

## Legal Design, Criminal Law and Social Empowerment

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### Abstract

*This contribution explores the concept of citizen empowerment within the context of Italian criminal law, utilising graphical tools to visualize legal information. Building on legal design literature, the authors, experts in Communication Design and Comparative Law, examine how to make the Italian criminal justice system more accessible and supportive, helping individuals recognize the crime of ‘mafia association,’ understand its mechanisms and impact, and effectively navigate legal channels to report, challenge, and protect themselves from such influence. The starting point is the analysis of two case studies, which have been deepened during the Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory led by Luciano Perondi, with the collaboration of Andrea Lancia, and the participation of Barbara Pasa and LIBERA’s lawyer Marco Lombardo. The case studies under scrutiny pertain to the criminal act of ‘mafia association of Camorra-style’ in the Venetian area (the so-called Casalesi di Eraclea trial) and in the Padua area (the so-called Aspidre trial), in the northeastern part of Italy. In the context of Italian criminal law, the expression ‘mafia association’ denotes a particular offence involving participation or support for an organized criminal group that engages in activities such as intimidation, violence, or the exploitation of social influence. It is widespread in Italy, not only in the South, as a stereotypical view of our country would have us believe. The expression ‘mafia association’ can be related to groups such as the Sicilian Mafia (Cosa Nostra), the Neapolitan Camorra, and the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta, among others. It has been demonstrated that the criminal enterprise extends beyond the commission of violent crimes, encompassing the provision of resources, connections, and other forms of assistance that serve to bolster the organizations’ capabilities. These case studies, covering numerous indictments, defendants, and complex socio-economic ties, reveal major gaps in communication within Italy’s criminal justice system. These include limited public understanding of mafia association trials and weak coordination among judicial actors. Effective communication is crucial in such cases, where lengthy proceedings, technical evidence, and broad social impact demand transparency and collaboration to sustain trust and legitimacy. In this light, the evaluation of how legal information is disseminated and understood becomes paramount. In order to determine the efficacy of communication tools for a broader public audience, it is necessary to consider expansion beyond the confines of the legal profession and institutional stakeholders. Such an expansion can foster greater awareness of the collective implications of criminal law, thereby empowering individuals to adopt a more proactive and preventive stance.*

Keywords: Legal Design; Italian Criminal law; Empowerment; Access; Citizenship

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## 1. Legal Design as a Site of Critical Speculation and Exploratory Practice

This article explores how the hybridization of communication design and legal analysis can support citizen empowerment in the field of Italian criminal law. The central hypothesis is that legal design, as ‘a movement aimed at changing both the understanding and the practice of law’ (Doherty, 2024), can serve not only as aids to legal drafting and interpretation, but as epistemic devices that democratize legal understanding, especially in contexts characterized by complexity, opacity, and socio-legal urgency.

Our inquiry originates from an interdisciplinary collaborative laboratory in communication design and comparative law, applied to two concrete case studies explored within the Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory led by Luciano Perondi at University Iuav of Venezia, in collaboration with Andrea Lancia, and with the legal expertise of Barbara Pasa. The project does not adhere to the conventions of empirical research, nor does it rely on quantitative or qualitative data analysis to assess individual perceptions of complex criminal cases through visual creation. Rather, it adopts a speculative, interdisciplinary approach in which over 50 students engage in legal design as a form of civic intervention. Positioned simultaneously as learners and citizens, these students generate visual artifacts that challenge and transcend traditional pedagogical boundaries. These outputs, developed through design-led legal interpretation, serve as accessible tools for public engagement, translating opaque judicial processes into resonant visual forms. In doing so, the project demonstrates how legal design can democratize legal knowledge and foster civic participation through interpretive engagement with legal complexity.

The visual communication tools employed in this process are grounded in *synsemic* and *semiotic* approaches, which emphasize the interplay between meaning-making systems and symbolic representation. These frameworks enable the creation of artifacts that not only convey legal content, but also invite interpretive interaction, enhancing their civic and pedagogical impact. These artifacts have the potential to democratize legal knowledge, fostering citizen empowerment by translating opaque legal proceedings into comprehensible, resonant forms. In this way, legal design becomes a tool for civic participation, not through content-simplification, but through speculative and interpretive engagement with legal complexity.

The term *synsemia* (sometimes seen as *sinsemia*) originates in Italian semiotics and design theory (Lussu, 2020). It refers to the deliberate visual arrangement of written elements in space, using layout, visual hierarchy, and other design variables, to communicate clearly, even outside of conventional text-based meaning.<sup>1</sup> The emerging corpus of literature on synsemic writing offers hitherto unexplored pathways through which these dimensions can be bridged with cognitive accessibility (Ketola, de Rooy, & Haapio, 2024) and participatory legal design (Toivonen & Vela, 2024). Visual communication, it has been demonstrated, has the capacity to reduce cognitive load and to support memory retention. Furthermore, it facilitates non-linear navigation of complex systems. However, these insights have yet to be systematically applied to criminal law, at least in Italy, as we are about to do. The case studies we examined are related to two major criminal trials involving mafia associations of Camorra origin operating in the northeastern region of Italy. These associations maintain complex economic and social networks, often concealed behind the façade of legally constituted corporations. The so-called

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<sup>1</sup> The blog *Sinsemia*, curated by Perondi & Romei, focuses on semiotics, communication design, and the intersection of writing and visual form. It advocates for intentional, designed writing in space aimed at clarity and interpretation, rather than emotional or abstract meaning.

*Casalesi di Eraclea* case is situated in the province of Venice, while the *Aspide* case pertains to the province of Padua. Both trials encompassed dozens of specific charges brought against numerous individuals, forming the foundation for criminal prosecutions.

These cases underscore a pivotal research concern: the extent to which the rules and principles of the criminal justice system, typically accessible only to legal professionals, can be effectively communicated to the public, thereby empowering citizens to proactively engage in contexts vulnerable to criminal infiltration and contribute meaningfully to its prevention. A growing body of work highlights that even ‘imperfect institutions,’ such as informal systems of law enforcement, and the spontaneous emergence of private protection orderings in general, can be quite successful approaches to the public good (Benzecry & Thompson, 2025). Our research contributes to the exploration of the ‘informal legal order’ and non-state providers of justice by addressing crime prevention through individual awareness and social empowerment. By examining how individuals (starting from our students) interpret and engage with legal norms outside formal institutional frameworks, we highlight the ways in which communities develop autonomous mechanisms of accountability and normative enforcement. The project aims at revealing that legal consciousness is not confined to official legal actors, or codified systems, but is actively shaped by everyday practices, social expectations, and collective responses to perceived injustice. Through our lab, we shed light on the ways in which informal legal orders emerge, persist, and interact with formal criminal justice institutions, offering insights into the dynamic relationship between state law and legal culture.

In our view, legal design should not be understood merely as a tool for simplification, but rather as a form of epistemic speculation, a means of interrogating how legal knowledge is produced, structured, and communicated. While we acknowledge the widespread appeal of ‘design thinking,’ we also recognize its definitional vagueness and methodological inconsistency (Barsalou, 2017). For this reason, we do not claim complete adherence to a design thinking framework, but we regard legal design as a critical and exploratory practice that resists reductionist models and invites reflection on the normative, aesthetic, and cognitive dimensions of law. Legal design, in this sense, is not a procedural shortcut, but a speculative lens through which the complexity of legal systems can be reimagined and contested.

In recent years, legal design has emerged as a response to the systemic opacity of legal language and its exclusionary effects on non-expert users. Initially developed in the context of contract simplification<sup>2</sup> and service design (Haapio & Passera, 2011; Passera, Haapio, & Barton, 2013; Haapio & Hagan, 2016; Hagan & Miso, 2018; Hagan, 2018; 2020), the field has progressively expanded to encompass speculative (Sinni & Pasa, 2024; MacLoud, 2024b), participatory, and narrative approaches<sup>3</sup>. This shift, from a primarily simplificatory orientation to more speculative and imaginative dimensions, reflects recognition that legal language is not only technical but also performative and informal. Legal texts do not simply describe social reality; they actively constitute it and imply meanings beyond the literal wording (Pasa & Morra, 2018; Pasa, 2015; Sbisà, 2007; Sacco, 1995). Pioneering projects such as Margaret Hagan’s Stanford Legal Design Lab (2018b) and the Finnish Legal Design Summit have laid the groundwork for interdisciplinary approaches involving design, semiotics, law, and digital technologies. While several initiatives have targeted administrative, civil, and privacy-related domains (Haapio et al., 2018; Rossi & Palmirani, 2019; Rossi & Lenzi, 2020; Rossi et al., 2022; Couronne et al., 2024; Pasa & Sinni, 2024b), few have ventured into the criminal legal system,

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<sup>2</sup> Legal texts are not ‘designed to make life easier’ to borrow Elizabeth Warren’s critique of American contractual language (Warren, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For a general overview see Ducato, Strowel, & Marique (Eds.), 2024, and the authors quoted in the following pages.

