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Introduction to MDes Thesis

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

What Is a Design Research Thesis?
MDes is not the usual master’s program—it is formed with the underlying goal of creating new knowledge within the frame of the broad array of types of activity supported by the Graduate School of Design. Research in the program’s unique areas offers the potential to address issues beyond the limits of each area, pushing knowledge to create a new understanding or reality.

The thesis is a transformational experience in which the student employs all that has been learned in coursework to make an original contribution in the design field. It also offers the opportunity for close one on one work with a member of the faculty to test and frame ideas. The student will work with a thesis advisor to fine-tune a thesis proposal, after which the student will work independently on the proposed project.

The thesis must establish a proposition (position, case, project, hypothesis) and arrive at specific conclusions through multiple formats of representation/media (textual, graphic, spatial, material, etc.). Depending on the program concentration, project topic, and faculty advisor, the specific process and format of the final project will vary.

The thesis begins with a research proposal, which provides a road map for the student to achieve a sound basis for their research project:

- Define the thesis question.
- Explain the reason for pursuing this project.
- Explain how the thesis relates to current knowledge/practice.
- Explain how the project differs, and the potential impact of the thesis, on the discipline.
- Explain the proposed research methodology and proposed reference sources.
- Provide an annotated bibliography.
- Describe the final outcome and submittal format envisioned.
- Where appropriate, given the nature of the project, propose measurable outcome-based objectives to determine project’s success.
Timeline for the Four-Semester Thesis Option for an MDes Degree

Each of these stages of work, and their associated requirements, is described in greater detail in the sections that follow.

- For MDes students interested in completing a thesis, the planning process begins in the first year of the program. In the spring term of their first year candidates must formally state their intention to complete thesis by submitting a signed MDes Final Year Option Contract (deadline in April). Interested candidates are also encouraged to begin developing a thesis topic and identifying a potential thesis advisor at this time. Students are encouraged to have a preliminary draft research proposal at the beginning of the second semester in order to identify and prepare grant applications for summer research work. Ideally the potential advisor is determined and the topic and its development is outlined.
- Over the summer, the student prepares a thesis proposal.
- If the student would like to change from Thesis to Coursework, or Coursework to Thesis, the student may submit a revised MDes Final Year Option Contract by the add/drop deadline of fall semester of the second year.
- If the advisor was not finalized in the spring, in the fall term of their second year of study, candidates should now secure a GSD faculty thesis advisor. The student files a Declaration of Advisor form, including a 250-word thesis abstract, by the add/drop deadline of fall semester (deadline in September). If no advisor is secured by the September deadline, the student will choose either the Three-Semester Coursework Option or Four-Semester Coursework Option.
- The student prepares a Thesis Proposal by the start of spring semester.
- The student must enroll in the 8-credit spring course ADV-9304 Independent Thesis for the Degree Master in Design Studies.
- A regular meeting schedule is encouraged between advisor and thesis candidate to manage expectations and progress the thesis. At a date agreed upon by student and advisor, but no later than two weeks before Thesis Reviews, the student submits a final written draft to the advisor.
- The student must publicly present and defend the project at the MDes Thesis Reviews in May.
- The student must submit a final written thesis, including signed cover sheet—for archiving in the library—to the program office by the deadline (May deadline, immediately following Thesis Reviews).

*Deadlines for deliverables may be determined by the thesis advisor or by the MDes Area Head for the cohort as a whole and may be earlier than the deadlines outlined in this Guide. Where conflicts exist, the earlier deadline will take precedence.
The First Year: Establishing a Foundation for Thesis

Students who are interested in a thesis should look at examples of previous years’ projects in the Loeb Library. Additional resources are available on the MDes Thesis Canvas website.

Declaring Intention to Pursue Thesis
While the thesis is pursued during the final year of the MDes at the GSD, planning for thesis begins in the spring term of the first year of study. Students should meet with potential GSD faculty advisors and MDes area heads to discuss their plans for the following year.

Students who opt to pursue a thesis are required to declare their intentions in the spring term of their first year, on or before a date published by the department office. This deadline, as well as the MDes Final Year Option Contract, can be found on the GSD website under resources at: https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/design-studies/information-for-mdes-students/

In selecting topics for their thesis, MDes candidates are encouraged to build upon their previous academic and professional formation, and to use the summer months to articulate their thesis proposal, as defined in the section below.

Students pursuing the thesis option are encouraged to attend the final Thesis Reviews of MDes thesis candidates in the graduating class.

Summer Research
The summer after the first year is a time for internships, field work, archival research, site visits, etc. to advance the research topic.
The Second Year: Thesis Prep

During the summer and following fall term of the final year of study, students begin an informal process of thesis preparation. Over the summer and fall semester, students complete recommended research methodology courses in their area and secure a thesis advisor. During the fall, students develop a thesis proposal in which they refine their ideas and begin to embark on the substantive work of thesis completion. This includes extensive reading to develop an annotated bibliography on the topic and in turn leads to a refinement of the thesis statement.

