

HARVARD  
UNIVERSITY

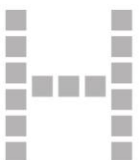
GRADUATE  
SCHOOL

OF  
DESIGN

48 QUINCY STREET  
CAMBRIDGE, MA 02138  
GSD.HARVARD.EDU

URBAN PLANNING AND DESIGN  
THESIS HANDBOOK

2025-2026



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## **1. INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS PROCESS**

### **1.1. Overview**

This handbook serves as a guide for students who are undertaking a thesis in the Department of Urban Planning and Design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. The thesis provides an opportunity for students in the urban planning and urban design degree programs to pursue graduate-level research and deeply explore a topic of their interest. This handbook provides a summary of key thesis requirements and provides an overview of the thesis process, from eligibility, selecting a topic, and producing a proposal to submitting the final thesis.

For UPD students interested in completing a thesis, the process begins in the first year of their degree. In April of the first year, students declare the thesis-track, identify a potential advisor, and propose a research topic. In the fall semester of their second year, students complete Thesis Prep and develop a detailed thesis proposal. In their fourth and final spring semester, students complete, defend, and submit their thesis. Each of these stages and associated requirements are described in detail in the following pages.

### **1.2 Eligibility**

For MUPs, those who receive a grade of pass or higher in both first-year studios are eligible to declare their intent to meet their Project-Based Learning requirement by undertaking an Independent Thesis for their final year. Securing an eligible faculty advisor by May 1 is required to remain eligible. Refer to section 2.2 for more information.

For MAUD/MLAUDs, a minimum final grade of “Pass” in both Elements and UPD Option Studio and, at minimum, a “High Pass” in one of the two OR a minimum final grade of “Pass” in all first-year courses and, at a minimum, a “High Pass” in at least three 4-unit degree requirements or distributional electives are eligible to meet their degree requirements by declaring thesis. The Independent Design Thesis is taken in place of the fourth-semester Option Studio. Securing an eligible faculty advisor by May 1 is required to remain eligible. Refer to section 2.2 for more information.

Upon completion of Thesis Prep in the fall of their final year, Urban Design students will be evaluated by the Urban Design Faculty to determine if thesis topics are sufficiently relevant, situated, and projective to proceed. Urban Design students who are not approved to proceed to an Independent Thesis in their final semester will instead be required to take a full course load and enroll in an Option Studio to fulfill their graduation requirements.

### 1.3 Timeline

The components in the timeline are explained in the remainder of the document. Specific dates are announced each year.

#### *Year 1:*

March: Initial thesis track information session.

April: Select thesis track.

May: Petition to undertake thesis (topic and advisor)

Summer: Refine thesis topic and timeline.

#### *Year 2:*

August/September: Enroll in **GSD 9204**

October: Mid-term review of preliminary proposal

December: Final review of proposal

January: Enroll in GSD 9302 and work with advisor, submitting drafts for review

March: Mid-term thesis review

April: **Penultimate draft of the entire thesis document is due to the advisor by Friday, April 24.** You can be working on components after that, and on the final presentation, but it needs to be substantially complete so the advisor can review and comment. **A copy needs to be uploaded to Canvas. Your advisor will be sent a survey for comments on this version.**

Early May: Final thesis review **(currently May 14, 2026)**

May: Submit digital copy of the thesis the Monday following the final review **(May 18, 2026 at 9:00 am)**

## 2. THE FIRST YEAR: ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION

### 2.1. Identifying a Prospective Thesis Topic

Identifying a prospective thesis topic and a thesis advisor go hand in hand. When approaching candidate advisors, it will be important to have some concrete ideas about the broad topics that you would like to investigate in the thesis. Identifying a final topic will likely be an iterative process where you establish whether different faculty members have expertise or interest in your emerging ideas, and you then refine your ideas with their input.

### 2.2. Identifying an Advisor

In the first year, students interested in pursuing a thesis should start locating potential thesis advisors. Selecting a compatible advisor – both intellectually and personally – is critical to successful completion of the thesis. Students will work closely with their advisor to develop a proposal and complete their thesis. Therefore, it is essential that the advisor and advisee have a strong working relationship and a shared understanding of expectations.

Students should begin canvassing potential advisors as early as possible, since it is possible that professors may find themselves with more advisees than they can handle later in the year. As well, some professors will likely be on sabbatical in any given year and clarifying their availability will give students a better sense of who is available to supervise their thesis work. In contacting advisors, be sure to approach them with ideas that fall broadly in their areas of interest and work. In other words, do some initial homework on faculty research interests before approaching advisors.

