

Graduate School of Design
Harvard University
PhD Program in Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning

Guidelines for the General Exams

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE GENERAL EXAMINATIONS?

The general examinations represent an important step in the process leading to the fulfillment of the PhD. They mark the end of course work and that the PhD student is now fully prepared to engage in his/her research, beginning with the elaboration of his/her dissertation proposal. The general examinations correspond to the moment when the students' committee begins to form. Usually, the primary advisor and other key committee members will be chosen among the faculty administering the examinations.

The general examinations main purpose is to check that the student has acquired a proper mastery of his/her domain of study in the perspective of a career devoted to teaching and research. This entails not only a good knowledge of the basic facts pertaining to the domain, but also an understanding of the fundamental issues at play within it.

However, the importance of the general examinations should not be exaggerated. The exact content and results of a student's general examinations are never made public. They play no role in later job applications. At that stage the final dissertation and possibly the book derived from it are all that matters. The definitions of the fields covered respectively by the major and the minor(s) give nothing more than a provisory indication on the orientations the student intends to follow in the future. To be more specific, the major is supposed to convey an idea of the type of courses the student could be led to propose in a later stage of his/her academic career. The minor is often more closely related to the direction his/her dissertation might take in the near future. But these are, once again, only provisory indications that are of concern only to the PhD Program faculty members and students. An analogy would be that the major is a survey course and the minor is a seminar. One has a broad stroke, the other a more refined topic.

In summary, it is important both to take the generals seriously and to avoid transforming them into an excessively dramatic episode of the PhD curriculum.

SCHEDULE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE EXAMINATIONS

In accordance with GSAS recommendations, the general examinations should be taken no later than the end of the first semester of the third year of study. They are followed immediately by the elaboration of the dissertation proposal. The latter must be submitted and approved before registering for the fourth year of study.

At Harvard, the organization of the generals differs considerably from one program to another. Some programs, with relatively narrow disciplinary scopes and well-defined core canons, have adopted a very standardized frame. Others are more flexible in their definition. In the PhD in Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning, a high level of standardization does not seem possible because of the broad range of disciplines, methods and fields covered by the program. This is why the decision has been made to organize the general examinations around two or more fields that have been chosen by the student after discussion with his/her advisors from inside and outside the PhD program.

Usually, the general examinations are composed of one major and one minor field. Sometimes, for scientific reasons, two or three minors are deemed acceptable. Sometimes the distinction between major and minor may be abandoned. These configurations should remain however exceptional.

There are various ways to define the major field. A possible one is to say that it corresponds to an important subdomain of the theory/history of architecture or of urban studies. The major is thus linked to the mainstream preoccupations that define the PhD in Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning. The major is usually administered to the student by two faculty members from the PhD program.

Another possible characterization of the major is to consider that it may provide the frame for a major lecture course in one of the disciplines to which the PhD program prepares: history/theory of architecture and urban studies.

The major covers a relatively broad domain like the evolution of architectural theory or the history of urbanism from 1750 to 1950. One should note however that the scale of the domain covered is relative to the nature and depth of the study envisaged. Postwar architectural theory or urbanism is perfectly acceptable subjects for a major, provided that they are envisaged in greater depth.

The minor as suggested by its name addresses usually a more limited or rather specialized field of study. There are, there again, various ways to characterize it. At Harvard, in a PhD delivered jointly by a professional school like the GSD and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the minor may give the opportunity to the student to work on subjects involving disciplines and themes not usually covered at the GSD. If such is the case, the student is strongly advised to work with specialists of these disciplines and themes who belong to other parts of the university, beginning with FAS. A minor may thus involve FAS historians, anthropologists, sociologists, etc.

To be opened to other disciplines and themes does not involve losing one's own identity. A proper minor field is usually defined at the intersection of the domains covered by the PhD in Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning and exterior domains and preoccupations.

Another characterization of the minor is to consider that it may be used as guideline for an advanced seminar rather than a lecture course.

Finally, it is often the case that the minor is related in one way or another to the prospective dissertation subject. However, this should not be taken as an absolute rule, since many students may still be uncertain about their dissertation subject at the time of the generals.

For each of the fields he/she has chosen, major and minor(s), the student then prepares with the help of his/her advisors a bibliography of relevant books and articles that he/she will read in the subsequent months and use in interactions with the advisors. **In order to remain within a reasonable frame, it is strongly advised to limit oneself to a total of 200 references, major and minor considered together.**

At the end of the reading period, the student submits to each of the faculty members involved in the preparation of the major and the minor fields a list of questions that reflect the approach he/she has taken, usually 3 to 4 questions broad enough to be the starting point of an essay. From those questions, the faculty members create their own questions that they will ask the student.

Two days are then chosen for the general examinations proper. The major exam will be an oral exam unless the student and faculty advisors suggest otherwise. The student will arrange a time that he/she can sit down with the two faculty advisors for approximately 2-3 hours. The student will then be asked questions about the major field of study. For the minor exam; at the beginning of the first day, around 9 am, the faculty members in charge of the minor examination send by email their question to the student. The student has until the end of the afternoon, say 5 pm, to send back his/her answer in form of a short essay on the question submitted to him/her.

A few days or week after the completion of the oral exam and essays, the student meets with the faculty involved in his/her major and minor to discuss his/her answers. The discussion is an integral part of the examinations. The exchange with faculty provides an opportunity for the student to demonstrate further his mastery of his/her major and minor fields, and to defend the positions he/she has taken. Open discussion of hypotheses and results represent an important aspect of academic life. The general examinations are also meant to test the student on that ground.