particularly within the European civil law tradition (Morales Barra, 2025). Indeed, the utilization of legal design principles within the domain of criminal law is still in its relative infancy. In addressing these issues, our paper shares the legal design principles as summarized in the LeDA manifesto,<sup>4</sup> grounded on scholars' reflections of Margaret Hagan (2016; 2020). Our theory and practice entail not only the visualization of legal texts, but also the identification of conceptual clusters, normative hierarchies, and procedural flows through the utilization of user-centered design methods. Our approach is founded upon the systematization and visual translation of juridical knowledge. Drawing also on speculative and narrative design (Pope, 2024; Pasa & Sinni, 2024a; MacLoud, 2024a), our approach integrates counter-models with a view to disrupting linear and exclusionary narratives surrounding law and criminality. Furthermore, we explicitly incorporate storytelling, games and satirical strategies as complementary tools for expanding access and engagement. The storytelling dimension enables the contextualization of legal issues within broader socio-political narratives (Perry-Kessaris, 2019), bridging the technical language of law with the discursive formats familiar to the public sphere. Equally important is the role of satire and irony, which we treat not as rhetorical decoration, but as cognitive levers. The utilization of humor has the potential to diminish feelings of intimidation, foster critical analysis, and unveil some contradictions inherent within legal systems, particularly with regard to processes of bureaucratic opacity or the legitimization of organized crime. Visual practices can destabilize dominant legal narratives when they employ vernacular and ironic codes (Sherwin, 2014). Thus, the utilization of techniques such as ironic framing, visual exaggeration, and parody within the medium of satire and sarcasm serves as a tool for epistemological disobedience. These rhetorical devices are used to subvert the authority traditionally attributed to legal language, thereby fostering greater engagement and participation among laypeople.

## 2. Criminal Law Literacy: State of the Art and Strategies for Enhancement

Criminal law is widely recognized as having a direct and profound impact on society, not only through the serious and lasting consequences it imposes on individuals convicted of crimes (such as fines or imprisonment affecting their personal, social, and professional lives), but also through collateral effects including stigma, reputational harm, and disruptions to family and relationships.

Despite this far-reaching influence, criminal law remains largely inaccessible to people.

The complexity of legal language, the procedural opacity of judicial systems, and the specialized nature of legal education contribute to a significant gap between the law's societal impact and citizens' ability to understand or engage with it. As a result, criminal trials, rules and procedures are often perceived as remote or impenetrable, reinforcing a sense of detachment from processes that fundamentally affect civic life. Bridging this divide requires innovative approaches that render legal knowledge more accessible, relatable, and inclusive, particularly through interdisciplinary practices, such as legal design and visual communication. Furthermore, public accessibility gives rise to significant concerns regarding legal literacy and civic empowerment. When the principles, rules, procedures, and implications of criminal law remain the preserve of legal professionals alone, citizens are deprived of the capacity to critically interrogate the legal system or to engage with it proactively in the service of prevention and democratic participation.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf <https://www.legaldesignalliance.org/> (last accessed 25.06.2025).

Enhancing legal literacy in more general terms, defined as the ability to comprehend and critically assess legal norms and processes, becomes essential for fostering informed citizenship and enabling communities to recognize and resist potential abuses, particularly in contexts vulnerable to criminal infiltration. It is, therefore, a democratic imperative to promote public engagement with criminal law, ensuring that the law is not enforced in isolation from the society it governs. This imperative is further underscored by a shifting perception of judicial authority: the notion that courts inherently uphold procedural and substantive due process is no longer accepted as a self-evident safeguard. In contemporary democracies marked by institutional fragility and public distrust, there is a growing demand for transparency, legal comprehension, and the practical application of law in the pursuit of justice. Legal literacy, in this context, is not merely educational: it is a tool of democratic resilience.

The Penal Code and the Code of Penal Procedure, which define crimes, their corresponding punishments, and the legal processes for investigating, prosecuting, and adjudicating those crimes, require a high level of legal literacy to understand fundamental legal principles such as legality, criminal responsibility, culpability, causation, etc. These key constructs require a systematic reading of legal texts. The reading and interpretation of legal norms, as well as an understanding of their practical functioning, urge a combined and systematic engagement with multiple sources. These range from constitutional provisions<sup>5</sup> to substantive rules and procedural mechanisms that govern the application and enforcement. Legal literacy, therefore, is not merely a matter of grasping isolated rules, but of navigating an interconnected legal framework that demands contextual and comparative analysis.

In the Italian legal system, the principle of *culpability*, enshrined in Article 27 of the Italian Constitution ('criminal responsibility is personal'), presupposes an individual's awareness<sup>6</sup> that their conduct may constitute a criminal offence. Together with the doctrine of *legality*, these principles ensure both the predictability and legitimacy of criminal law. Articles 42(1) and 43 of the Italian Penal Code further specify that *criminal liability* arises only when an act is legally defined as an offence and committed with consciousness and intent, or, alternatively, through negligence. Thus, criminal liability hinges not only on the legal classification of an act, but also on the individual's mental state. A lack of legal awareness, therefore, poses tangible risks, underscoring the need for accessible legal education and public understanding. Procedural mechanisms of criminal trials present an even greater challenge to our understanding, given their reliance on strict procedural safeguards rooted in many legal principles, such as due process, which guarantees the safeguarding of fundamental rights and human dignity, including the right to a public trial and confrontation of witnesses, legal representation and access to aid, the prohibition of retroactive punishment, the protection of personal liberty through the presumption of innocence, and the ban of the death penalty, which are all recognized by the Italian Constitution, and are technically translated in forms of actions by the Code of Penal Procedure. In addition to the conceptual and linguistic inaccessibility of Articles of Codes, the overwhelming volume of legislative and sub-legislative texts, and the deeply technical structure of judicial reasoning, further challenge citizens' accessibility and comprehension of criminal rules and procedures.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> As enshrined in the Italian Constitution: Articles 24, 25, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Notably, the distinction between 'blameless ignorance' and 'ignorance due to fault' has been clarified in landmark rulings by the Italian Constitutional Court, affirming that only the former may exempt individuals from liability.

<sup>7</sup> We will not be addressing the 'law of mafia organizations,' understood as an informal, spontaneous, and parallel normative system that operates through extralegal yet effective customs and codes of conduct.

This is just one example of why criminal law is often considered a specialized field reserved for experts. This is indeed true given its procedural and substantive complexity (McLachlan & Webley, 2021). Our aim is to make criminal legal systems more accessible and responsive to the needs of individuals within the community, whether they are impacted by neighborhood crime, at risk of unintentional legal violations due to limited legal knowledge, or voluntarily engaged in criminal behavior. Inspired by the practices of civic journalism and investigative documentary-making, our perspective metamorphoses the design output to become a form of public legal reporting. The resulting capacity to unveil hidden dynamics of criminal governance and institutional complicity is a key feature of the transformation we advocate.

### 3. Data, Research Questions and Goals

In January 2025, the Veneto Region, in collaboration with Unioncamere Veneto, LIBERA (a network comprising over 1,600 associations, groups, and organizations dedicated to combating organized crime and corruption, and fostering a more equitable society) and the Women's Entrepreneurship Committee of the Venice Rovigo Chamber of Commerce hosted a conference entitled 'Mafias in Veneto: presence in the economy and the environment.' As presented at the conference, there was an increase in crimes such as usury, extortion, and money laundering, as well as scams and computer fraud, during the 2022–2023 period. During the pandemic period, indeed, criminals took advantage of the virus to strengthen their position and boost their illegal businesses, according to the latest data collected by the Network. According to the Public Prosecutor's Office, distinct Mafia syndicates are currently operating in the Veneto region. These include one of local origin, three of 'Ndranghetist derivation, and one of Camorra matrix,<sup>8</sup> along with additional 'simple' (i.e., non-mafia) delinquent groups. These associations are said to have supported the mafia organizations in carrying out criminal activities, primarily in the economic sphere. The nature of the crimes is diverse, as evidenced by the 610 offences charged across 328 mafia-related proceedings in the Veneto region during the 2022–2023 period. The highest concentrations of charges involve money laundering and the reuse of illicit funds, as well as drug trafficking, with over 100 recorded incidents. Other significant categories include extortion, illegal possession and trafficking of firearms, and tax-related crimes, each with fewer than 100 cases. A smaller number of offences involve fraud, robbery, theft, bribery, fraudulent bankruptcy, usury, and some cases of bodily harm linked to forgery in public documents.<sup>9</sup>

On this backdrop, the research questions we are posing stem from some unresolved tensions: What methods can be employed to visually represent the interpretation by courts of Italian criminal law, with a particular focus on those governing mafia-related offences, without distorting their legal meaning? To what extent can visual and graphical artifacts function not only as communication tools, but also as epistemic and pedagogical devices, thereby empowering ordinary people to recognize and respond to mafia structures in their

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<sup>8</sup> The '*Ndrangheta* and *Camorra* are distinct mafia organizations with different origins and structures. The '*Ndrangheta*, traditionally based in Calabria, is highly centralized and built around blood ties, making it secretive and difficult to infiltrate. It operates quietly but has a strong international presence, especially in drug trafficking. In contrast, the *Camorra*, historically rooted in Naples, is fragmented and decentralized, with many independent clans often in conflict. It tends to be more visible and violent, focusing primarily on local control. These differences reflect their respective social and geographic contexts and influence how they interact with politics and the economy. See Scaglione, 2011; Dickie, 2014; Arcidiacono, Avola & Palidda, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Lombardo, cit. at the conference 'Mafias in Veneto: presence in the economy and the environment' (2025).

environment? Which forms of interdisciplinary collaboration are required to translate criminal norms into comprehensible and actionable formats?

