zevi, "Una specie d'incoscienza", *L'Espresso*, July 14, 1985; B. Zevi, "Giustizia è fatta", *L'Espresso*, December 27, 1987; Leonardo Ricci, "Per il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona", *L'architettura cronache e storia*, no. 388, February 1988.

Fig. 1

Savona Palace of Justice, view from the northwest, 1987, image published in Leonardo Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona* (Florence: Centro Di, 1987).



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the project; one he calls "rhetorical-repressive"², in which the building architecturally expresses the power of the state; and another he calls "Anglo-Saxon"³, in which the building is likened to an administrative office without expressing its centrality to civic life. Neither mode identified in the buildings of the past satisfies him, so he chooses a third way: that of constructing a series of "sacred"⁴ and monumental spaces capable of attributing dignity to the moments of public life dedicated to justice without, however, appearing as the unambiguous emanation of a power. Thus he assigns the name "basilica" to the large glazed volume through which the courtrooms are accessed [Fig. 3] and the large open space below the building is called the "covered plaza." The building itself is not just a courthouse, but a "Palace of Justice." A Palace for all the professionals associated with this social function, be they lawyers, policemen or magistrates; a place whose noble dignity is deemed essential to emphasize. The architecture, however, must avoid appearing as an empty and bombastic rhetorical amplification, and for this Ricci chooses to fragment the project into a multitude of occasions studied independently and treated, even formally, in a diverse manner. This explains why each facade is so different from the others, why each element also presents a multitude of variations within it, and why this need to diversify pervades all environments and invests even the most minute details⁵.

To these two ambitious goals Ricci also adds a third: that of changing and improving the entire civil society of his time.

After three years that the Palace of Justice in Savona is in operation [Ricci will state] I was able to have the verification of this new model: in

2 Leonardo Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona* (Florence: Centro Di, 1987), 13-17, 13.

3 Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona*, 13-17, 13.

4 Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona*, 13-17, 13.

5 This work of subdividing and identifying different parts in the same building has been a characteristic of Leonardo Ricci's work since his earliest works. The fact that Umberto Eco dedicates "to Leonardo Ricci and the future city" his *Appunti per una semiologia delle comunicazioni visive* (Milan: Bompiani, 1967) which constitutes the first version of the volume that would later take the title *La struttura assente. La ricerca semiotica e il metodo strutturale*, must also be read in relation to this attitude.

Fig. 2

Letimbro Station in Savona, circa 1920, image published in Franco Rebagliati, and Mario Siri, *Savona Letimbro. Album della stazione 1868-1924*, Il vol. (Turin: Alzani, 1997).



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the interior space [the large hall called the basilica] concerts are held and even in the square on which the palace rises children's baby carriages circulate and, at night, couples in love⁶.

In a sense this project is not intended for the society in which Ricci lives, but for a possible but different future society where the place where justice is administered can come to be integrated into the cultural and leisure activities of the city⁷. This is the ambitious dream of a sacred building, conceived as a new civil church, as fragmented and plural as the secular and democratic institution it houses, capable of revolving around it all the vital moments of society: in a sense Ricci imagines in a single building all those complex relationships that characterize

6 Antonio Nardi, *Leonardo Ricci. Testi, opere, sette progetti recenti* (Florence: Alinea, 1990), 100. Giovanni Bartolozzi, *Leonardo Ricci. Lo spazio inseguito* (Roma: Testo & Immagine, 2004), 77-82, 82.

7 On this theme see also Emiliano Romagnoli, *Leonardo Ricci: un pensiero che si fa spazio* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2021), 41-55.

Fig. 3

Palace of Justice in Savona, view of the interior atrium called the "basilica," 1987, image published in Leonardo Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona* (Florence: Centro Di, 1987).