Advisor
Confirmation of a thesis advisor is due by the mid-point of the fall semester. An MDes Declaration of Advisor & Proposal Form must be submitted to the program office by the deadline published by the office. The MDes Declaration of Advisor & Proposal Form must be signed by both the student and the thesis advisor, and must contain as an attachment a 250-word thesis abstract.

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. 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 the thesis. Regular meetings and feedback will also allow the student to iteratively develop a final proposal that meets the requirements and expectations of their advisor.

MDes Research Fellows
A cohort of advanced doctoral students is hired each year to work with MDes thesis students as MDes Research Fellows. The fellows are available for individual research and writing consultations in office hours. Fellows may also organize informal reviews, pecha kuchas, or other group presentations of thesis research throughout the fall and spring semesters.

Students are also encouraged to meet with other students 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 motivating yourself and keeping the thesis on track, both temporally and intellectually.
The Second Year: Thesis Completion

The spring term of the second year sees students complete, defend, and submit their thesis. This is a critical period in the thesis process and one where a strong student-advisor relationship is essential. During the term, students work closely with their advisors to develop a final thesis that can pass the scrutiny of faculty and outside critics and demonstrate significant self-directed independent work on the development and completion of the final thesis project.

During the spring term of their final year of study, MDes candidates pursuing thesis must enroll in the 8-unit course, ADV-9304 Independent Thesis for the Degree Master in Design Studies.

Thesis Proposal
In consultation with the advisor, the student prepares the thesis proposal. Like the thesis itself, the proposal can take a wide variety of formats. Students are encouraged to consult with their advisor on an agreed format. Regardless of the format, however, the thesis proposal must include the following elements: a clear statement of the student’s thesis topic or question, a compelling argument for why the question merits study and is of intellectual interest, a description of the current knowledge/practice with respect to the thesis question, the potential impact of the thesis on the discipline, a detailed presentation of the methodology and proposed reference sources that will be adopted in the project and a robust justification for why this is appropriate, a summary of relevant literature and precedents on the subject, and a timeline for completion of the thesis. The thesis proposal should be submitted to the advisor by the end of J-Term/start of the spring semester.

Maintaining a Strong Advisor-Advisee Relationship
A positive and respectful advisor-advisee relationship is central to successful completion of the thesis proposal. Students should try to establish a strong relationship with their advisor early in the thesis process, beginning with early identification of an advisor in the first year. Students should meet as regularly as possible with their advisor over the thesis completion term, as they begin to engage in more substantive research. The student and advisor should devise a set of deadlines and deliverables for the final semester. Importantly, students must submit a final draft of the thesis to their advisors well in advance of the final due date, according to a timeline established by each advisor, but no less than two weeks prior to the final reviews. This gives advisors sufficient time to provide feedback on the thesis and record a grade based on the work. Each student should work out a submission schedule for the final draft (and earlier drafts) with their advisor and ensure that both parties have similar expectations in this regard.

May Thesis Reviews
The final, formal thesis review is coordinated by the MDes Program Director. The final reviews are scheduled in mid-May in front of a panel consisting of external reviewers, GSD thesis advisors, area heads, and other faculty reviewers. See the GSD Academic Calendar for dates of MDes Thesis Reviews. http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/resources/academic-calendars-schedules/
For the final thesis reviews, outside reviewers will be invited to provide critical feedback on student work. Students will be able to suggest reviewers and every effort will be made to bring together a dynamic group of reviewers who can speak directly to the content of students’ theses.

Format of the Thesis
The format of MDes theses varies considerably from student to student. Students are encouraged to consult with their advisor on an agreed format and to do so early in the thesis process. For example, students may produce a written thesis, a thesis that relies on graphic representation, a thesis that combines text and graphic representation, or a thesis grounded in an entirely different medium, such as film, software, or product design. Regardless of the ultimate format of the thesis, as a contribution to public knowledge it must be a rigorous research-based product that can withstand the academic scrutiny of one’s advisor and outside reviewers.

Evaluation
The Thesis Advisor is responsible for the judgment of completion and adequacy of work submitted at the time of the final Thesis Review and, in consultation with the relevant Area Heads and Program Director, for grading the Thesis. To fulfill the requirements, the student’s Thesis must satisfactorily meet the established standards of the program in terms of overall worth, significance, and completeness that recommends it to the highest standards of academic critical scrutiny. The Thesis Advisor will evaluate the Thesis according to relevance, competency, persuasiveness, and other criteria agreed by the Faculty. Theses are graded according to the standard GSD grading structure of Distinction, High Pass, Pass, Low Pass, Fail.