These questions are driven by both pragmatic and theoretical concerns.

From a practical standpoint, the research addresses the lack of information surrounding criminal judgments, particularly in high-profile mafia cases, such as the *Casalesi di Eraclea* and *Aspide* trials. These investigations revealed complex networks of power, as well as significant institutional challenges in conveying such complexity to the public. In the ongoing *Casalesi di Eraclea* trial involving a Camorra-based mafia association operating in the Venetian area, a total of 73 defendants faced charges amounting to approximately 90 counts of crimes committed from 1999 to 2019. The judicial proceedings encompass a total of more than 4,500 pages.<sup>10</sup> In the *Aspide* trial involving a Camorra-based mafia association operating in the Padua area, approximately 20 defendants were involved, facing dozens of charges for offences committed between 2008 and 2011. While the judgments are shorter in terms of number of pages, they are by no means less complex.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, it should be noted that criminal judgments issued by Italian courts are not readily accessible. They may be obtained through the criminal archive office of the court or via the court's copy office. Only a limited number of judgments can be retrieved through the Ministry of Justice database or through private, fee-based databases. At present, there is no open-access, free-of-charge database available to individuals who wish to independently consult such judgments.<sup>12</sup>

On a theoretical level, our research responds to calls for the democratization of legal meaning-making by experimenting with visual and spatial modalities of legal expression. It is crucial to improve people's understanding of the fundamental principles and concepts underlying the criminal justice system. A first key principle is the *principle of legality*: an individual cannot be punished for an act that is not defined as a crime by law at the time it was committed. Another key principle is that of *mens rea*, which refers to a guilty mind or intent, a prerequisite for criminal liability. The *presumption of innocence* is another fundamental principle, meaning that an accused individual is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty. The *burden of proof* is a further key concept, meaning that it is the responsibility of the prosecution to prove the guilt of the accused. The *double jeopardy rule* is designed to prevent individuals from facing multiple penalties for the same offence. And so forth... We believe that increasing people's familiarity with the criminal justice system can enhance democratic institutions as a whole, with the

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<sup>10</sup> Abbreviated procedure: Judgment of first instance GUP Venezia (768 pages); Judgment of Venice court of appeal (482 pages); Judgment of the Supreme Court (82 pages). Ordinary procedure: Judgment of the first instance Tribunal of Venezia (conspiracy with some crimes aggravated by the mafia method) (3,188 pages long).

<sup>11</sup> Ordinary procedure: Judgment of first instance, Tribunal of Padova (174 pages); Judgment of Venice court of appeal (144 pages); Judgment of the Supreme Court (five pages).

<sup>12</sup> The Supreme Court judgments (*Cassazione*) are the only ones available online without charge. Cf <https://www.italgiure.giustizia.it/sncass/> (last accessed 25.06.2025). Also, the Constitutional Court decisions are freely accessible (cf ft. 2). As the Court's role is to act as a 'judge of the laws,' it is tasked with reviewing two key aspects of legislative acts: firstly, whether the acts have been enacted in accordance with the procedures outlined in the Constitution (which is known as formal constitutionality), and secondly, whether their content aligns with constitutional principles (also referred to as substantive constitutionality). The Constitutional Court does not function as a third legislative chamber, where individuals can petition to contest or amend legislative choices made for political reasons by elected representatives. The Court's primary function is to establish and maintain boundaries: if the legislature exceeds the limits of the Constitution (which provide sufficient scope for legislative freedom of action), it is the Court's responsibility to either condemn the law, or ensure it is brought back within those limits in order to prevent a violation of the Constitution.



further goal of fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for people living in poor conditions, who are particularly susceptible to manipulation and exploitation. It is precisely due to its impact on individual rights, public policy and public order that criminal law necessitates a large public access. Comparative legal studies on legal transplants<sup>13</sup> and normative pluralism (Sacco, 1991; 2015) have emphasized how law is shaped not only by formal rules but also by informal codes and social expectations. This is particularly relevant in contexts such as organized crime, where so-called ‘mafia law’ functions through its own normative infrastructure while simultaneously exploiting institutional channels. In this regard, the task of ensuring that criminal law is comprehensible to citizens becomes a multifaceted undertaking, encompassing both legal and cultural dimensions.

Our objectives are therefore twofold. Firstly, it is necessary to reframe the access to criminal law as an issue of cognitive justice and public agency. Law should not only be made *for* citizens, but also *with* them, in forms they can understand and act upon (Toivonen & Vela, 2024; Raparelli, 2024). Secondly, we must develop pedagogical and communicative strategies that allow both prevention and critical awareness. If legal knowledge remains confined within technocratic silos, the risk is not only disempowerment, but also unintentional complicity on the part of ordinary people in systems of criminal governance. Our effort aims at a new understanding of the reality of law, creating knowledge by building ‘tools’ (documents, visual artifacts, services and technologies), piloting them, and evaluating them, to produce a new knowledge systematization wherein people are empowered not merely to understand the law, but also to recognize when and how it applies to their lived realities and personal experiences.

#### 4. Methodology and Interdisciplinary Study Design

We adopt a multi-method, practice-based methodology at the intersection of design research, legal theory, and participatory pedagogy. Rather than a controlled experiment, our project consists in a studio-based intervention that integrates: (i) legal analysis of complex criminal proceedings, (ii) didactic deconstruction of legal knowledge into communicable units, and (iii) synsemic and visual translation into public-facing artifacts. Our approach aligns with participatory and proactive strands of legal design (foregrounding access, cognitive accessibility, and user engagement) as consolidated in recent handbooks and roundtables on legal design.

The project was embedded in a Master’s-level Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory.<sup>14</sup> The initial 40 hours focused on foundational training in information design and data visualization, covering topics such as visual variables, reference systems, analogy, and elementary statistics. The remaining 60 hours were devoted to guided inquiry into criminal law case studies, including prototyping, critique sessions, and final project delivery. External contributors provided targeted inputs and commentary: legal-design practitioners (graphic and legal), an investigative journalist specialized in organized crime, and two Supreme Court judges who explained trial procedures and judicial writing. As said, we focused on two complex proceedings of the mafia-style association in North-Eastern Italy, the so-called *Casalesi di Eraclea* and *Aspide* trials. The document corpus comprised some publicly available judgments and related materials; teams were required to reconstruct facts, charges, procedures, actors,

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<sup>13</sup> The literature on this topic is endless: for a summary see citation Pasa & Sinni, 2024a.

<sup>14</sup> Over a span of 100 contact hours, approximately 50 students engaged in small-team work under our supervision. Students were informed of the potential educational and research use of their outputs, permitting the fair use of selected material for quotation where necessary and relevant to the academic paper. No personal data was collected. To preserve the integrity of the blind review process, the names of contributors and institutions were initially withheld and submitted separately to the editor.



evidentiary logics, timelines, and outcomes, and to map citizen-relevant interfaces (rights, reporting avenues, and prevention). The emphasis on public-facing communication and legal literacy addressed well-documented shortcomings in the accessibility of criminal law information, underscoring the need for cognitively accessible legal artifacts that facilitate broader public understanding and engagement.

Each team designed a book or a board game, which could include: synsemic maps (layout-driven writing in space that blends text structure and visual hierarchy), process timelines and role/rights guides (who does what/when; what rights/obligations citizens or businesses have at each stage), data visualizations (e.g., offence typologies, economic-social ties), and micro-explainers or visual narratives (e.g., graphic novels, ludonarration).

Students were instructed to: (a) maintain legal meanings they read in the judgments, (b) minimize cognitive load through layout/structure, and (c) make actionability explicit (recognition cues, reporting channels, protective steps). This decomposition of legal texts into chunks and relationships deliberately mirrors legal design practices that transform dense documents into structured, designable units for visual translation.