Thesis advisors are required to be faculty at the GSD. Typically, they have “professor” in their title or are lecturers who are full-time at the university and/or teaching in both semesters. Affiliated professors from other schools are not eligible to serve as a thesis advisor. For a list of faculty eligible to serve as a thesis advisor contact the program administrator ([Sarah Hutchinson](#)).

Sometimes students wish to have two advisors. This is discouraged as it adds logistical burdens; rather, you should seek out various faculty to discuss your thesis and provide informal feedback. If you do wish to have two advisors, they both need to be eligible to be advisors according to the criteria in this section. One will be designated the **primary advisor**, and their schedule will be the one that the department coordinates with for all fall and spring semester reviews. The **primary advisor** will be responsible for the grade in conjunction with other faculty in the grading meeting.

### **2.3. Submitting Forms for Pursuing the Thesis**

In the spring of the first year, students must submit at minimum two forms to the UPD office in order to pursue a thesis in their second year. First, in April, MUP students must submit the “Thesis, Option Studio, or Project-Based Courses” binding declaration form, while MAUD/MLAUD students must submit the “Thesis, Option Studio, and Courses” binding declaration form”. These forms are available for download with each program’s Curricular Details.

Second, on **May 1**, students must submit the “UPD Secondary Thesis Petition” form, on which the student identifies a thesis topic and advisor. Identifying the student’s topic and advisor during the spring of the first year is important for two reasons. First, it gives students the chance to refine their topics and conduct preliminary research over the summer. This is especially important for students who are contemplating field or archival research, as the summer break represents the longest period of unstructured time available for this purpose during the degree. Second, since many faculty members are not available during the summer, it can be very difficult for students to identify an advisor over the break. Former UPD students who have successfully completed a thesis consistently emphasize the importance of starting early and having the summer to both refine their proposed topic and begin communicating with their advisor.

### **3. THE SECOND YEAR (THIRD SEMESTER): DEVELOPING A THESIS PROPOSAL**

#### **3.1. Thesis Preparation Overview**

The fall semester of the second year sees students embark on a formal process of thesis preparation. Over the semester, students develop a thesis proposal in which they refine their ideas and begin the substantive work of thesis completion. Both MUP and MAUD/MLAUD students complete the thesis preparation phase through the department's thesis preparation seminar ( ADV 9204), a four-unit course held during the fall semester. This seminar meets each week for three hours and provides an opportunity for students to develop their emergent thesis ideas, share work in progress, and get feedback from their peers, visiting reviewers and faculty members.

#### **3.2. Thesis Preparation Seminar (ADV 9204)**

The seminar provides the theoretical and methodological foundation necessary for completing a graduate thesis in the Department of Urban Planning and Design. Over the semester, students will produce a solid thesis proposal so they can complete their thesis by the end of the academic year. In the course, students will identify and refine their thesis topic, solidify their relationship with a thesis advisor, and incrementally develop an intellectually interesting and tractable thesis project. Sessions focus on discussion and analysis of relevant readings, examination of different thesis models and approaches, and exploration of emergent student work.

The seminar begins by introducing the thesis as a conceptual frame and by identifying the key elements that cut across the different types of theses that students produce, for example, written, design-focused, or based in another medium, such as film. They address many issues: identifying topics and questions, research methods, case selection, the craft of thesis production, managing the advisor-advisee relationship, and techniques for verbally defending a thesis. As a forum for the exchange of work in progress, the seminars ask students to share their ideas and get feedback from their peers, visiting reviewers, and faculty. Students complete weekly assignments relevant to their theses and present in class on most weeks. Students will be expected to provide critical and thoughtful responses to their peers' work and engage in informed and mature discussion.

#### **3.3. Maintaining a Strong Advisor-Advisee Relationship**

A positive and respectful advisor-advisee relationship is central to successfully completing the thesis proposal. Students should try to establish a strong relationship with their advisor early in the thesis process. Students should meet as regularly as possible with their advisor over the thesis proposal semester, as they develop their ideas and begin to engage in more substantive research. It is important to have a shared set of expectations with your advisor about the scope and nature of the thesis proposal and this can only come from a series of detailed conversations about your work.

To track progress, students should stay in close contact with their thesis advisor over the thesis preparation semester. Regular meetings and feedback will also allow the student to iteratively develop a final proposal that meets the requirements and expectations of their advisor. This semester is the key time to work closely with your advisor, whether through office hour appointments or other meetings, to develop the core ideas underpinning your thesis. 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.