Evaluation criteria include:

- Proposal: the potential of the research project
- Argument: the intellectual framework for the project
- Engagement: showing consistent inquiry throughout the semester
- Presentation/Representation: demonstrating a clear argument
- Excellence of design research

Final Submission Requirements
The final thesis must be submitted by the thesis due date, which will be announced at the beginning of the spring term. Students’ final theses will be catalogued and stored digitally in the Harvard Library collections and will be made available to future years of thesis students in the Frances Loeb Library. As a result, only a digital version of the thesis needs to be submitted. While documents of a variety of dimensions may be submitted, it is worth noting that your digital thesis will be most easily viewed and printed by others if it is produced in relatively standard page dimensions.
Students whose final thesis takes the form of a book or paper should submit a pdf of the thesis document. Students must include a signed cover page as the first page of the pdf. This cover page provides the title of the work and denotes that it constitutes a thesis for an MDes at the GSD. A template for the thesis cover page is provided in Appendix I. For the library to accept the thesis, the language on the thesis cover page must be the same as that in the template. The cover page must be included as the first page of the final thesis pdf and not appended as a separate file.

Recognizing that a wide variety of thesis formats are possible, some additional requirements are specified for theses not taking book or paper form. Theses of this sort may include films, computer programs, or certain types of visual material. In these cases, students must submit a digital copy of the thesis by the thesis submission deadline. Students must also submit a short written summary of the thesis. This summary should be provided in pdf format and include the following information (in addition to any requirements imposed by the individual thesis advisor):

- A brief description of the thesis, including a title and summary of project’s rationale, methodology and relevance to design research.
- A description of the format of the thesis.
- A description of the devices or equipment needed to locate, access, and view the thesis.
- A cover page providing the title of the work and denoting it constitutes a thesis for a Master in Design Studies degree at the GSD. A template for the thesis cover page is provided in Appendix I.

Students who intend to produce a thesis in a non-traditional format should speak with the thesis advisor early on to work out a plan for submission of their project in a manner which is compatible with the university’s thesis cataloguing and storage protocols.

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 for grading, and should also be included on the thesis 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 a DVD, also according to library guidelines included in the appendices of this document.

**Thesis Prizes**
The department may award two thesis prizes each year to recognize outstanding thesis research. The prizes are:

- The Daniel L. Schodek Award for Technology and Sustainability - Awarded annually in recognition of the best Master in Design Studies theses in the area of technology and sustainable design;
- The Project Prize - Open to both published and unpublished papers/projects authored by a full-time graduate student in any of the Areas of the Masters in Design Studies program. The project must have been completed in the past academic year.
Prize nominations from MDes faculty and thesis advisors are reviewed by the MDes Faculty Council at the final degree vote meeting of the department. The Council reserves the right not to recommend any theses for prizes.
Additional Information for MDes Areas of Concentration

Art, Design and the Public Domain
As ADPD thesis are generally project based, there is a degree of flexibility regarding the length of the written submittal as compared to other MDes areas of concentration. That said, evaluation is based on both the project (whether it be an installation, exhibit, media, or other work), as well as the clarity and comprehensiveness of the written documentation described below.

In addition to submitting visual documentation of the thesis, you are required to submit a written paper that clearly explains your position. You should describe why you have this position, the information and context on which your position is based, and the potential impact of your work on the broader discipline. This documentation needs to be clear and readable. You should consider how your project would be described to someone who is reading about it in a publication and has never seen it before.

Your project will refer to issues that are subject to research done by those working in other disciplines. This includes, but is not limited to, sociologists, theorists, philosophers, and anthropologists. Describe the body of existing knowledge that informs your project, and the specific perspectives that are relevant to your project’s focus. Include information about artists or others who are working in a similar area, but be sure to explain these references in the text or footnotes. If you mention an artist then you must provide information about their specific project(s), and explain why you are referencing this artist’s work and how it relates to your thesis.

There must be a concurrent focus on making and writing. The advanced research should be developed with active people in the field—active artists and/or designers with extensive experience in developing and applying projects. In this research process, various reviews and public presentations are integral to the curriculum. The presentations to various constituencies are required in the process of the work development. Visual essays should be developed as part of the presentation, communication and engagement with the communities—the student must be able to engage from more organic and informal publics to more institutional contexts.

Critical Conservation
Critical Conservation does not pre-determine a model for research or the final thesis representation. CC instead supports allowing each research project to find the best methodology and expression suited to the inquiry. CC expects that the research work will establish a foothold in the idea of "new knowledge." Research inquiry is framed in multiple contexts: intellectual, cultural, theoretical, physical, etc., appropriate to the questions being asked. The product is composed within a narrative form and use of media appropriate to the intended audience. How well this is done, in what depth, and how well it is communicated is considered but there are no fixed criteria for evaluation.
Energy and Environment
In a thesis, Energy and Environment looks for an original contribution and potential impact on the field. Typically, EE students do an oral presentation with a written thesis. Other, nontraditional forms of a thesis are acceptable in consultation with the advisor. Some EE students work in small teams. Evaluation is based on innovation, soundness of the methodology/argument, as well as the overall quality of the presentation and written paper. (Implicit in both is that the student has done sufficient research to understand the current state of the field.) Ideally, the student has published/presented their work, e.g. at a conference.

