Preparation for SMArchS Urbanism Thesis

MIT 4.288 Section D-1. Fall 2019

Units/Level: 3-0-6 G
Class and time: Room 2-103. Mondays, 10-1 pm.
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Class Description and Goals:

In this class we will work with you in order to achieve three main goals:

1. To develop a thesis proposal: that is, to define your thesis topic, research questions, conceptual framework, methods and sources, as well outcomes and format.

2. To test a range of research methods and theoretical approaches to your thesis topic through short, weekly exercises;

3. To sharpen your ability to critically analyze and comment on a range of evidence in written, verbal, and visual form.

General Structure and Requirements:

The class combines three parallel strands.

These strands are aimed at continuously testing formats, producing deliverables, and generating feedback to the process of formulating a thesis proposal. Each strand works at a different speed. The thesis proposal takes time for you to write, finetune, and for readers to respond to, while a visual presentation of what you are doing should be able to deliver key questions and assumptions in no more than five minutes, and an elevator pitch should capture your audience in no more than two sentences. We have structured the class accordingly.

Strand I (semester-long): preparing your thesis proposal.

Formulating a thesis statement and research plan, and selecting an adviser and readers, is a process that takes time. Accordingly, you will work continuously on refining the thesis proposal.

There will be three presentations of your thesis during the semester. The first two of these presentations are scheduled after a week in which we do not have class; you will therefore submit the written part of your thesis proposal before that long weekend, and use the second week to prepare the five-minute presentation. The last presentation will be the last week of class and it is conceived as a test run of the public presentation of your thesis proposal on XX / YY / ZZ.

The final document of the thesis proposal will include an abstract and problem statement, description of the state of the field, research questions, methodology, conceptual framework, work plan (timeline and deliverables), and sources/bibliography (organized thematically). This document will typically have 15 to 20 pages. The instructors will facilitate a template of this final proposal.

The dates of submission and presentation of these drafts are indicated in the schedule.

Strand II (weekly): interrogating forms of evidence and output formats

Regardless of your particular topic or whether your thesis is more research based or proposal oriented, there are several key forms of evidence, research methods, and forms of representation that we all need to consider. In this strand we will ask you to produce weekly Probes in which you will investigate partial aspects of your thesis. The main idea of these weekly Probes is to produce and test with a quick turn around how a particular type of evidence and output format can inform your thesis proposal.

You must submit your probes by Sunday, 5 pm to both instructors by email in order to receive feedback on your work. Late submissions will not be considered.

Strand III (in class): methods workshops; discussion of texts; and presentations and critique of student work.

Finally, we will engage you in on-the-spot production during class time. We will have three hands-on methods workshops, and will be discussing readings as well as your colleagues’ work.
Attendance:

Work in the class will build sequentially. Therefore, student commitment to incremental development on a weekly basis is of great importance. The demanding nature and pace of this class necessitates regular attendance and requires that deadlines are consistently met. Attendance in class and for the duration of all formal reviews is mandatory. Greater than two absences from class without medical excuse supported by a doctor’s note or verifiable personal emergency could result in a failing grade for the course.

Evaluation Criteria:

33% Attendance and participation in class.

33% Weekly probes.

33% Final thesis proposal.

Grading Definition:

A. Exceptionally good performance demonstrating a superior understanding of the subject matter, a foundation of extensive knowledge, and a skillful use of concepts and/or materials.

B. Good performance demonstrating capacity to use the appropriate concepts, a good understanding of the subject matter, and an ability to handle the problems and materials encountered in the subject.

C. Adequate performance demonstrating an adequate understanding of the subject matter, an ability to handle relatively simple problems, and adequate preparation for moving on to more advanced work in the field.

D. Minimally acceptable performance demonstrating at least partial familiarity with the subject matter and some capacity to deal with relatively simple problems, but also demonstrating deficiencies serious enough to make it inadvisable to proceed further in the field without additional work.

