

GSD 9203: Preparation of Design Thesis Proposal for MArch
Fall 2009

Instructor: Timothy Hyde

Course Description

Thesis Prep consists of one semester of independent research pursued under the guidance of a Thesis Advisor. The goal of Thesis Prep is to complete a program of research—inquiry, documentation, and analysis—that will define the parameters of the Thesis Project to be carried out during the following semester. In regular meetings during the semester, each student will work with his or her Thesis Advisor to develop the specific intention, substance, and methodology of the Thesis Project. At the end of the semester, each student will submit a Thesis Proposal that clearly defines the argument and the complete criteria that will be addressed through the synthetic and projective work of the Thesis Project.

While the majority of work will be conducted independently and with Thesis Advisors, Thesis Prep also includes a series of four workshops in which students will develop particular aspects of research that build toward the culminating Thesis Proposal. These workshops will be two-hour long seminar meetings held at intervals throughout the semester, and will include the preparation of specific exercises relating to argument, method, contextualization, and programming. The workshop meetings and exercise are designed to assist students in proceeding with their research in a timely and productive fashion.

Requirements

Students enrolled in Thesis Prep must attend all four workshop meetings and complete all the workshop assignments by the prescribed due dates. The primary requirement of Thesis Prep is the production of the Thesis Proposal document as described in the Thesis Requirements, and as agreed between individual students and their Thesis Advisors.

You must submit a preliminary draft of your Thesis Proposal to your Thesis Advisor no later than **November 24th**, and the final Thesis Proposal is due on **December 18th**. Two copies of the final document must be submitted: one to your Thesis Adviser and one to the Thesis Director.

Grading

Student grades will be assigned by individual Thesis Advisors. The course Instructor must confirm that each student has attended all meetings and completed the assignments for Thesis Prep to receive a grade of P or higher.

Course Schedule

Introduction

September 8

Workshop #1: Discourse

September 15

Workshop #2: Method

September 29

Workshop #3: Speculation

October 20

Workshop #4: Context

November 10

Workshop #1: Discourse

The goal of the Thesis Project is to develop a proposition about the role and significance of architecture. Such propositions may be introspective, examining predispositions and potentials held within the discipline itself; others may direct attention outward, to the effects and consequences of the discipline in the world. Many, of course, will draw upon both of these viewpoints. What all Thesis Projects have in common is that they aim to expand and refine architectural thinking.

To do this, though, one must begin from a clearly understood position within contemporary architectural discourse. You are neither the first nor the last to engage issues of architectural thought. But by grappling with these issues, by taking up and extending and expanded existing arguments and possibilities, your Thesis Project can open new questions and insights. Such thoughtful contributions to the discourse will require a comprehension of not only what the discourse already contains, but your own motivations and ambitions in entering into it.

Workshop Exercise

The following exercise prompts you to define the position of your thesis in relation to contemporary discourse.

After completing the required readings, survey other relevant readings from the list below and from sources you locate on your own. Then, using the perspective gained from these readings, draft a thesis statement that clearly links the issues, problems, and questions embedded in your thesis topic to contemporary architectural discourse. This statement will be provisional and will change as your research progresses, but at this stage it is crucial to assess your thesis topic from the perspective of architectural discourse, and to situate it within the complex of current debates. The primary goal is to generalize your topic in order to understand its contemporary relevance.

Your thesis statement should not exceed one page, and should refer directly to at least three textual sources that exemplify the relevant discourse (and not just your specific thesis topic.) The statement should succinctly describe your thesis topic and must clearly demonstrate your awareness of prevailing architectural discourse.

Readings

Required:

Mark Jarzombek, "A Thesis." *Thresholds* 12 (Spring 1996): 6-8.

Sandford Kwinter, "When Did You Stop Beating Your Wife?" *Hunch* 6/7 (Summer 2003): 290-293.

Mark Linder, "TRANSdisciplinarity." *Hunch* 9 (Summer 2005): 12-15.

David Leatherbarrow, "Architecture is its Own Discipline." In *The Discipline of Architecture*, edited by Andrzej Piotrowski and Julia Williams Robinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 2001: 83-102

Suggested:

Assemblage 41 (2001): entire issue.