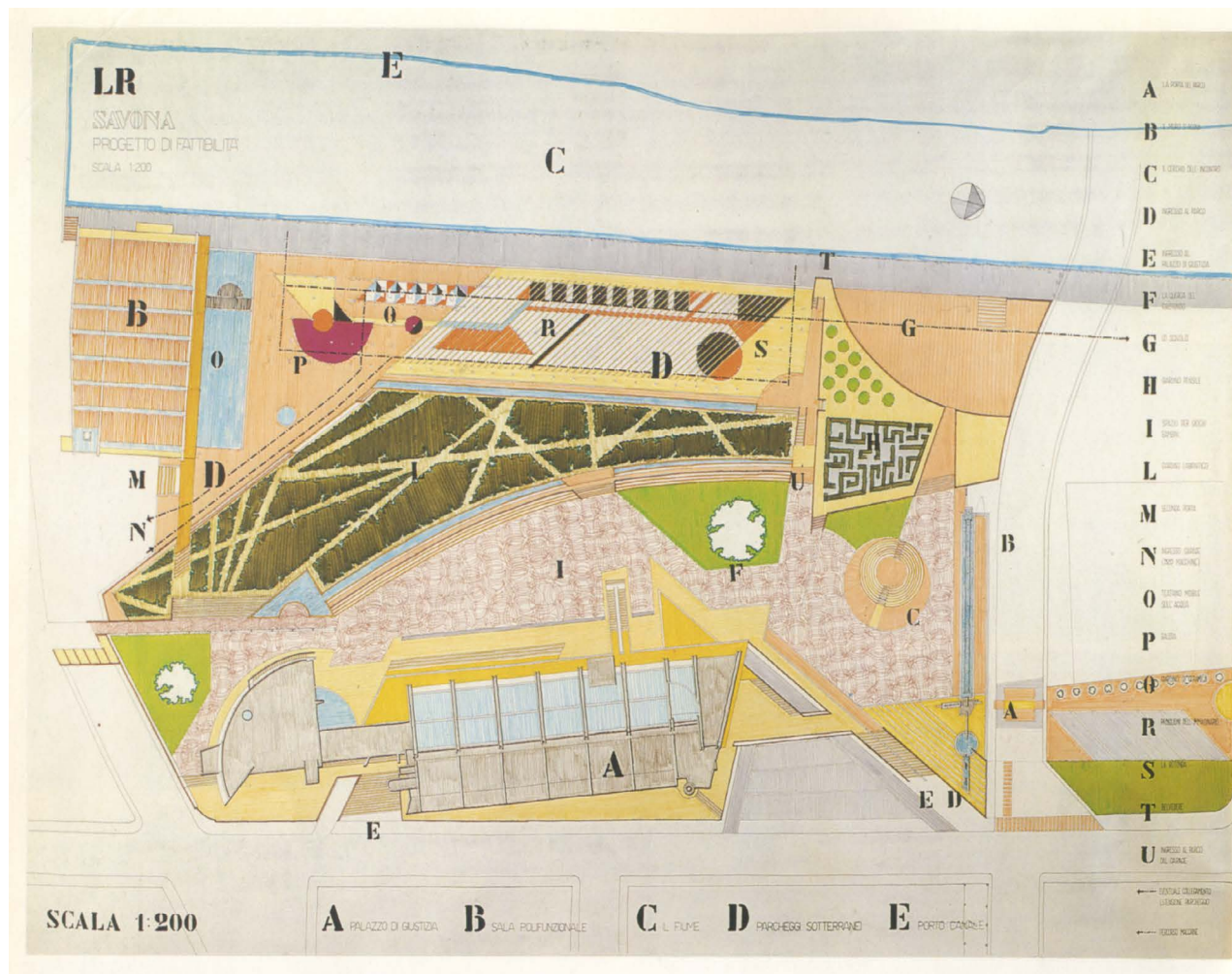
a city. Architecture itself then becomes the tool for transforming the present society into the future one, and urban spaces take on the maieutic force of a miraculous gesture capable of changing the lives of men, following in this the teaching of his master Giovanni Michelucci. It really seems that when a problem cannot be solved within the boundaries of the project assigned to him, Ricci chooses to expand those boundaries so that he can include in his project not only the urbanistic problems of this part of the city, or the symbolic problems related to an institutional building, but also the resolution of the difficult relationship between state and citizens and even the transformation of the present society into a more just, open and tolerant future one. Ricci's utopia is precisely evident in not accepting the conditions he is given to work. In the end, the good intentions behind this project turned out to be unsuccessful, not because the strategy put in place was wrong, but because the specific solutions were insufficient, because of excessive optimism about the future society, or more simply because what was imagined was too good to be true.

First and foremost, Ricci was aware that a good project needed to integrate with the city around it, and in order to resolve the complex urban planning situation around it he chose to place his project between the nineteenth-century city and a large urban park that in his intentions was to be built on the banks of the Letimbro stream: a park that was beyond his commission but that could have revitalized the riverfront that had long remained abandoned through landscaped gardens, fountains, a labyrinth, an underground parking lot, and even through a mobile theater on the river water [Fig. 4]. Placed between the nineteenth-century city and a merely imagined park, Ricci's project chooses to realize itself primarily with the latter: both the immense sloping glass window and the large covered plaza face this side. On the contrary it seems to turn its back on the pre-existing nineteenth-century city where it re-proposes the embankment of the pre-existing railroad and the closed curtain wall volumetry of the nineteenth-century city, and where in the more than 100 meters of its extension there is only one stairway opening that could have led toward the river. Ricci is aware that this choice may weaken the project, and in fact in his report he writes "the interruption of the cross streets, which do not find their natural outlet towards the river, creates a slight sense of discomfort"⁸, but immediately justifies this position by stating that such an inconvenience would be "immediately removed by the presence of the covered plaza"⁹, which was supposed to function as a junction between the city and the park. Thus the covered square takes upon itself a multitude of tasks central to the operation of the intervention, while the entire project entrusts its success more to the future city than to the existing one, the one that did not exist then and still does not exist today.

These lofty aspirations collide with the harsh Italian reality. The site where he had planned to build the large park on the Letimbro remains occupied by the warehouses of the State Railways' Rialzo Squad until 2008. The same regime of

8 Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona*, 29.

9 Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona*, 29.