### **3.4. Human Subjects Review**

Students should determine as soon as possible after deciding on a topic and methods whether their research requires human subjects approval. Approval is granted by the Harvard University Area Institutional Review Board (IRB). The scope of research requiring human subjects review is broader than often assumed and includes research involving interaction with a wide range of people. Don't assume that you don't need approval just because you're doing work that doesn't seem focused on experiments or the social sciences. 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 method. More information on this important aspect of thesis research will be provided in the thesis preparation seminar. Still, students should investigate whether they will have to submit documentation for human subjects review before the topic is formally introduced in the seminars. 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/>

### **3.6. Thesis Proposal Mid-Term and Final Reviews**

During the fall semester, we hold mid-term and final reviews of the thesis proposals, during which all thesis students will present their proposals and receive feedback from reviewers. Precise dates for the reviews will be determined and announced to students and advisors at the start of the fall semester. Students should remind their thesis advisors of the review dates and encourage them to attend. This will be a valuable opportunity to bring your thesis advisor up to date on your work.

In general, the mid-term review will take place in October, while the final review will take place in mid to late November or early December. The deadline for submitting the final thesis proposal at the end of the semester will be on Canvas. While the final thesis proposal is due at the end of the semester, students should bring work in progress to their advisors for feedback and review over the course of the semester.

These reviews are a way for students to see the work of other students. During the fall semester, there are other opportunities to discuss your work with your advisor, other students, and faculty. This can be done in Thesis Prep, by arrangement with your advisor, during faculty office hours, and informally.

### **3.7. Requirement to Prepare and Submit a Thesis Proposal**

The thesis proposal, like the thesis itself, 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 submitted thesis proposal must:

- clearly state the student's thesis topic or question,
- argue in a compelling way why the question merits study and is of intellectual interest,
- describe the frontier of knowledge with respect to the thesis question,
- present the methods and approach in detail and justify why they are appropriate,
- summarize relevant literature and/or precedents on the subject,
- describe the final product of the thesis (e.g. a research study examining x or a design proposal looking at y), and
- provide a timeline for completing the thesis.

The thesis preparation seminar provides more detail.

### **3.8. Grading**

The grading basis for students who receive their thesis preparation through the formal seminar is provided in the course syllabus.



## **4. THE SECOND YEAR (FOURTH SEMESTER): COMPLETING, DEFENDING, AND SUBMITTING THE THESIS**

### **4.1. Thesis Completion Overview**

The spring semester 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 semester, students work closely with their advisor(s) to develop a final thesis that can pass the scrutiny of faculty and outside critics. Students present their thesis-in-progress in mid-term reviews and defend the final project in a final review.

### **4.2. Independent Thesis Course (GSD ADV 9302)**

Working closely with their advisor, in the spring semester, all students register in ADV 9302: Independent Thesis, counting for eight units.

### **4.3. Maintaining a Strong Advisor-Advisee Relationship**

As with the thesis proposal, a positive advisor-advisee relationship is central to successfully completing, defending, and submitting the thesis. Students should meet as regularly as possible with their advisor over the semester. Regular meetings are especially important during the final semester as the iterative process of submitting work and receiving feedback is critical to developing a robust thesis. In the final semester, it is crucial to have a shared set of expectations with your advisor about the scope and nature of the thesis. Students should continue to stay in contact with other thesis students to share their emerging work and to learn from each other's successes and struggles. The peer network of fellow thesis students can keep you motivated and on track.

### **4.4. Thesis Mid-Term and Final Reviews**

During the spring semester, mid-term and final reviews will be held, during which students will present their in-progress and final theses for critical feedback. The mid-term and final thesis reviews are public reviews to which a panel of outside critics and GSD faculty are invited. The departmental thesis coordinator will coordinate and organize these reviews. The precise dates of the mid-term and final reviews will be determined before the start of the semester and conveyed to students and their advisors at the start of the spring semester. Students should also remind their thesis advisors of these dates once they are established. More details about final review logistics are in Appendix B and will be distributed as needed.

### **4.5. Reviewers for Thesis Reviews**

For the spring semester mid-term and final thesis reviews, outside reviewers will be invited to provide critical feedback on student work. Students will be able to suggest reviewers for the final reviews and every effort will be made to bring together a dynamic group of reviewers who can speak directly to the content of students' theses. All reviewers must be invited by the GSD/Department (Sarah Hutchinson) for various legal, financial, budgetary,

and logistical reasons.

#### 4.6. Format of the Thesis

The format of UPD 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. 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.

#### 4.7. Submitting the Thesis

The final thesis must be submitted by the thesis due date, which will be announced at the beginning of the spring semester. The submission deadline is usually 9:00 am on the day thesis grades are due from thesis advisors. **Importantly, students must submit a final draft of the thesis to their advisors well in advance of the final due date and no later than Friday, April 24, 2026. As noted above, a copy must also be uploaded to Canvas. Your advisor will be sent a survey for comments on this version.** 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.