F. Failed. This grade also signifies that the student must repeat the subject to receive credit.

Academic Integrity and Honesty:

MIT’s expectations and policies regarding academic integrity should be read carefully and adhered to diligently: http://integrity.mit.edu

Writing and Communication Center:

The WCC at MIT (Writing and Communication Center) offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts. The WCC is staffed completely by MIT lecturers. All have advanced degrees. All are experienced college classroom teachers of communication. All are all are published scholars and writers. Not counting the WCC’s director’s years (he started the WCC in 1982), the WCC lecturers have a combined 133 years’ worth of teaching here at MIT (ranging from 4 to 24 years). The WCC works with undergraduate, graduate students, post-docs, faculty, staff, alums, and spouses. The WCC helps you strategize about all types of academic and professional writing as well as about all aspects of oral presentations (including practicing classroom presentations & conference talks as well as designing slides). No matter what department or discipline you are in, the WCC helps you think your way more deeply into your topic, helps you see new implications in your data, research, and ideas. The WCC also helps with all English as Second Language issues, from writing and grammar to pronunciation and conversation practice. The WCC is located in E18-233, 50 Ames Street). To guarantee yourself a time, make an appointment. To register with our online scheduler and to make appointments, go to https://mit.mywconline.com/. To access the WCC’s many pages of advice about writing
and oral presentations, go to http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/. Check the online scheduler for up-to-date hours and available appointments.

**Student Performance Criteria (NAAB):**

Realm A: Critical Thinking and Representation

- A1. Communication Skills: Ability to read, write, speak and listen effectively
- A2. Design Thinking Skills: Ability to raise clear and precise questions, use abstract ideas to interpret information, consider diverse points of view, reach well-reasoned conclusions, and test alternative outcomes against relevant criteria and standards.
- A3. Visual Communication Skills: Ability to use appropriate representational media, such as traditional graphic and digital technology skills, to convey essential formal elements at each stage of the programming and design process.
- A5. Investigative Skills: Ability to gather, assess, record, apply, and comparatively evaluate relevant information within architectural coursework and design processes.
Course Schedule

For 9/9:  

Prepare: A succinct, 3 minutes spoken presentation of your thesis proposal in light of the reading.

Week 1  Monday, September 9

In Class:  
Introduction by Instructors and students; Discuss Readings (Dines).

For 9/16:  
Probe 1: Keywords, or: Make Terminology Matter.

Goal: Understand the etymology, disciplinary history and the definition of the most critical concept of your thesis. Each student will question the main conceptual presupposition—captured in a single term—on which their thesis relies.

Outcome: Produce a text of 750-1000 words in which you seek to describe why this term is central, how it is used, how its use has changed over time and why, what unspoken assumptions and contradictions underly its use, and how it differs from other, seemingly similar terms in English and other languages, if applicable. Begin by selecting a series of terms relevant to your work, and then narrow it down to one.

Due: Sunday, September 15, by 5 pm.


Navigate: http://www.brokennature.org/checklist/

Week 2  Monday, September 16

In Class:  
10–11 am: Discussion of Reading (Antonelli).

11–1 pm: Workshop 1: Biennale.

Goal of Workshop 1: To generate an overview of the state of the field according to designers, and to frame a question to serve as a curatorial statement.

For 9/23:  
Probe 2: Sources, or: Select Your Evidence, Formulate a Hypothesis.

Goal: Understand the different sources that you will need to consider in your work, the relation between them, and the role they will play in your thesis.

Outcome: Select between 20 and 30 sources that will inform your thesis. Consider which are your primary sources (archival material, people), secondary sources (relevant literature), and what other documents are important for you (f.i. data, plans, reports, policy documents, etc.). Present your findings visually through a timeline and/or other graphic representation showing the relationship between the different documents. In the citations, adhere to standards. We recommend the Chicago Manual of Style. In addition, write an abstract of 300 words that presents your thesis topic, research questions, methods, and relevance.
Week 3  Monday, September 23

In Class:  10–12 pm: Workshop 2: Archive, with Gary van Zante and Daryl McCurdy, MIT Museum.

Goal of Workshop 2: To describe primary evidence in your own words, and use these observations to develop a conjecture on what happened and why.

12–1 pm: Discussion of Reading (Morris).


Goal: To understand the current debates about the main question you are exploring (which could be, for instance, the one you dealt with in Probe 1), and define your own position in relation to these debates. Try to articulate the relationship between your position and your main research questions. What do you want to know and how will you frame your work?

Outcome: 1000 word essay, organized around your research questions (one primary question, and between two and four secondary questions) and the state of discourse in relevant fields.

Due: Sunday, September 29, by 5 pm.


Week 4  Monday, September 30

In class:  10-11 am: Discussion of Reading (Aureli).

11-1 pm: Presentation and discussion of Probes 1/Keyword, Probe 2/Sources, and Probe 3/Theoretical Framework.

For 10/7:  Probe 4: Site, or: Define the Territory of your Intervention.

Goal: To understand the space and scale in which your thesis intervenes, and the different conditions affecting them. This site can be literally a physical place (for instance, a building or city), or a condition you aim to explore.