The process unfolded in successive phases. In the initial case-study analysis, student teams compiled concise dossiers from the judicial corpus (facts, charges, actors, timelines), distinguishing doctrinal elements from procedural aspects and extracting questions of civic relevance. Building on this foundation, they employed studio heuristics, such as entity-relation tables, flow charts, and role-responsibility matrices, to decompose legal content into communicable units, complemented by plain-language glosses reviewed by professors and practitioners (Rossi, 2019). Subsequently, the teams prototyped synsemic layouts and visualizations. Iterative critiques addressed issues of semantic adequacy, visual hierarchy, and risks of misinterpretation, drawing on widely acknowledged evaluation dimensions in legal-visualization research, including understandability, legibility, and alignment between intended and perceived meaning.

The Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory was organized into alternating skill modules (including visual variables, narrative and diagrammatic forms, and data handling) interspersed with project sprints and critique sessions. Alongside these activities, students were introduced to the foundations of multimedia learning, perception, and evidence-based graphic design through a flipped-classroom approach, notably poster sessions on scientific literature and peer cross-reviews. The program also included other specific contributions: (i) legal design practice from both graphic and legal perspectives, (ii) investigative journalism on organized crime, with attention to narrative constraints and legal limits in reporting, and (iii) judicial practice, addressing trial stages, appellate review, and judgment writing. We conducted structured expert reviews (involving legal scholars and practitioners) and studio-based formative critiques, guided by criteria including: (i) legal accuracy, (ii) clarity and comprehensibility, and (iii) civic usefulness and actionability. Discussions focused on cognitive accessibility and user-centered evaluation lenses developed by legal design scholarship. These include measures of understandability, legibility, and correspondence between intended meaning and user interpretation. We did not run public user surveys or comprehension tests in this first iteration. The artifacts were evaluated by experts and through studio-based critique sessions, but not by lay citizens beyond the fifty students. We identify formal field testing (such as task-based comprehension exercises with non-experts, short intercept interviews, and lightweight surveys) as future work, aligned with our practice-based, exploratory remit in criminal-law communication.

As said above, the starting point has been the legal and procedural analysis of the two mafia association trials: the *Casalesi di Eraclea* case, involving that family clan named ‘i Casalesi,’ and the *Aspide* case, involving criminal infiltration in public contracts and logistics. Legal documents (including indictments, judgments, and procedural rules) were deconstructed with the support of legal scholars and visualized collaboratively with students. Particular attention was given to the mapping of defendants, charges, investigative phases, and network of business and social relationships. The legal material was re-articulated through spatially structured layouts combining text, icons, typographic hierarchy and schematic flowcharts, drawing on Lussu’s (2020) framework of synsemic writing. The visual prototypes focused on rendering accessible: (a) rules and principles contained in penal (procedural and substantive) codes; (b) the logic of responsibility attribution; and (c) the multi-stage nature of criminal proceedings. Design choices were grounded in cognitive accessibility principles (Rossi, 2019; Ketola, de Rooy, & Haapio, 2024) and iteratively tested with students and non-expert users in workshop settings. The participatory and proactive orientations, alongside a deliberate focus on cognitive accessibility, resonate with established trajectories in legal design scholarship: participatory ladders (Toivonen & de Francisco Vela, 2024), possibility-driven approaches to contracting (Salo-Lahti & Haapio, 2024), and cognitive lenses developed through comic-contract frameworks (Baasch Andersen & Corner, 2022; Ketola, de Rooy, & Haapio, 2024). The emphasis on synsemic layout and on evaluation dimensions such as understandability and ‘fitness of correspondence’ is consistent with legal-visualization research and patterns for legal communication (Kosslyn & Chabris, 2005; Passera, 2015; Hagan & Haapio, 2016). The segmentation and reframing of complex legal documents into designable units aligns with the best practices documented by practitioners operating at the intersection of law and design in areas beyond criminal law (Waller, Passera, & Haapio, 2022; Passera, 2015).

## 5. Analysis and Results / Discussion

The experimental core of this work lies in the visual rearticulation of two complex mafia-related criminal proceedings (*Casalesi di Eraclea* and *Aspide*) as cognitive, communicative, and pedagogical objects. The artifacts developed by students and researchers were conceived in this phase not as empirical evidence, but as speculative and exploratory forms of legal reasoning, rendered spatial and interactive through design. Within this framework, communicative strategies such as satire and irony functioned not as ornamental features, but as structural devices that enhanced the synsemic coherence and interpretability of the artifacts. Their role is intrinsically linked to the imperative of accuracy and clarity in the generation and dissemination of legal knowledge, particularly when engaging with phenomena as intricate and opaque as criminal governance.

### 5.1 Visual Translation as Legal Inquiry

In both case studies, students were tasked with analyzing and reconstructing key elements of the proceedings: the network of defendants, the sequence of criminal acts, crimes and sanctions, the spaces involved, the legal qualifications of facts, and the procedural stages (indictment, precautionary measures, hearings, etc.). Instead of restating the process textually, participants employed synsemic layouts: compositions integrating graphic symbols, typographic contrast, iconographic shorthand, and schematic maps (Lussu, 2020; Rossi, 2019). The visualizations revealed emergent patterns that were otherwise buried in the textual documents. For instance, in the *Aspide* case, spatial mapping of procurement chains and municipal actors exposed redundancies, loops of responsibility, and proximity between public officials and Camorra-linked companies, details difficult to perceive in prose alone. In a similar

manner, in the *Casalesi di Eraclea* case, timeline diagrams and network graphs allowed for an intuitive reading of the long-term infiltration strategy of the *Casalesi* clan.

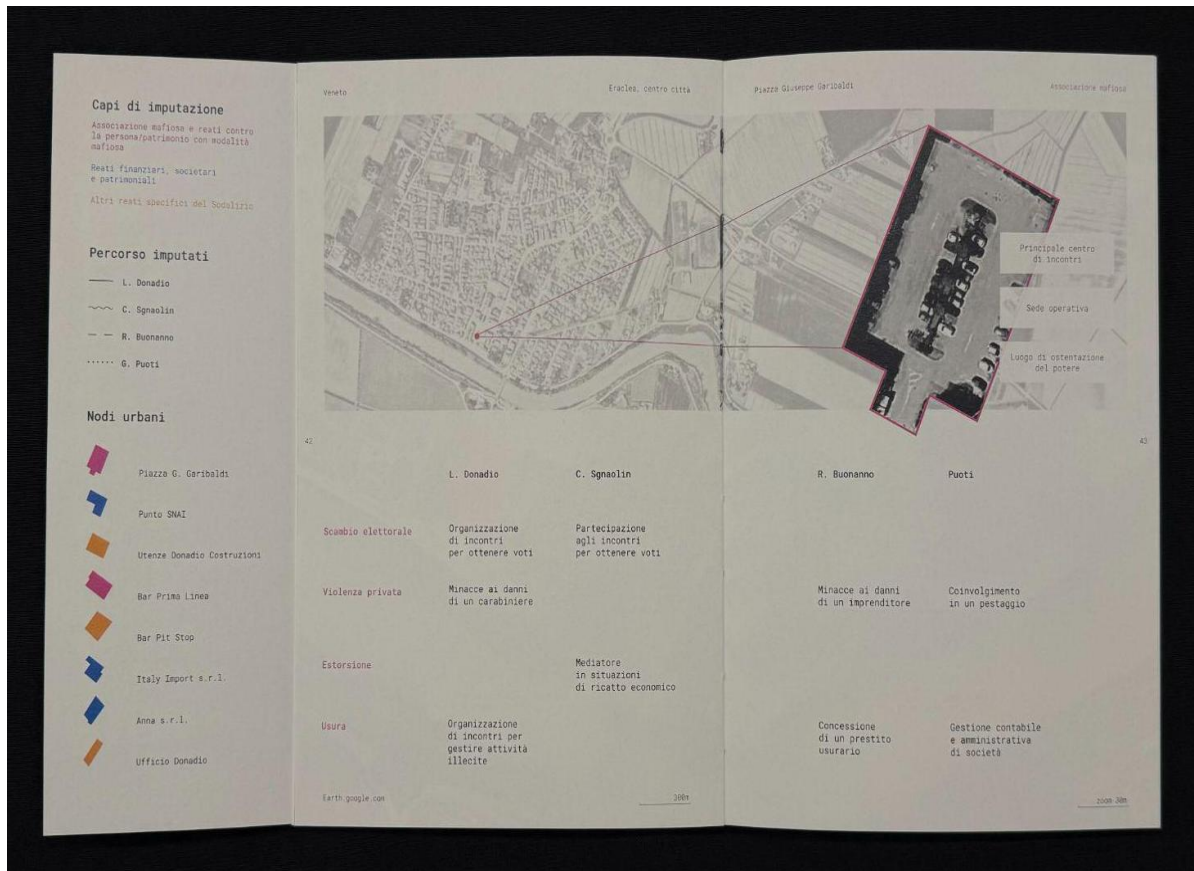


Fig. 1 - Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory, University luav of Venezia (2025). Students: Chiappe, Moroni, Zironi. By mapping the locations and routes described in the *Casalesi di Eraclea* judgment using Google Maps, the authors created a visual atlas of the case. This spatial translation supports navigation and enhances public understanding of the legal narrative. Under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

