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1. INTRODUCTION TO MLA DESIGN THESIS

a. Overview

This handbook serves as a guide for students who are undertaking a design thesis in the Department of Landscape Architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. The thesis provides an opportunity for candidates in the Master in Landscape Architecture program to pursue graduate-level research and explore a topic of their interest through design research. The design thesis builds upon the core curriculum in landscape architecture at the GSD. This handbook provides a summary of key design thesis requirements and offers an overview of the design thesis process, from selection of a suitable topic to submission of the final thesis.

For landscape architecture students interested in completing a thesis, the planning process begins in their penultimate year of the MLA Program. The thesis project itself begins in earnest in their final year, through thesis prep and design thesis courses, offered in Fall and Spring terms, respectively. In the Spring term of their penultimate year of study (fourth semester for MLA I students, second semester for MLA I AP and MLA II students), candidates must formally state their intention to complete thesis. Interested candidates are also encouraged to begin consideration of a thesis topic and potential thesis advisor at this time. In the Fall term of their final year of study candidates enroll in GSD 9341 and prepare a design thesis proposal and secure a design thesis advisor. In the Spring term of their final year of study candidates enroll in GSD 9342 Design Thesis and complete, present, and submit their design thesis. Each of these stages of work, and their associated requirements, are described in greater detail below.
2. THE PENULTIMATE YEAR: ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION FOR DESIGN THESIS

a. Declaring Intention to Pursue MLA Design Thesis

While the design thesis is pursued during the final year of the MLA at the GSD, planning for design thesis begins in the Spring term of the penultimate year of study. Students considering pursuing an MLA design thesis are invited to attend midterm and final reviews of MLA thesis candidates in the year ahead of them, as well as meetings with potential faculty advisors and the MLA design thesis coordinator, in the Spring term prior to their final year of study. These reviews, discussions, and informational sessions survey the potentials and limits of the MLA design thesis process, as well as the support offered by the department for the design thesis.

Students who opt to pursue a design thesis are required to declare their intentions in the Spring term of their penultimate year, on or before a date published by the department office. This deadline, as well as the MLA thesis declaration form, and other relevant information can be found on the GSD website under resources at: https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/resources/mla-thesis-guidelines/

MLA candidates electing to pursue design thesis are not required to declare a thesis topic or faculty advisor until the Fall term of their final year of study; however, they are encouraged to begin reaching out to faculty before the Fall during the Spring term of their penultimate year and over the summer months. In selecting topics for their design thesis, MLA candidates are encouraged to build upon their previous academic and professional formation, and to use the summer months to articulate their individual interests, appetites, and attitudes. These are most effectively articulated in dialogue with a faculty advisor and the design thesis coordinator. MLA candidates in the professional degree program (MLA I and MLA I AP) who pursue a design thesis are required to complete an option studio offered by the Department of Landscape Architecture in the Fall term of their final year of study. Candidates in the post-professional degree program (MLA II) are not subject to this requirement.
3. THESIS PREP (Fall Term Final Year)

a. Thesis Prep Overview

During the Fall term of their final year of study, students begin a formal process of thesis preparation. Over the semester, students complete the department’s four-unit thesis preparation seminar, GSD 9341: Preparation of Design Thesis Proposal for Master in Landscape Architecture. This research seminar is intended for Master in Landscape Architecture candidates electing to pursue a design thesis in their final year of study. The course defines the parameters of a design thesis and assists candidates in the development of their own individual design thesis proposals. The course addresses a series of broad themes essential to developing a cogent thesis proposal including design research, projective practices, discursive agendas, site contexts, programmatic drivers, and representational strategies. The seminar examines the role of precedent projects and design methods in thesis, as well as the status of design and design research as forms of knowledge production in the research university.

b. Thesis Prep Seminar Structure (GSD 9341)

Seminar Structure
The seminar meets weekly for three hours, beginning with a presentation and seminar discussion, followed by tutorial workshops with smaller groups for the purpose of reviewing assignments and proposals in progress. In addition to the regularly scheduled class sessions, tutorial workshops, and formal reviews, individual meetings with faculty advisors are an important aspect of the course. Students will be invited to identify and recruit a faculty thesis advisor during the first half of the term. By the end of the term candidates will have prepared a proposal for their individual design thesis through word and image.

Conceptual Framework of the Design Thesis
The first half of the semester introduces the thesis as a conceptual frame and identifies key elements common to all design theses. Students are required to begin drafting a thesis statement, develop a specific topic for their proposed thesis, and simultaneously explore and collect a body of precedent research to help define the form and type of project they intend to produce. A thorough examination of precedent material and simultaneous iterative development of the thesis statement is emphasized, with the intention of allowing students to develop broad ideas and concept of what a thesis is, as well as specific direction for their individual work. The analysis of precedent work is an iterative process that leads to the definition of the thesis.