"Stocktaking 2004: Nine Questions about the Present and Future of Design," in *Harvard Design Magazine* 20 (Spring/Summer 2004): 5-52.

Hunch 6/7 (Summer 2003): entire issue.

Perspecta 38 (2006): entire issue.

Andrzej Piotrowski and Julia Williams Robinson, eds. *The Discipline of Architecture*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 2001: selected essays.

Workshop #2: Method

Research is a general term that encompasses a wide variety of intellectual endeavor. In the Thesis Program research is the examination of presumptions and possibilities, facts and potentials, ideas, interactions, and changes in the disciplinary and discursive territory of architecture. Because research (and architecture) are broad, fluid terms it is the responsibility of each student to determine and defend his or her method of research.

The explicit determination of a method of research is of crucial importance to the Thesis Project. Because the Thesis Project is a hypothetical or speculative proposal, it must carry with it its own terms of evaluation. On what basis are the claims of the Project asserted? By what evidence are its claims defended?

Students will set out very different programs of research, exploring technical, cultural, disciplinary, economic, or social dimensions of architecture, and each of these requires different methods of research and consequently different standards of evidence. These standards are neither transparent nor equivalent. For example, the evidentiary standard of technical research would include the principles of scientific experiment: reproducibility and falsifiability; disciplinary research would adopt the standard of precedent and norm; economic research that of the model. These different attitudes must be foregrounded as part of the research itself and be deliberately incorporated into each student's individual methodology.

Workshop Exercise

The following exercise is designed to illuminate the assumptions and assertions that are likely already inherent in your ongoing research work. Or in other words, to reveal the methods you already employ so that you will be able to manipulate them more productively and convincingly.

Select one discrete element from the research you have begun to accumulate. This element might be an existing building you are examining as a precedent, a book or article whose theoretical argument you are thinking about, a law or regulation whose influence on architecture you want to discern, a material whose properties you are determining, a software platform, a specific social behavior, etc. It should be self-contained and small enough that you can isolate part of it for this exercise.

With a text and accompanying images totaling no more than two 8 ½ x 11 pages, describe 1) the element under consideration, 2) the exact means of analysis or interpretation that you are employing against that element, 3) the evidence that you gather or adduce from that means, and 4) the claim relevant to architecture that you assert on the basis of that evidence. Note that these four components (the thing that is approached, the means of analysis used, the evidence adduced, and the claim asserted) are the constituents that make up a method of research.

This exercise is intended to be didactic. Its purpose is to make visible the connections between the different stages of research—choosing the element, the means of examining it, the assertion of a claim, and so on—to allow you to assess the consistency between those stages.

Readings

Required:

Michael Caldwell, "Flooded at the Farnsworth House." In *Strange Details* (Cambridge: MIT Press) 2007: 93-136.

Mark Goulthorpe, "Cut Idea." In *The Possibility of (an) Architecture* (London: Routledge) 2008: 49-63.

Stephen Kieran, "Research in Design: Planning Doing Monitoring Learning." *Journal of Architectural Education* (September 2007): 27-31.

Suggested:

Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm." In *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press) 1989: 96-125.

Karl Popper, "Science: Conjectures and Refutations." In *Conjectures and Refutations* (New York: Basic Books) 1962: 33-59.

Workshop #3: Speculation

The process of thesis research does not consist of the linear accumulation of data absent any application of design. Research is a reciprocal process, in which facts and conditions are not only located and examined, but also tested. You need not defer design until the end of your thesis research. On the contrary, design should be understood as a technique of research and should be incorporated into the preparatory stage of your thesis.

Many facts or conditions will only become significant to your thesis once you have explored the potentials and the limitations they offer or impose by adding speculation to description. Speculation is the posing of an open question: "What if?" For example, thesis research that is interested in material properties could include a series of experiments that test unorthodox configurations of material. Thesis research that is interested in a particular typology could develop a series program organizations to discover possible limit conditions of scale, volume, or density. Thesis research that is interested in a specific urban location or condition might conduct interviews with a group of potential constituents assessing future outcomes.

Incorporating the speculative thinking of design as a component of research facilitates a feedback through which you can progressively adapt and refine the focus of your research.