At the end of the discussion, the faculty asks the student to withdraw for a moment in another room. After a usually short deliberation, the faculty members decide whether the student has passed or not his/her generals. Failure is by the way exceptional and is as much a failure for the program as it is for the student. The result is then transmitted to the PhD program Chair and Administrator using a special form signed by all the faculty members involved in the general examinations. If positive, this result is announced to the whole PhD program community and congratulations are addressed to the student by the faculty and administration.

FRAMING THE MAJOR AND MINOR FIELDS, CONSTRUCTING THE RELATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES

As it has been said previously, a major covers usually a relatively broad field like the history of architecture from 1800 to the present or the theories of urbanization in the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. More focused fields are of course possible. The relations between architecture, science and technology may be for example taken as a major.

Representative examples of minors chosen by students of the program in the past years include fields like "Decorative Art, Design and the Object: History, Theory, and Debate: 1850-1930", or "Modernity and Modernism in Latin America."

In both the major and the minor, the fundamental question is how to frame the field in order to propose a satisfying bibliography and a good set of questions epitomizing the approach he/she has chosen. There are of course no general answers to such a question. The following guidelines may however be useful.

First, since a student seldom chooses his/her major and minor fields without any prior knowledge at all of what there are about, he/she may begin by identifying a series of key references that will need to be included in the bibliography. Most of the time majors dealing with modern architecture will include for instance classic books like Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* or Kenneth Frampton's *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*.

Following the identification of these fundamental references, the student should deal with two problems that are actually related one to another. The first has to do with the chronological, geographic and cultural structures that have been used to describe the field. If one takes modern architecture, what are the key chronological divisions usually mobilized to analyze its evolution? Are there debates regarding some of them? Have new propositions been made recently regarding the definition of the relevant periods to be considered? From history of architecture to urban studies, similar questions arise when dealing with geographic or cultural entities and boundaries. The definition of the non Western by opposition to the West is among the most common and the most disputed of these boundaries.

The second problem is about the key themes that have oriented the work of scholars in the field. If one takes modern architecture, a vast array of themes, stylistic, political, cultural have been tackled with. One may for instance be interested by the relations between nineteenth- and twentieth-century architecture or by the technological obsessions of modernity. Most of these themes relate to certain types of chronological, geographic and cultural structures. It is absolutely impossible to reach an exhaustive knowledge of a major field at the stage of the General examinations. Even a minor may prove far too extensive. **The real challenge is to choose a set of themes, fundamental enough to be considered as a reasonable mode of entry into the field, with their corresponding chronological, geographic and cultural structures, knowing that the definition of these structures is as debatable as the questions themselves.**

There again, there is no standard method to identify the relevant questions and the proper chronological, geographic and cultural structures. Reading, reflection and discussion with advisors, represent the only way to reach the inner conviction that a proper approach has been found. This approach should possess a strong degree of internal coherence, while enabling to describe most salient features of the field.

Besides enriching gradually the set of references that will provide further insight into the major or minor field, the next challenge lies in the general organization of the bibliography. This organization is supposed to reflect both the fundamental assumptions made on the relevant chronological, geographic and cultural structures that orient the description of the field, and the themes retained by the student. Whenever applicable, it is convenient to associate a period or a geographic or cultural boundary with a theme. But this kind of solution is not always possible.

Now, regarding what to include and what to leave aside in the major and minor bibliographies, a series of questions arise regularly. The first has to do with sources. To what extent should original literature be included in a bibliography, a book by Gottfried Semper or Le Corbusier for example?

As a general rule, sources should appear in very limited number, the assumption being that the student will have read the relevant primary works during his preparation for the General examinations. The sources listed should be those works that provide an intimate knowledge of what is considered as absolutely essential to frame properly the field. Sometimes, these sources will be writings that have exerted an enormous influence, like Le Corbusier's *Towards an Architecture*, or Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York*, for twentieth-century architectural theory. At other times, one may pick a less essential source book or article because it exemplifies a very specific question that might remain otherwise not totally clarified. This might account for the presence of a reference like Richard Neutra's *Surviving through Design* to characterize fully post-war architecture.

A second frequent motive of perplexity has to do with general references extending beyond the scope of the major and minor fields, a history of American society for a post-war American architecture field, for instance. Other cases regard philosophical references like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze or Jacques Derrida's writings, or methodological works of a general nature.

There again, there is no universal answer. As a rule, however, general references should be listed only when they provide a very specific element, either conceptual or methodological, that is considered as crucial by the student.

The classification of the sources and references is always tricky for many books may appear under various headings. Rather than duplicating a reference to make it appear at various points in the bibliography, this should represent an incentive to limit the number of headings and subheadings. The broader the headings are, the easier it is for the reader to understand that their definition remains always a bit fuzzy. Too many headings tend to be more confusing than adding to the clarity of the argument.

PHRASING THE QUESTIONS

The best way to phrase properly the questions used by the examiners to formulate their own that the student will have to answer is to combine a set of relevant themes with the temporal, spatial and cultural problems of definition and boundary they raise. It may be useful for that purpose to group various related sub questions in the same general question.

Harvard University
Department of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning

Report on the General Examination for the Degree of PhD

Student's Name: _____

Chair: _____

Exam Field 1:

Examiner: *signature*_____

Exam Field 2:

Examiner: *signature*_____

Exam Date & Location: _____

The committee certifies that the General Examination of the candidate was:

Pass _____ Fail _____

Further comments may be made below:

1. Does the candidate have a good grasp of the fields, both in terms of bibliography and of problems?
2. Is the candidate sufficiently articulate to generate and maintain undergraduate interest in the subject?
3. Does the candidate have the kind of lively mind that you would look for in assigning teaching fellows in your own course?
4. Is the candidate ready for teaching in ordinary course sections?