Precedents
Students are required to review and critically evaluate relevant literature and projects that will inform their anticipated thesis project. By considering a range of project types and format, students will amass a body of work to draw from when defining the parameters to which their design thesis will respond. This body of work should define a genre within which the individual thesis project will fall, in this way placing the student's work within a larger professional and academic context at an early stage. The selected precedents should demonstrate stylistic
qualities, conceptual approaches, and presentation structure intended for the final thesis. This literature and project review serves as a resource to students moving forward through the thesis prep and into the final thesis semester. Students are expected to explain their choice of selected precedents, and communicate their analysis and critique of each project to the seminar class. Precedents are critically evaluated through verbal explanation and analytical drawings exploring a range of key elements including design, representation, and site.

Advisor
Advisor choices are due in early October so that the advisor-student relationships can be confirmed before the mid-term reviews. Typically, students will list their preferred advisors in order of preference. These are then validated with the advisors, in concert with their individual teaching roles and responsibilities. While the student-advisor choices are confirmed in October, often these discussions begin much sooner. Students are encouraged to choose an advisor they might work well with.

Site + Subject
The thesis topic is addressed following the precedent studies. Students iteratively refine both their thesis statements and precedent analyses during this section of the seminar. Students begin to articulate an idea of site through both the precedent analysis and thesis topic development. At this point in the thesis prep semester, the site may remain an abstract concept, defining parameters that will inform the selection of a specific project site, or if the site is fundamental the topic of the thesis, students may identify a more specific, physical site for their work. After identifying a site, students continue through the remainder of the semester to hone in on specific site selection and study through mapping and analytical drawing. This section of the seminar concludes with the Mid-Term Review, where students present the conceptual framework of the design thesis, through their precedent analysis, thesis statement, preliminary site definition, and beginnings of a design project.

Articulation of Design Thesis Project
The second half of the semester focuses on developing the design project, and producing an outline of the work to be completed in the final thesis semester for the final design project. At this stage, the regular thesis prep seminar sessions are followed by individual meetings with the instructor(s) rather than the meetings of small groups. By the end of thesis prep, students are required to have defined the design project of their thesis, as well as the methods of research, production, and representation they intend to use to complete the final project. This work provides the basic structural framework for the design project, preparing students to continue directly into the final design project in the following semester.

Design Project
Students are required to launch directly from feedback of the Mid-Term Review toward a more refined definition of a design project for the design thesis. The design project will be refined through iteration over the course of thesis prep, but the idea of site, program, and scope must all be addressed.

Representation
Students are required to review and discuss the main representational techniques they intend to use in their final thesis project. Representation methods must be analyzed to explain their effectiveness and appropriateness to each proposed thesis. A number of seminar sessions will
be dedicated to exploring various representational techniques through tutorial and workshop.

Methodology
Students are required to review and discuss their intended methodology(ies) for research and design work. The selected methodology should reflect the anticipated topic and program of the final thesis. Defining the method simplifies the design process for students later by defining the manner of making fundamental decisions and moving forward throughout the final thesis project. This basic decision-making is fundamental to successful progress of the final thesis.

Schedule and Deliverables
Throughout the second half of thesis prep, students are required to refine a list of media and deliverables to be produced for the final thesis project, as well as a draft schedule for the completion of thesis. The media and deliverables should reflect, and be heavily informed by the precedents selected by each student. The draft schedule will inform the progression of work for the final semester.

c. Reviews

Small Group Seminar Reviews
Progress reviews occur each week within the seminar. For the first half of the semester students meet each week in small groups with a seminar instructor, alternating groups and instructors frequently. This allows students and instructors to have more individual review and comments for each project as students develop the initial thesis concept. This also encourages discussion and critique between students.

Students are encouraged to meet with other classmates to share emerging work and to learn from each other's successes and struggles. Developing a strong peer network of fellow thesis students is an excellent strategy for self-motivation and keeping the thesis on track, both temporally and intellectually.

Mid-Term Review
For the thesis-prep Mid-Term Review, students present their work and receive feedback from a panel including their thesis advisor, other MLA thesis advisors, thesis prep instructors, and additional reviewers from within the Landscape Architecture Department faculty. Students are expected to have articulated a thesis statement, and present precedent projects, site description and the beginnings of a design proposal at the Mid-Term Review.

Individual Seminar Reviews
Following the Mid-Term Review, weekly progress reviews within the seminar occur one-on-one between students and instructors. This allows students and instructors to have individual, project-focused time as students begin developing in more detail the thesis design proposal.

December Presentation of Design Thesis Proposals
For the Final Presentation of Design Proposals in December, students will present work to a panel of advisors mostly from within the faculty of the GSD. Students are expected to present their work from the semester, encompassing precedents, topic, method, site, and focusing on the proposed design project.
Advisor-Advisee Meetings
A regular meeting schedule is encouraged between advisor and thesis candidate. Once advisors are selected, students are encouraged to meet regularly throughout the semester with their advisor and develop a working relationship and progress the thesis. To track progress, students should stay in close contact with their thesis advisor over the thesis preparation term. Regular meeting and feedback will also allow the student to iteratively develop a final proposal that meets the requirements and expectations of the department. This semester is the time for students to work closely with advisors, whether through office hour appointments or other meetings, and develop the core ideas underpinning your thesis.

d. Evaluation

The thesis prep course is evaluated on a standard GSD pass/fail system. Course requirements include class discussion and presentations (25%); weekly class assignments (50%); and final review (25%). All weekly assignments and review presentations should be uploaded as PDF to canvas site by 12noon the day of the due date/review.