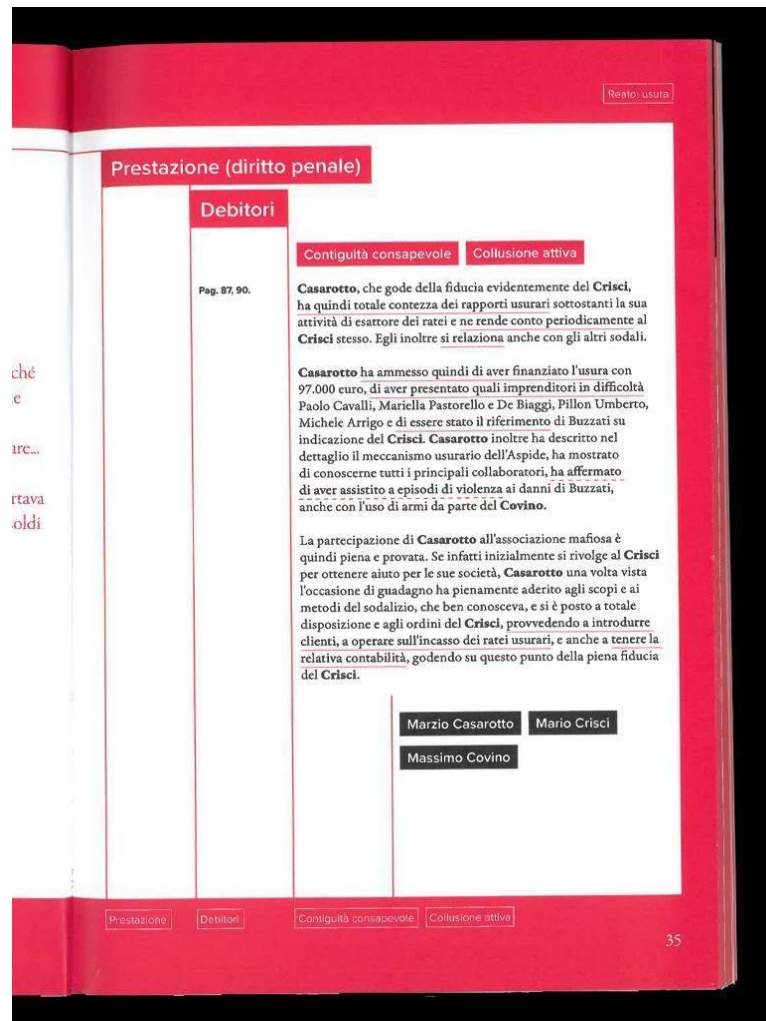


Fig. 2 - Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory, University Iuav of Venezia (2025). Students: De Giglio, Ditillo, Vanone. Through a comprehensive mapping and visual recording of the judgment, the authors transformed the full legal text into a format that is easily accessible, highlighting its structure and key contents. Under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

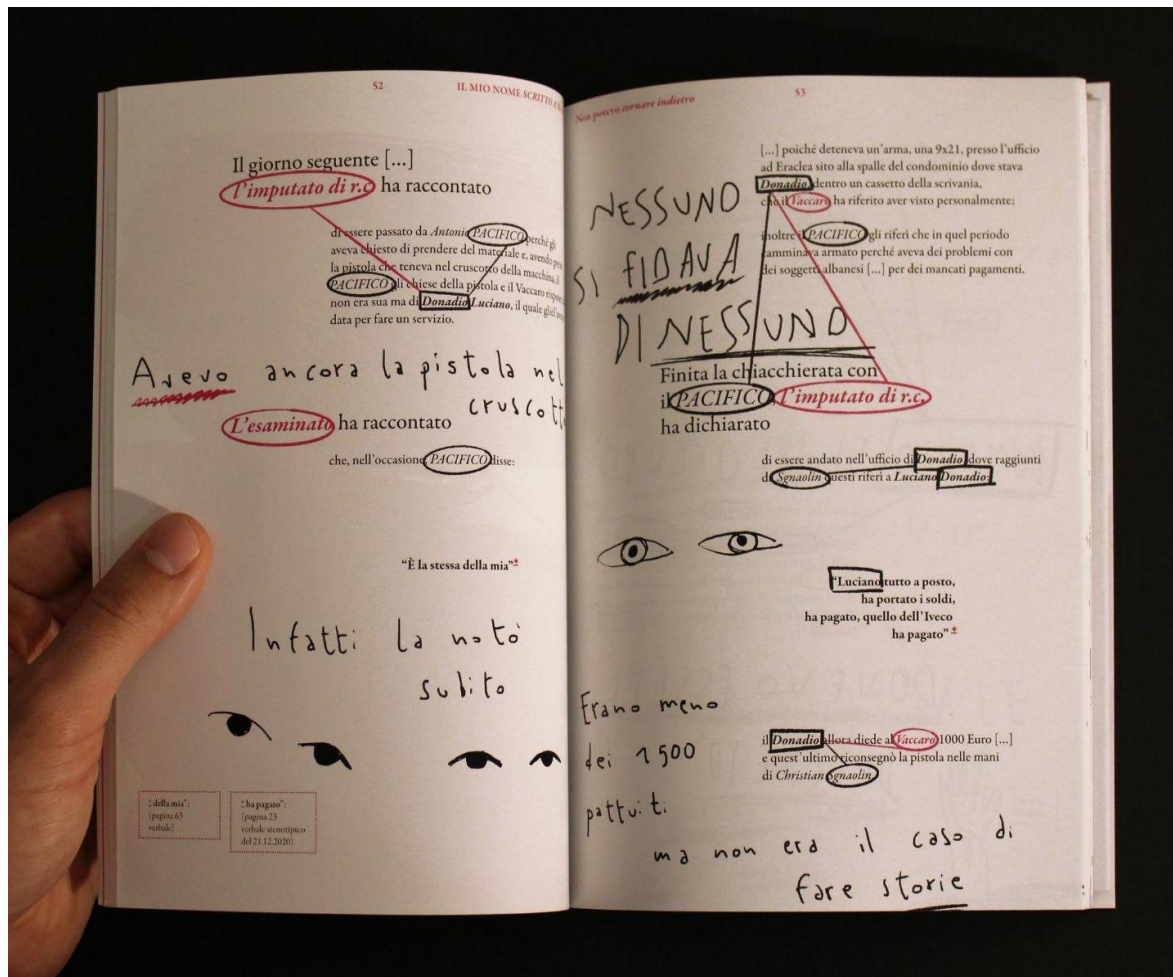


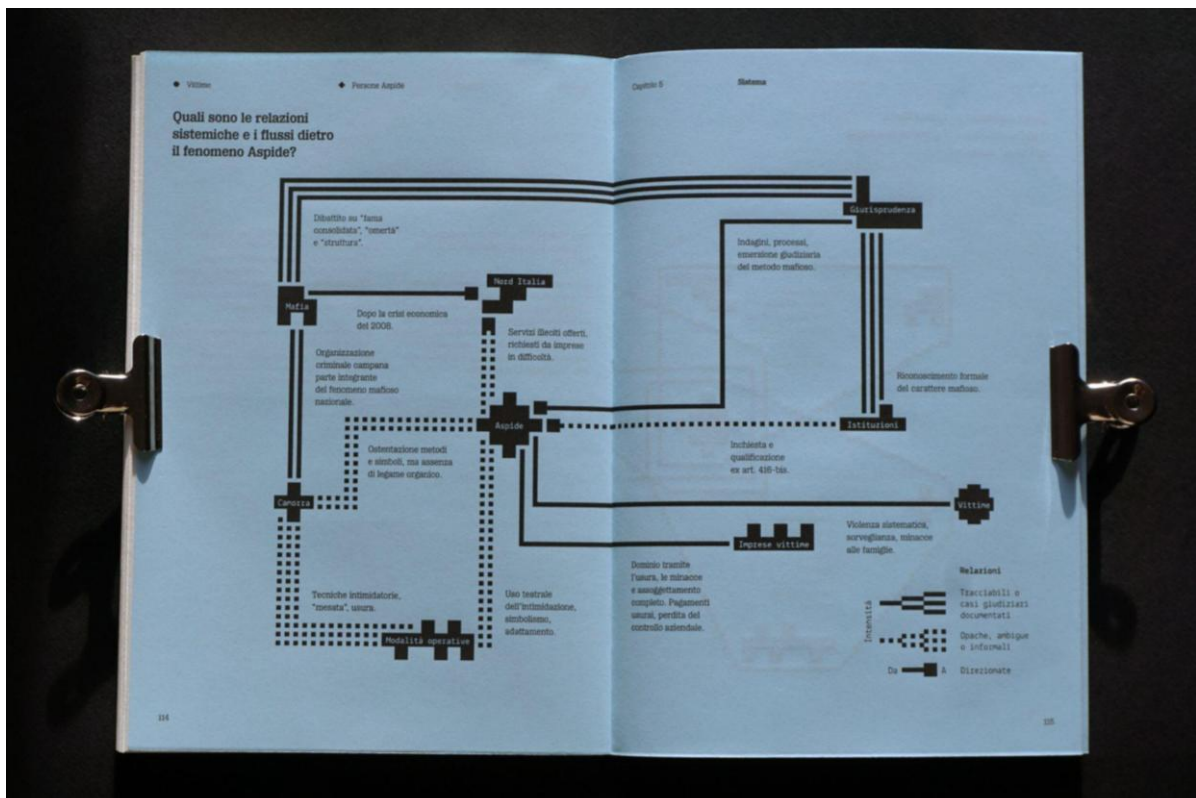
Fig. 3 - Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory, University luav of Venezia (2025). Students: Amato, Fanzin, Tomeo. Building on a systematic visual translation of the judgments and testimonies, the authors introduced a strong expressive layer, integrating handwritten notes and line-based annotations with excerpts from the court text. Under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