Outcome: Visualization of your site as a map, drawing, model, animation, or other. Use a map or other visual document of your site, or part of it, and challenge it through a new visualization to reflect your approach to the question of space and scale.

Week 5  Monday, October 7
In class: 10-11 am: Discussion of Reading (Moe).
11-1 pm: Discussion of Probe 4 / Site.
For 10/14: or earlier (if you want to maximize your long weekend), submit the written part of your thesis
document to the instructors. This will allow us to give specific feedback to you.
For 10/21: Prepare a succinct, 5-minute presentation of your thesis and research plan. In parallel, prepare
printed material, format tbd.

Week 6  Monday, October 14  Columbus Day: NO CLASS

Week 7  Monday, October 21  First Presentation
In class: Presentation and discussion of thesis proposals.
For 10/28: Note taking: Prepare a one-page document in which you summarize your takeaway from the
presentation and outline next steps.

Probe 5: Actors and Forces, or: Prepare a Relational Chart.

Goal: To identify the different actors relevant to your project, and understand their relative roles.
Actors can be individuals, institutions, organizations, laws, objects, places, publications. The
relationships between them can be synchronic or diachronic, in which case you will also need to
convey how they emerged and related temporally.

Outcome: A visualization that explains the relationships between actors.

Read: Dubravka Sekulic, “The Ambiguities of Informality: The extra-legal production of space in
Belgrade during socialism and after.” Dérive No. 71 (April 2018), 37–42.

****** Deadline to confirm your thesis adviser: Friday, October 25  ******

Week 8  Monday, October 28
In class: 10-11 am: Review of Presentation; Discussion of Reading (Sekulic).
11-1 pm: Discussion of Probe 5/ Actors and Forces.
For 11/04: Probe 6 / Abstract the Tangible.

Goal: To understand the materials or technologies that are involved in your research/project, and
how they are in turn the result of certain forms of production. To question which are the conditions
that make those materials / technologies possible.

Outcome: Charts, Tables, or Diagrams—a visualization that helps to quantify and understand the
choice of these technologies and materials; that is labor and other cost, sources of raw materials,
transportation paths, technologies, etc.

### Week 9  
**Monday, November 4**

In class:  
10-11 am: Discussion of Reading (Picon).

11-1 pm: Discussion of Probe 6 / Abstract the Tangible / Relational Chart.

For 11/4:  
or earlier (if you want to maximize your long weekend), submit the written part of your thesis document to the instructors. This will allow us to give specific feedback to you.

For 11/11:  
Prepare a succinct, 5-minute presentation of your thesis and research plan. In parallel, prepare printed material, format tbd.

### Week 10  
**Monday, November 11**  
Veterans Day: NO CLASS

### Week 11  
**Monday, November 18**  
Second Presentation w/ Guests

In class:  
Presentation of thesis proposals.

For 11/25:  
**Note taking:** Prepare a one-page document in which you summarize your takeaway from the presentation and outline next steps


### Week 12  
**Monday, November 25**

In class:  
10-11.30 am. Workshop 3: The Interview, with Yonah Freemark, PhD scholar at DUSP.

**Goal of Workshop 3:** Often, your primary source will be people and their unwritten knowledge. The goal of this workshop is to explore different forms of framing and conducting an interview.

11.30 – 1pm. Review of Presentation; Discussion of Reading (Koolhaas et al.).

For 12/2:  
Probe 7 / Materialize the Intangible.

**Goal:** To understand the social and legal constraints—not immediately represented in built form, but embedded in regulations, codes, laws, habits, customs that shape built form—that may affect your research and project.

**Outcome:** A short, illustrated essay, no more than 10 pages, that takes a fragment of your research endeavour as a point of departure to identify and materialize otherwise intangible forces.

Read: Maria S. Giudici, “Alone Like the Horn of a Rhino: Reproduction, Affective Labor, and the Contemporary Boarding House in South Korea,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, No 46 (Fall/Winter 2018), 34-41.
Week 13  Monday, December 2
In class:  10-11 am. Discussion of Readings (Giudici).
          11-1 pm. Discussion of Probe 7/ Materialize the Intangible.
For 12/9: Submit a full thesis document and documentation of the seven probes and prepare a 10-minute presentation for a test-run.

Week 14  Monday, December 9
In class:  Test run of final presentation.
For tbd:  Revise your presentation as part of the all-SMarchS Pre-Thesis Presentations. See separate announcements regarding format and time.