Work submitted weekly will be evaluated by four equally weighted terms of evaluation:

1. Representation: demonstrating a clear argument visually as well as verbally;

2. Research: consistent inquiry and engagement with the topic throughout the term;

3. Proposition: the intellectual and cultural arguments supporting your project.

4. Proposal: potential of the project as both an intervention in the world and a contribution to the field; and
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<td>Design Research</td>
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<td>Design Projection</td>
<td>[intro to design methods and media of representation]</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Design Contexts</td>
<td>[intro to sites and situations for design research]</td>
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<td>Design Drivers</td>
<td>[intro to programs and publics for design research]</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Design Methods</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>MIDTERM REVIEW</td>
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<td>Sites + Scales</td>
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<td>11</td>
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4. DESIGN THESIS (Spring Term, Final Year)

a. Design Thesis Overview

During the Spring term of their final year of study, MLA candidates pursuing thesis complete the final design thesis for defense in May. Following the successful completion of Thesis Prep (GSD 9341) in the Fall term, each student articulates a specific topic for their design thesis as advised by a member of GSD faculty. Students must be enrolled in the 8-unit course, Independent Thesis in Satisfaction of the Degree Master in Landscape Architecture (GSD 9342).

Throughout the thesis process, student work closely with their faculty advisors, participate in organized peer and external reviews, and demonstrate significant self-directed independent work on the development and completion of a final design thesis project. By the end of the Spring term, students will have developed rigorous design proposals and be able to present and defend these proposals both verbally and through a range of representational media including but not limited to drawings, models, and diagrams. Completion of the final design thesis project requires public presentation of the project and its successful defense, as well as the submission of the thesis book, documenting the final thesis for Harvard University’s own record. This document will be made available to future years of thesis students in the Frances Loeb Library. The evaluation of the design thesis is the primary responsibility of the faculty advisor, in consultation with the thesis coordinator, other thesis advisors, and the program director.

b. Independent Thesis in Satisfaction of the Degree Master in Landscape Architecture (GSD 9342)

Structure of Semester
Building upon the research and work done in the Fall term, students focus in their final term on the articulation of a design research project to satisfy the thesis framework set out by the department, and outlined by the individual student during Thesis Prep. Design thesis work is advised by a member of GSD faculty, yet is largely pursued independently. Students meet regularly with their advisors on a mutually agreed schedule, and participate in reviews of their work arranged throughout the term by the thesis coordinator.

c. Reviews
The formal reviews listed below are all to be coordinated by the thesis coordinator. Any additional internal reviews between students, and between student and advisor, should be arranged independently.

January preliminary reviews:
Preliminary thesis reviews are held at the beginning of the Spring term in January. These are less a repetition of December reviews and more a review of work done since the December meeting and include the scope and schedule of work during the Spring term.

March midterm reviews:
Mid-term reviews are typically held on the Monday immediately following Spring Break. The deliverables are established in consultation with individual faculty advisors.
May final reviews:
The finals are scheduled in mid-May in front of a panel consisting of external reviewers in addition to the GSD design thesis advisors and other faculty reviewers.

d. Evaluation

Evaluation of the design thesis including grading is the responsibility of the individual faculty advisor in consultation with the other thesis advisors, thesis coordinator, and program director. These grades will be informed by:

1. Representation: demonstrating a clear argument graphically as well as visually;
2. Engagement: showing consistent inquiry throughout the semester;
3. Proposal: the potential of the design research project; and
4. Excellence: quality of overall design research project.

Submission requirements
PDFs of all final boards and presentation materials are required for final submission to the Department of Landscape Architecture immediately following the final review. The submission of a final digital PDF thesis book to the Loeb Library is required for completion of the final design thesis. In addition to the design project, this book should document the precedent and site research begun in the fall semester, as well as clearly outline the thesis site and subject.

A signed statement of permission allowing Harvard University’s libraries to archive the thesis work is required at the time of submission of the thesis book for grading. In general, this statement is included on the thesis internal cover page. Please see attached addenda with specific instructions from the library on PDF creation guidelines and cover page with permission statement template. Supplemental materials such as video or additional photos are permitted, and should be included on digital drive or disc, also according to library guidelines included in the appendices of this document.
GENERAL READINGS FOR MLA DESIGN THESIS


Miwon Kwon, “One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” *October*, no. 80 (Spring 1997), 85–110.


References


Michael Bierut, *How to use graphic design to sell things, explain things, make things look better, make people laugh, make people cry, and (every once in a while) change the world* (Thames & Hudson, 2015).


Resources

Chicago Manual of Style

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu

GSD Design Research Resources

http://guides.library.harvard.edu/gsd/databases#s-lg-box-6335467

GSD Research Support Services

http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/frances-loeb-library/resources-services/research-support-services/

GSD Write and Cite

http://guides.library.harvard.edu/gsd/write