In the energy and environment field a typical format for papers is:

- Abstract
- Introduction (with literature review)
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion (important!)
- Conclusion (like a summary abstract)

Evaluation is based on the overall quality of the presentation and written paper. (Implicit in both is that the student has done sufficient research to understand the current state of the field.) Ideally, the student has published/presented their work, e.g. at a conference.

History and Philosophy of Design and Media
Evaluation of an HPDM thesis is based on:

- pursuit of a clear question/argument
- clarity of structure and argumentation
- originality and creativity
- literature review relevant to subject matter; contextualized within current state of knowledge
- student’s demonstration that they can think critically and creatively, and are able to communicate clearly and logically.

Real Estate and the Built Environment
A REBE thesis consists of: a creative proposition or exploration; sound and thoughtful methodology for investigating it; an outline that lists the main steps of an envisioned analytic process or constructs of arguments; a good understanding of the literature on the particular topic being explored; and a clearly expressed set of conclusions or insights.

Often we encounter the question from REBE students: can a business plan be counted as a thesis? Yes, a well-thought-out business plan for a creative business proposition can be counted as a thesis.
Risk and Resilience
An exemplary RR thesis demonstrates:

- A well-formulated research question that enables a physical/material/spatial research agenda
- The articulation of a ‘project’ grounded in a clear mastery of a scholarly literature or practice
- Lucid explanation of chosen methodology and how it impacts research and data collection
- Evolution of the idea and progress at each stage of review
- A compelling presentation of the research undertaken that makes a clear argument in a mixed methods / mixed-media final product
- The student’s ability to work in a post-professional environment, self-motivated and independent

Technology
There are many publics in design. For any thesis the best mark of success is that it is compelling, sophisticated, and virtuosic enough that it places you in conversation with the professional public you want to be a part of. In this sense there are two poles of project in MDes Technology:

- Projects invested in the development and building of a new prototype tool or technology that doesn't currently exist;
- Projects invested in the creation of artifacts that consider cultural implications or virtuosic application of advanced but existing technologies in a new context.

Most projects fall between these two poles, but these categories allow us to think about success metrics. In each case success is measured as a project which, by virtue of its novelty, rigor, comprehensiveness, or representation, has the capacity of a wider audience, as measured by its probable acceptance to a relevant conference or publication.

Urbanism, Landscape, Ecology
The goal of a ULE thesis project is to articulate new questions and create new knowledge resulting from the synthesis of the conceptual and critical thinking of design with the rigor and clarity of academic and scientific thesis structure. In the first semester’s Proseminar, students build a research topic using, perhaps for the first time, the basic tools of creating a thesis. Thus they arrive in the second semester with experience of a new way of thinking, or already with a draft of what they can build upon for their MDes Thesis.

ULE expects that thesis students will: Secure a strong relationship with a faculty thesis advisor early in process; Clarify the thematic thesis topic with the advisor early in the process; Agree with the advisor as to deliverables and methods early in process.
APPENDICES

Forms:
- MDes Final Year Option Contract (PDF)
- MDes Declaration of Advisor Form THESIS 18-19 Fall (PDF)

Final submission specifications:
- Thesis Cover Page
- Guidelines for Submission of Thesis to Loeb Library
- PDF Creation examples for Loeb Library

Resources on writing at Harvard:
- Loeb Library Research and Writing Support

Human Subjects Review
Students should determine as soon as possible after deciding on a topic and methodology whether their research requires human subject approval. Approval is granted by the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB), which for the GSD is housed in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. The scope of research requiring human subjects review is broader than often assumed and includes research involving interaction with a wide range of informants, interviewees and subjects. Don’t assume that, just because you’re doing work that doesn’t seem focused on experiments or the social sciences, you don’t need approval. The good news is that, even among students having to submit documentation for approval, many will be eligible for expedited review. If research involves human subjects, but does not require formal approval, students are still required to communicate with the IRB to confirm their exemption. Since review can take several weeks, or longer in some cases, students are encouraged to explore these issues as soon as they have identified a tentative topic and research methodology. More information on this important aspect of thesis research will be provided in the thesis preparation seminar, but students are nonetheless recommended to investigate whether they will have to submit documentation for human subjects review before the topic is formally introduced in the seminar. Further information on the human subjects review process at Harvard, including a schedule of application deadlines, can be found on the following website:

Harvard IRB General Information and Resources: http://cuhs.harvard.edu/