These visual outputs functioned as heuristic devices: not merely as summaries, but as tools for sense-making and hypothesis generation (Pasa & Sinni, 2024a; Sinni & Pasa, 2024). Their appearance, however, was not neutral: expressive qualities played a role in shaping how meaning was constructed. Depending on the designer's choices, visual artifacts can activate either sign-based interpretation or immediate perceptual experiences, what Sinico (2023) defines as 'meanings mediated by signs' versus 'those mediated by expressive qualities,' which may evoke different cognitive and emotional responses even before textual decoding occurs. For this reason, students were encouraged to explore a wide range of expressive forms, embracing stylistic diversity (from minimal and sober to raw and unrefined), interpretive richness, playfulness, and emotional resonance as legitimate components of legal communication.



## 5.2 Reflexive and Participatory Learning Outcomes

We conducted a non-systematic analysis of the intermediate assignments produced during the laboratory. Each delivery followed a standard *pecha kucha* format,<sup>15</sup> requiring students to report both on the state of content construction (sources, legal framing, interpretive choices) and on the progressive visualization of selected parts of the final project. We compiled this corpus of iterative slide decks and drafts and carried out a thematic analysis combining deductive codes (cognitive stance toward the law; narrative engagement; meta-reflection on legal language) with inductive sub-codes emerging from the material (e.g., pattern recognition and network mapping; role/causality modelling; critique of institutional framing). Triangulation with in-class discussions and the final artifacts strengthened robustness. Students experienced a shift in how they perceived the law, not as abstract norms, but as a dynamic web of social relations, power structures, and conflict resolution. Visual mapping played a crucial role in this cognitive reorientation, revealing hidden patterns and connections beyond traditional legal texts. Through narrative reconstruction, students gained a sense of agency. Translating legal procedures into visual stories rooted in causality and responsibility fostered deeper emotional engagement and opened space for critical reinterpretation of justice and accountability. Finally, visual composition prompted reflection on legal language itself. Students began to see how institutional discourse not only informs but also frames, excludes, and legitimizes, inviting a more critical and nuanced engagement with the law. Students with a background in design, when placed in active collaboration with legal scholars, jurists and journalists, thus experienced a notable transformation in their approach to criminal law.



<sup>15</sup> Presentation format based on 20 slides shown for 20 seconds each (total duration: 6'40"). Originally developed in 2003 by Klein Dytham Architecture (<https://www.pechakucha.com>), it is designed to foster conciseness, rhythm, and visual storytelling, ensuring comparability across presentations.

Fig. 4 - Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory, University Iuav of Venezia (2025). Students: Ceraolo, Maffei, Russo. By extracting key concepts from the judgments, the authors created a series of thematic maps that offer alternative, non-linear perspectives on the case, enabling multidimensional reading beyond sequential text. Under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

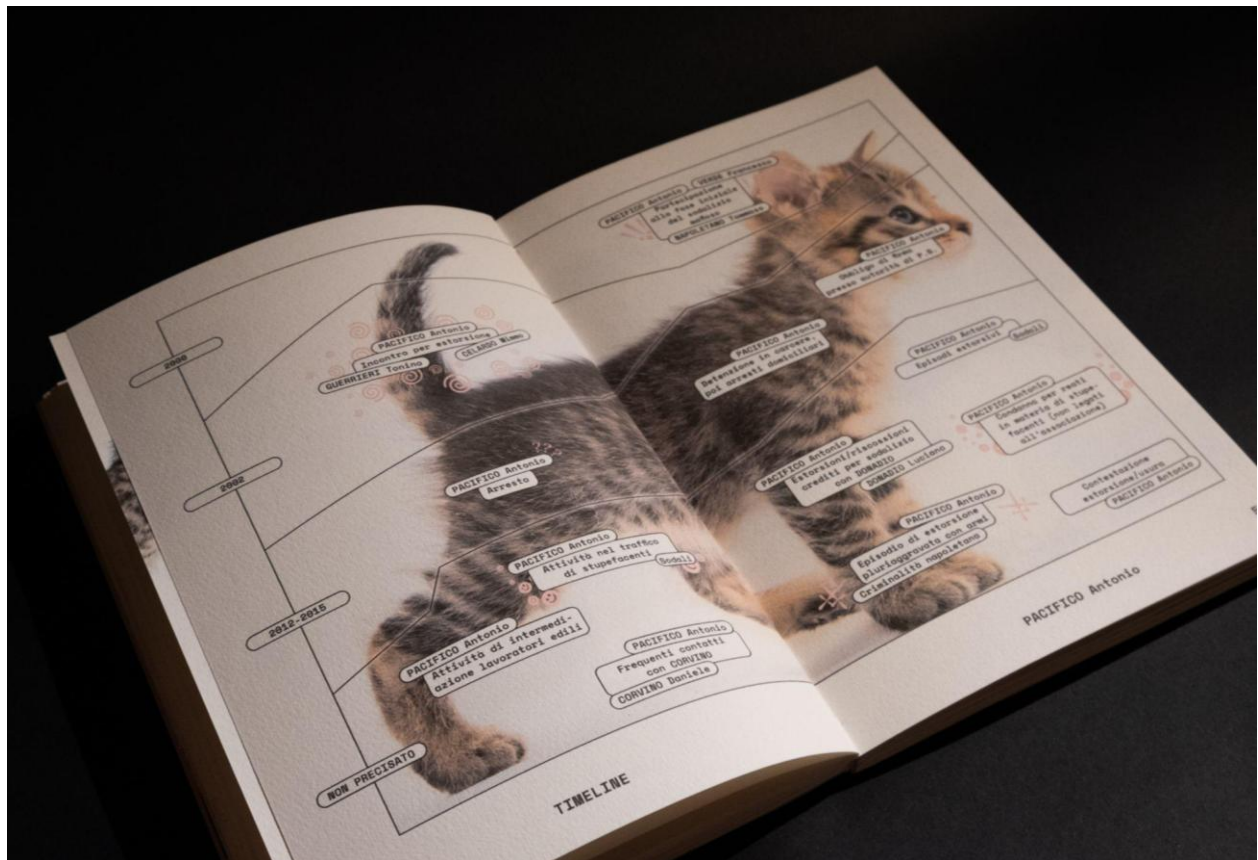


Fig. 5 - Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory, University Iuav of Venezia (2025). Students: Birilli, Cannarile, Parolin. Through systematic visual syntheses of the judgment, the authors presented alternative readings of the case. They introduced an unconventional element in the form of images of kittens, serving as an ironic or dissonant commentary on the legal text. Under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

These findings align with broader theories of participatory design in law (Toivonen & Vela, 2024) suggesting that design methods not only clarify content, but alter users' epistemic relationship to law.

By making legal processes visible through design, we can bring underlying structures of power and intentional opacity into clearer focus. This can foster a heightened awareness of the political and rhetorical functions of legal discourse.

### 5.3 Game Design: Sentencing Games as Legal Prototypes

As part of the project, some students were assigned the task of creating board games based on the court rulings. The objective of this exercise was to transform the narrative content of judicial decisions into interactive experiences, enabling players to engage with the underlying ethical and social tensions of the cases. While players adopt the roles of individuals involved in organized crime, the games are meticulously designed to encourage lawful and prosocial behavior, thereby reinforcing positive norms and reducing the risk of players identifying with



criminal figures. Each game functioned as a '*legal provotype*,' in which students were challenged to design mechanics that translated the narratives emerging from real court rulings into playful and educational experiences. The goal was not to simulate courtroom procedures, but to offer a concrete representation of how organized crime affects communities. Through the game's mechanics, it aimed to foster civic awareness and promote lawful, prosocial behavior. The design's core objective was to deter criminal activity by educating the public in an engaging and accessible way.