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ownership of the areas changes several times, passing from public to investee company to ownership by private companies that intend to develop the land. Although the building has always been owned by the municipality, the land on which it stands had remained the property of the State Railways until the building was put in real estate registry in 2018. Many of the Courthouse's problems,⁶ and part of the perceived sense of degradation in the entire area, stem from the failure to create this urban park, yet they were also contributed to by certain design choices the architect paradoxically wanted to pursue to achieve a diametrically opposite effect.

The second difficulty that Ricci perfectly recognizes is that inherent in wanting to integrate the paths of a courthouse with those of the city, that is, in wanting to prevent such a building from becoming "a body in itself, defended and extraneous to the life of the community"¹⁰. In part, this position implies a different conception of the court in which control and oversight are not so central. This difficulty led him to raise the building off the ground so that he could multiply the paths through the building and increase the number of entrances. As many as seven entrances are still recognizable today, leading into at least five rooms of the building all located at different levels: three entrances along the north side, one to the south, one along XX Settembre Street, and two more on the west

¹⁰ Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona*, 15.

Fig. 4
The Palace of Justice within the design plan of the park along the Letimbro, image published in Leonardo Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona* (Florence: Centro Di, 1987).

side. The disproportionate number of entrances should have transformed the building into a junction between different urban routes and made it permeable to the community, while the absence of a main entrance should have ensured the existence of multiple entrances equivalent to each other. Instead, in spite of the best intentions of who had designed it, the courthouse was relegated to being an isolated foreign body within the city, the imagined pathways were closed because the urban park they led to was never realized, and for years people entered the courthouse from a crawl space. Similar problems were found throughout the building. For example, the maintenance of the sloping facade was planned through a trolley capable of sliding over the entire surface – a so innovative mechanism that it was not provided for in Italian regulations, which is why it was never possible to test it and put it in function. Thus without routine maintenance soon the sloping facade soon experienced water infiltration. Even the complex and fragmented interior spaces would have required great caution even during the most trivial plant or functional upgrades. Instead, the absence of the necessary care during the many interior interventions often ended up undermining the delicate architectural balance of the work.

Leonardo Ricci was well aware of a third constructive risk of a large, mono-functional building: he knew that functional specialization results in occasional and intermittent use of an urban area and sought to prevent this from happening. He had already recognized this drawback in many tertiary areas of modern metropolises and, as early as the mid-1960s, had addressed these issues in his "Research for a No-Alienated City", which he also developed in university courses at the Pennsylvania State University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Florida¹¹. To solve the problem he creates a space under the building that he calls a covered plaza where he places some functions independent of the courthouse such as a café, a bookstore, and a bank ATM, imagining that these activities, with the connection to the future park, could prevent the whole area from living "only during the hours when the courthouse is functioning"¹². He imagines this square being used by the citizenry on holidays or in the evenings, even during bad weather days, so as to bring "life to that area of the city that is now dead"¹³. The followed strategy could have worked, although the intended functions were perhaps few, but the ownership of these commercial spaces remained with the municipality resulting in a strange conflict of interest that led, after the first attempts to rent them out, to these places being left completely unused. In fact, those who should have rented them were the same entity that preferred to avoid any mixing of functions.

In fact, in the Palace of Justice in Savona Leonardo Ricci designed, though without succeeding in implementing it, that mixture of functional programs and uses that during the 1990s would become the banner of Dutch architecture and then an inescapable constant in all urban renewal operations. Even today,

¹¹ Michele Costanzo, *Leonardo Ricci e l'idea di spazio comunitario* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2009), 69-74.

¹² Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona*, 15.

¹³ Ricci, *Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Savona*, 15.

especially in operations aimed at increasing the commercial exploitation of an urban area, it remains unavoidable to resort to a plurality of functions that at least mimic that continuous and undifferentiated use of space proper to historic buildings. The Dutch experiences of the 1990s take up the idea of functional mixing from the research in megastructural architecture of the 1960s to which the Savona Courthouse refers and of which it is an example, albeit a late one. Ironically, all that remains today of this early attempt at urban regeneration through functional admixture is a dusty sign with the words "BAR" [Fig. 5].

Finally, it is true that the Savona Courthouse does not fulfill the ambitions it claims to achieve, but this is only because, if left alone, it is too small to fulfill them. In fact, despite its size, the task it takes on is far more immense by wanting to redefine the entire area from Via Sormano to Via Luigi Costi, and from Piazza del Popolo to the Letimbro stream. While setting itself much greater goals than those to which the project was called to respond, Ricci's project turns out to be very generous with the future city because, by occupying the nineteenth-century blocks up to the continuation of Via Astengo, it doesn't constrain the development of the western front of Piazza del Popolo. After all, it is precisely the absence of any project capable of continuing and completing the great aspirations expressed by the Palace of Justice that makes the difference between the future city dreamed by Ricci and the sloppiness of the current



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Fig. 5
Palace of Justice of Savona,
covered square, 2017, picture
by Vittorio Pizzigoni - photo
VP 2017.

reality all the more evident.

This huge, utopian architecture of boundless ambitions trusts quite generously in future society to accomplish the lofty, perhaps too lofty, task it has set for itself. Despite its temporary failure, it nevertheless remains an example of the generosity with which it manages to trust in the future for its own completion, a generosity that truly leads one to liken this work to the great architectures of the past.

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