Workshop Exercise

The following exercise aims to encourage a speculative stage of thesis work in which data and information gathered thus far is considered as raw material for new forms, scenarios, performances, or effects.

You should first isolate a definable area of your thesis work of which you feel you have a comprehensive understanding. From this material, construct at least three distinctive speculations, experiments in which you propose potential transformations of that same material. These speculations may be oriented toward specific results or they may be open-ended. They must, however, be speculations and not rehearsals of known consequences.

Examples of speculations would include: repetitive studies that demonstrate the reflective properties of reflective surfaces; narrative descriptions of different scenarios resulting from different programmatic configurations; schematic codes for new technological configurations.

You are strongly encouraged to pursue an iterative approach in order to better assess the properties of the results of your experiments. An iterative approach—one that consists of multiple variations of a discrete process or operation—is likely to illuminate when and how certain potentials are created or precluded by specific design configurations. A non-iterative approach, in which only one object or result is produced, does not allow a ready comparison of different possibilities.

Each of the three speculations should be clearly documented and presented. For this exercise, the choice of format is open, but should be carefully premeditated so that it is more likely useful through the remainder of your research.

Readings

Required:

Robert Venturi, "Epilogue." In *Iconography and Electronics Upon a Generic Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press) 1996: 333-374

Rem Koolhaas, "Field Trip: A(A) Memoir" and "Exodus, or The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture." In *SMLXL* (New York: Monacelli) 1995: 214-232 and 5-19.

Workshop #4: Context

Whatever its focus—cultural, technical, disciplinary, typological, etc.—the Thesis Project delimits an area as a venue for architectural thinking and practice. Once delimited, this area serves reciprocally as the context for the thesis project, defining the conditions, forces and influences with which the project must contend. Due to its immersion in economic, social, and political processes architecture is often described as the most complex cultural production. In the formulation of the thesis project, however, the influence of such processes must be explicitly stated and clearly understood.

Two common components of architectural context are the site and the program. While these may be essential, the understanding of context in contemporary architectural discourse is considerably more expansive, taking in aspects such as economic mechanisms, sustainable production processes, media diffusion, cultural identity, regulatory structures, or social behavior. Moreover, site and program are not invariable. That a particular place or program will have particular consequences cannot be assumed as fact, but must be convincingly argued as the probable outcome of a reaction between several contingencies.

The context of architecture is the shifting interactions of these many realities and probabilities, the hierarchies developed among them, and the anticipation of their possible configurations.

Workshop Exercise

The following exercise is designed to help you define the context of your thesis in concrete terms, and to move past an initial description of context toward an understanding of the consequences of architecture's participation in that context.

First, each student must determine and describe the primary constituent elements of the context of his or her thesis project. These elements may include physical aspects of site such as urban fabric, topography, or environment; they may also include regulatory structures such as zoning codes or economic criteria such as speculative financing; they may include social patterns such as behaviors or cultural traditions that are programmatically defined. In short, what are the primary factors—external to the project itself and inherent to its program—which your project must accommodate? What forces precede it and what forces will it attempt to configure?

For the exercise, select no fewer than three such constituent elements, one of which must be program. With a text and accompanying images totaling no more than three 8 ½ x 11 pages, diagram these elements as patterns of cause and effect. To do so, you will need to first represent clearly the initial condition of the contextual element and then to represent the consequences of the existence of that element. Note that you will also need to have a well-defined program prior to beginning the exercise.

As in the first exercise, the goal is clarity of understanding. You are selecting elements from that context in order to didactically propose how such elements produce an instance of cause and effect that will have a bearing upon architecture.

Readings

Required:

"2 Architects, 10 Questions on Program: Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi." In *Praxis* 8 (2006): 6-15
Sandy Isenstadt, "Contested Contexts." In *Site Matters*, edited by Carol Burns and Andrea Kahn (London: Routledge, 2005): 157-183.
Timothy Love, "Double-Loaded." *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (Fall 2004/Winter 2005): 42-47.
Roger Sherman, "If, then." *Log* 5 (Spring/Summer 2005): 50-58.

Suggested:

John McMorrough, "Notes on the Adaptive Reuse of Program." *Praxis* 8 (2006): 102-110.
Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace." *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 175-190.
Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress: Umberto Eco on Interpretation." In *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999): 131-147.