Research in game studies and psychology highlighted how games, when properly designed, can foster empathy, ethical reflection, and civic awareness, even when players take on controversial or morally ambiguous roles. The key is not to avoid difficult content, but to shape the reward structures and affordances of the game in ways that reinforce prosocial behaviors (Belman & Flanagan, 2010). When players are rewarded for cooperation, fairness, or law-abiding actions, even within simulated contexts of conflict or deviance, the game becomes a pedagogical space for internalizing civic and ethical norms. The games with positive feedback can improve cognitive, motor, and social-emotional skills, including empathy and emotional regulation, even in violent or morally complex contexts (Granic, Lobel, & Engels, 2014). What matters is not the thematic content per se, but the direction of player reinforcement. Serious games rewarding ethical choices boost engagement and emotional learning more than games with neutral or ambiguous feedback (Ruggiero, 2015). Building on this, Kaufman and Flanagan (2015) propose a psychologically 'embedded' approach to prosocial game design. Their model shows that embedding ethical messages in game mechanics and context rather than making them explicit can enhance prosocial effects and reduce player resistance. This is achieved through strategies like intermixing serious and humorous content and obscuring didactic intentions. These studies validate the design approach adopted in our laboratory: although students created games in which players assume roles tied to organized crime, the game systems were intentionally structured to reward lawful, cooperative, ethical and prosocial behavior. Rather than glorifying criminality, these games function as 'civic spaces' where players can explore the socio-legal consequences of deviance while being incentivized to pursue constructive alternatives.

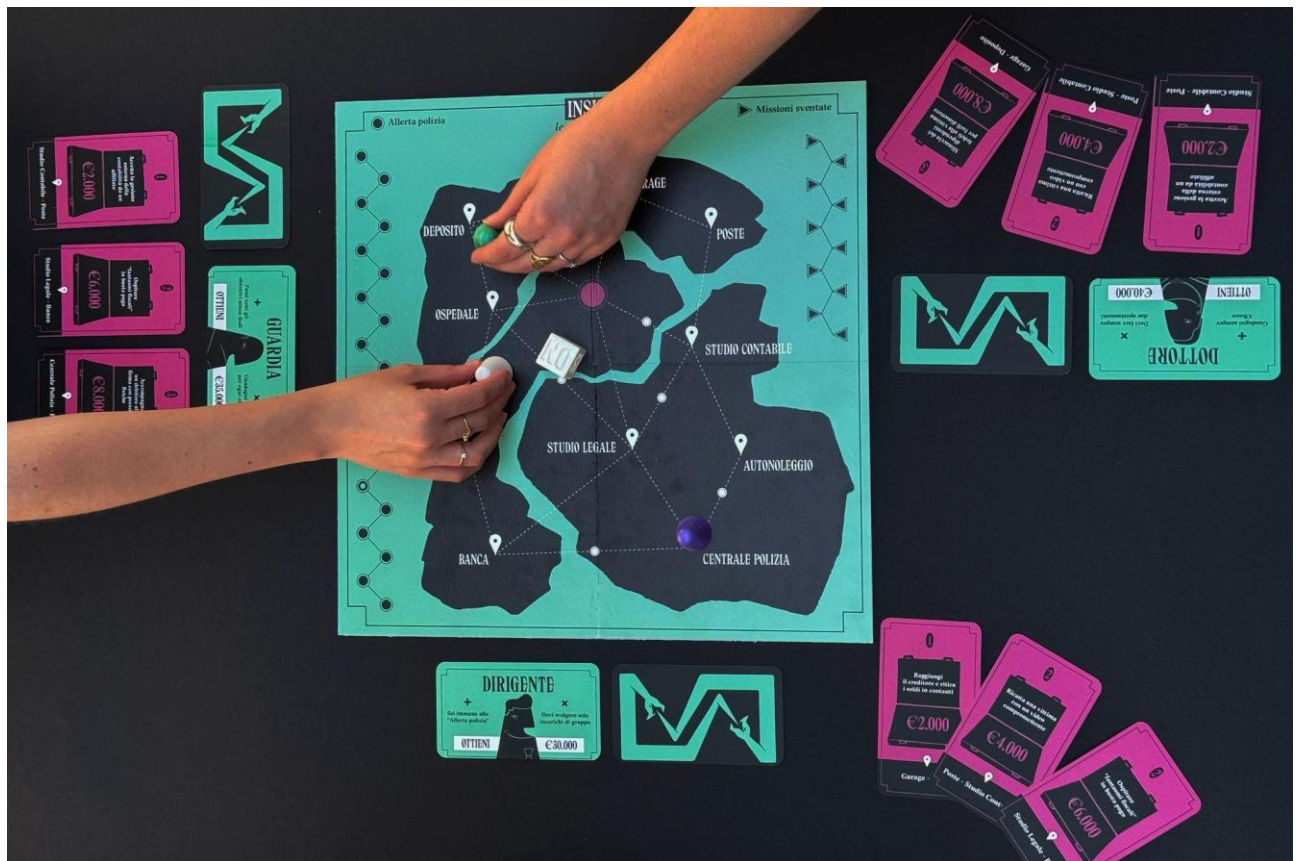


Fig. 6 - Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory, University Iuav of Venezia (2025). Students: Castelli, de Nicoletlis, Faggiani. This is a hidden-identity game in which players carry out mafia-related missions. At the same time, an undercover agent attempts to sabotage them or expose the boss. The game combines legal themes with interactive storytelling. Under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

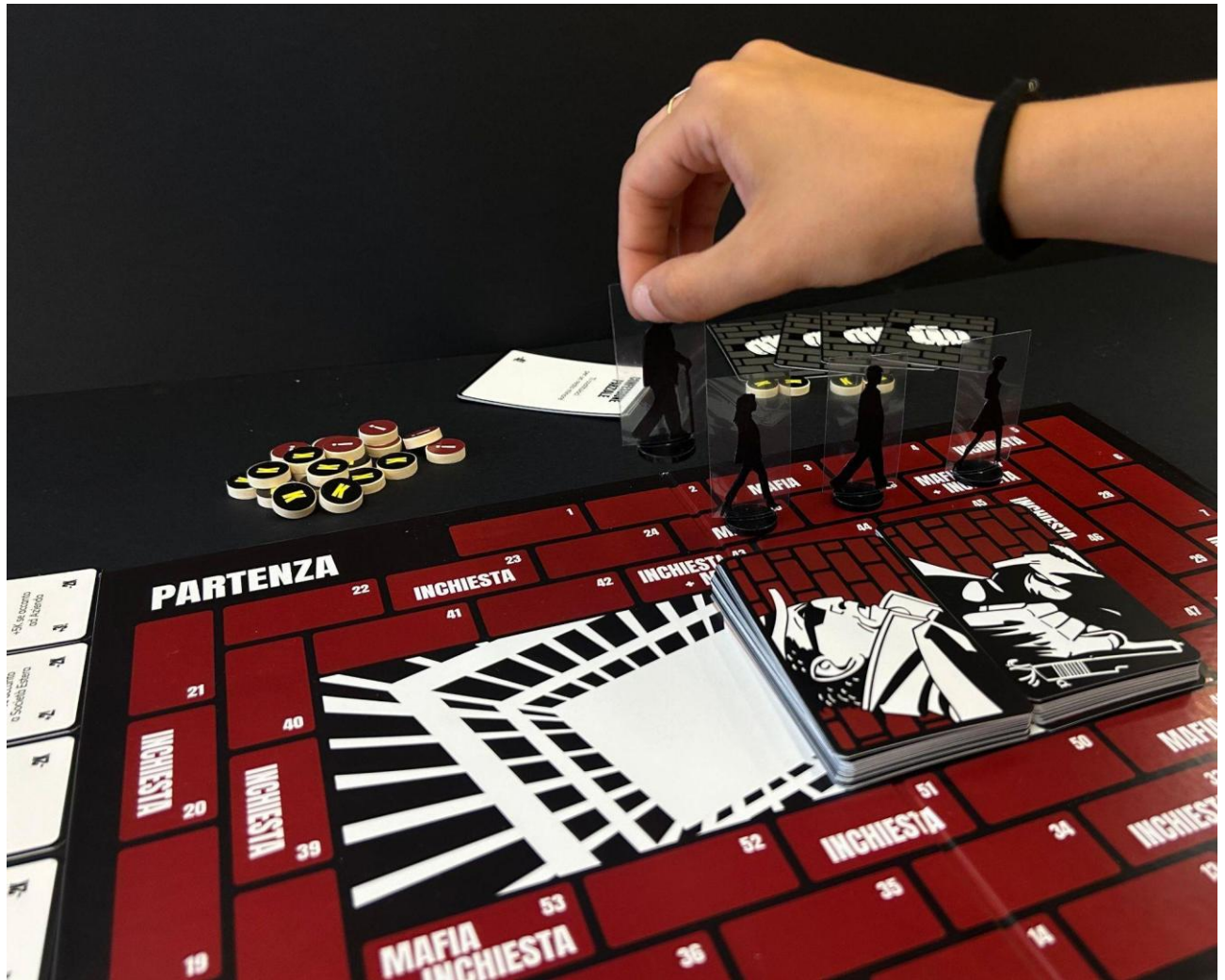


Fig. 7 - Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory, University Iuav of Venezia (2025). Students: Cannizzaro, Fano, Javidi. In this game, entrepreneurs must maintain a delicate balance between honesty, profit, and the allure of illicit transactions. Multiple surprise endings encourage prosocial strategies without rewarding dominant ones, fostering ethical reflection through play. Under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

#### 5.4 Irony, Satire, and Epistemological Disobedience

In our lab, irony and satire were identified as key rhetorical and epistemic tools within the visual and narrative strategies. These tools were not considered marginal embellishments, but rather integral components of students' engagement with the intricacies, authority issues, and social implications of criminal law.