Students' final theses will be catalogued and stored digitally in the Harvard Library HOLLIS collections via the DASH platform (Digital Access to Scholarship at Harvard). As a result, only a digital version of the thesis is required 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 wishing to additionally have a physical copy of the thesis stored in the Loeb Library are welcome to submit a bound version of the thesis to Sarah Hutchinson in the UPD department office by the submission deadline. Students may use an online book binding service or a local printer to create their physical thesis document. Submitting a physical copy of the final thesis is voluntary and is not a requirement of the thesis program.

Final digital versions of students' theses must be submitted to the Harvard Library using the Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETD) tool from ProQuest. All submissions will be reviewed and approved by the UPD department administrator (Sarah Hutchinson). Submission instructions and access to the ETD tool will be shared in advance with each thesis student. All final submissions are required to include the signed cover page.

The digital materials to be submitted by the final submission deadline vary somewhat according to the type of thesis undertaken. Specific details, based on the format of the final thesis, are provided in the sections below:

#### *Submission Requirements for Book or Article Format Theses*

Students whose final thesis takes the form of a book or article should submit a PDF of the thesis document. Students must include a signed cover page as the first page. This cover page provides the title of the work and denotes that it constitutes a thesis for a degree in the department of Urban Planning and Design at the GSD. A template for the thesis cover page is provided in Appendix A. 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.

#### *Submission Requirements for Theses in Other Formats*

Recognizing that a wide variety of thesis formats are possible, some additional requirements are specified for theses not taking book or article 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):

1. A cover page providing the title of the work and denoting it constitutes a thesis for a degree in the department of Urban Planning and Design at the GSD. A template for the thesis cover page is provided in Appendix A.
2. A brief description of the thesis, including a title and summary of the project's rationale, methods, and relevance to urban planning and/or urban design.
3. A description of the format of the thesis.
4. A description of the devices or equipment needed to locate, access, and view the thesis.

Students who intend to produce a thesis in a non-traditional format will also be required to upload their media files to the university's Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETD) tool.

#### **4.8. Thesis Abstracts**

A GSD Now event will be created for each thesis student's final review. We will be including each student's name, advisor's name, thesis project title, and a short abstract in GSD Now. A long lead time is required due to copyediting deadlines set by the Communications office. Thesis abstracts are due on April 1. Guidelines and submission details will be shared in advance.

#### **4.9. Grading**

The grade for the thesis is given by the thesis advisor in consultation with other faculty in a thesis grading meeting. **Grades are submitted to the Registrar's Office by the Department following the grading meeting.**

#### **4.10. Thesis Prizes**

The department may award two thesis prizes each year to recognize outstanding thesis research. The prizes are the UPD Thesis Prize in Urban Design and the UPD Thesis Prize in Urban Planning. Prize nominations emerge from the thesis grading meeting, and a subcommittee of faculty who did not supervise the nominated theses read them in depth. Nominated theses are also reviewed by the UP and UD Prize Committees, which are composed of faculty members appointed by the department chair. This committee presents its recommendations for prize recipients to the remainder of the departmental faculty at the final degree vote meeting of the department. The committee reserves the right not to recommend any theses for prizes.

**APPENDIX A: COVER PAGE TEMPLATE**

**THESIS TITLE**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Urban Planning and Design,**

**Harvard University Graduate School of Design**

*by*

**AUTHOR NAME HERE IN CAPS**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of**

**FULL DEGREE NAME HERE IN CAPS**

**DATE (Month and Year Thesis Submitted)**

The author hereby grants Harvard University permission to reproduce and distribute copies of this Thesis, in whole or in part, for educational purposes.

Student signature

\_\_\_\_\_

**Full Student Name Typed Here**

Advisor Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

**Full Thesis Advisor Name Typed Here**

## APPENDIX B: FAQ: THESIS ABSTRACT AND IMAGE

UPD Thesis Abstracts are typically due April 1 at 12:00 PM (noon).

Thesis students will be prompted to submit the below information. Each student will have one opportunity to correct grammatical errors after it is professionally copyedited, but all other content is final upon submission, including the title and abstract.

### **Thesis Titles:**

- Titles have a **75-character count maximum, including spaces**. This is a combined count for a title and subtitle.

### **Abstracts:**

- A Word document template will be provided to complete and return. Abstracts must be returned as a Word document for copyediting.
- **Abstracts have a 150-word count maximum.** Write as succinctly as possible.
  - One common way of structuring an abstract is as follows, though feel free to do it in any way your advisor approves:
    - the motivation for the thesis (the issue you are addressing and why)
    - the specific question that your thesis addresses
    - your key findings or the key components of your proposal
    - a statement of how this addresses the motivation (the contribution)
- Include your program and name in the file name. Example: MUP\_Hutchinson\_Sarah