Their use can be described as epistemological disobedience, a stance that challenges dominant regimes of knowledge by reframing them from the margins (Mignolo, 2009). This approach resonates with the argument that legal meaning is no longer confined to textual procedures, but is increasingly shaped, and challenged, by visual and cultural codes (Sherwin, 2014). As Sherwin writes, law awakens 'upon contact with the flesh of the world and the skin of the image' (p. xxxiv), and the proliferation of visual storytelling introduces new modes of critique, irony, and public engagement. These visual practices, far from being decorative, invite critical judgment through immersion, emotional resonance, and cultural familiarity. By engaging with the language of the law in an ironic manner, students exposed its implicit



contradictions and socio-symbolic power. For instance, some visual artifacts reimagined the legal material not as institutional summaries, but as tourist guides to criminal territories, brochures of mafia-run companies, puzzle magazines, or even tabloid magazines for teenagers, where the individuals involved in the investigations were portrayed as if they were celebrities. With ethical safeguards in place, the use of ironic formats did not trivialize the content; rather, by appropriating popular genres, they highlighted the grotesque normalization of criminal power and prompted a critical engagement with both legality and its media representation. These formats, though playful, achieved a double function: they disarmed legal intimidation while enhancing critical awareness.

This approach aligns with the long-standing traditions of graphic satire and civic sarcasm, which have historically served as accessible forms of legal commentary, from 18th-century pamphlets to contemporary political cartoons. As Pope (2024) and Perry-Kessaris (2019) argue, design can be a vehicle for counter-narratives, especially when it breaks with institutional aesthetics and adopts visual grammars rooted in popular culture and grassroots resistance. From a pedagogical perspective, the use of irony in the classroom environment can be a valuable tool for students to explore non-deferential positions towards legal institutions. Rather than fostering cynicism, this approach encourages civic engagement through the medium of humor. The act of laughing at the law did not trivialize it; rather, it revealed its human, fallible and contested dimensions. In this sense, satire functioned not only as critique, but as an empathic method, inviting users to question, reinterpret, and even reclaim the authority of the law through collective imagination.



Fig. 8 - Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory, University Iuav of Venezia (2025). Students: Di Bella, Persona, Piva. The judgment is reimagined as a teen gossip magazine, with mafia figures played by celebrities and stories retold with irony. Despite the light-hearted tone, the legal text has been meticulously analyzed and graphically prepared. Under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.



Fig. 9 - Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory, University Iuav of Venezia (2025). Students: De Astis, Francini, Taiuti. The judgment is reinterpreted as a corporate brochure offering ironic and hyperbolic 'mafia services,' styled with precise business aesthetics to highlight the absurdity through contrast. Under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.





Fig. 10 - Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory, University luav of Venezia (2025). Students: Lentini, Miggiano, Roberti. The judgment is reimagined as a beach-themed puzzle magazine and photo-comic. Key elements are presented as brain teasers, offering a playful and unconventional perspective on the legal text. Under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

## 6. Limitations

The results of our project must be understood considering certain limitations. Firstly, the artifacts were produced in a pedagogical setting and lack validation through public-facing deployments or judicial environments. Secondly, the participants were design students with high visual literacy, a demographic that does not fully represent the general population. Our findings may not hold across more heterogeneous populations, especially among individuals with limited literacy, or those residing in communities disproportionately affected by organized crime. Thirdly, the projects addressed highly specific criminal offences concerning crimes related to mafia associations. While this limitation is duly noted, it narrows the scope of generalizability. Nevertheless, the process offers compelling evidence that legal design, when applied with methodological rigor and interdisciplinary collaboration, can make even the most technical and politically sensitive branches of law accessible and contestable.

## 7. Conclusions

Our project explored tools that might be useful for understanding the functioning of the Italian criminal law system, in particular mafia association crimes, and for communicating them to the

people. These tools can be generalized outside the Italian context. In addition, they facilitate a more profound comprehension of the local contexts in which people live, the rationale behind potential encounters with environments susceptible to mafia influence, and the additional measures people can undertake to refrain from becoming involved.

Through an interdisciplinary collaborative effort, we examined the feasibility of fostering care for democratic institutions by means of social empowerment. Our initiative involved integrating university course curricula to promote stronger collaboration between students, designers, and jurists. Ideally, this would have taken the form of mixed classes in which students from both disciplines worked together throughout the process, a model that, we believe, would have substantially enhanced the effectiveness and depth of interdisciplinary exchange. This arrangement, however, proved unfeasible, and participation was limited to design students in collaboration with legal professionals. Nevertheless, the experimental outputs presented in this essay suggest that legal meaning can emerge through interaction, composition, and re-contextualization. In this view, synsemic layouts are not mere tools of simplification, but critical instruments of pluralization. They serve as alternative modes of knowing, recognizing, and narrating the law. Legal language, widely acknowledged for its technical and technocratic nature, constitutes a specialized epistemic domain that poses significant challenges to accessibility and public comprehension. To render legal information (rules and procedures) more intelligible and widely accessible, and to advance the dissemination of knowledge within the domain of criminal law, it is imperative to engage both educational and informational infrastructures. Crucially, the ability to recognize recurring patterns in criminal behavior serves as a foundational component in cultivating informed and proactive civic participation in the pursuit of justice and the prevention of crime

The synsemic redesign of legal information, ranging from criminal statutes to judicial decisions, from legal principles to factual matrices, should be understood as a structural undertaking within legal design, rather than a superficial or cosmetic intervention. This approach not only encourages the development of new media and visual languages, but also cultivates interdisciplinary collaborations among designers, jurists, journalists, and cultural producers more broadly. Legal design can draw upon a diverse toolkit that includes visual storytelling, investigative journalism methodologies, game mechanics, and graphic satire, all of which contribute to enhancing comprehension, fostering resistance, stimulating imagination, and promoting civic engagement. As such, it enables new forms of critique and participation, positioning legal design as a generative and speculative epistemology.

In conclusion, rethinking the communication and accessibility of criminal law requires more than minor adjustments in drafting style. It calls for the development of visual, spatial, and narrative tools that are grounded in communication design, elaborated in dialogue with jurists. Only by adopting such approaches can the complexity of criminal legal systems be rendered intelligible and actionable for non-experts, thereby bridging the long-standing divide between legal institutions and civil society. At the same time, it is essential to engage critically with the question of how legal meaning itself is shaped and reshaped through visual languages. This concern highlights the need for sustained interdisciplinary dialogue among jurists, designers, and semioticians, since each discipline contributes unique perspectives on the interplay between form, interpretation, and authority in legal texts. This broader effort shows particular promise in visual-textual compositions that combine symbols, text, and spatial hierarchies. Such compositions enable citizens to grasp legal dynamics that are often obscured by the linearity and abstraction of formal prose. Drawing on the theory of synsemic writing, these visual grammars can be employed to map complex procedural elements, including chains of responsibility, stages of investigation, and degrees of imputability. By providing accessible



representations of otherwise opaque structures, they hold the potential to democratize legal knowledge and to make visible the intricate operations of the criminal justice system. Finally, it is crucial to develop narrative counter-models that challenge the dominant discourse surrounding criminal justice systems. These narrative prototypes go beyond mere critique; they empower communities to envision and articulate alternative informational frameworks. Crucially, they ensure that ironic or playful representations do not trivialize the experiences of victims or glamorize criminal figures. Irony and satire emerged as central rhetorical and epistemic devices within the visual and narrative strategies employed. Far from being peripheral embellishments, these tools are integral to students' critical engagement with the complexities, authority structures, and societal ramifications of criminal law. In doing so, they provide a means of resisting dominant narratives while fostering more inclusive, participatory understandings of law and its role in shaping collective life.

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