

SMArchS AD

Methods + Thesis Prep

MIT ARCHITECTURE
ARCH 4.130 + 4.288
FALL 2026
R 9:00 – 12:00
RM W41-1119
CREDITS: 12 (3-0-9) g

Syllabus

INSTRUCTORS

Xavi Aguirre - xaguirre@mit.edu

Brandon Clifford - bcliffor@mit.edu

ASSISTANT INSTRUCTOR

Juchen Zhang - juzhang@mit.edu

OVERVIEW

4.130 Theory + Methodologies and *4.288 Thesis Prep* are dedicated to supporting the individual design-research trajectories of students in the SMArchS Architecture Design program. While the two courses engage students at different moments in their studies—4.130 through the development of methods for design research, and 4.288 through preparation for thesis—they share a common objective: to cultivate and advance each student's design practice.

The purpose of these courses is not to prescribe a singular model of architectural practice or design research, but to provide a framework through which each student can articulate, test, challenge, and advance a practice of their own—however, and in whatever form, that practice may take.

The primary instrument of this pedagogy is **critique**. Critique is understood here not as the evaluation of finished work, but as an opportunity to engage an emergent and in-progress design exploration: to test, digest, analyze, distill, destabilize, and redirect it. A critique should have consequences. It should provide the student with new questions, interpretations, provocations, and possibilities through which the work can continue.

Together, the courses form a communal table for design research: a place where individual practices are made available for collective engagement, enrichment, and interrogation. Students are asked not only to advance their own research trajectories, but to become active participants in the development of those around them.

STRUCTURE

The two classes operate as distinct but interconnected courses. Each course is organized around three exercises, tailored to the particular stage of development of its students.

While the exercises remain specific to each course, they are coordinated by the faculty to create productive points of exchange between the two cohorts. Each exercise culminates in a shared crit-space in which all eight AD students participate. Students present the work developed through their respective course while simultaneously serving as critics and interlocutors for the work of the AD cohort.

The crit-space is therefore where the two courses intersect. By bringing all eight design-research trajectories into the same conversation, the structure allows emerging methods and thesis-bound research to inform, challenge, and

complicate one another. Across both courses, students learn through the development of their own work and through sustained engagement with the evolving practices of their peers.

About the Crit

Each critique is an opportunity for the class to enter deeply into a student's design practice. Within this space, the student presenting their work is responsible for constructing the conditions of its critique. The exercises (faculty created) establish the bounds of exploration, but students determine how their classmates can most meaningfully encounter, understand, and engage the work.

A critique begins well before the scheduled session. A student might provide a reading, podcast, interview, or theoretical framing in advance; install work and ask classmates to encounter it independently; solicit a written response; structure an opening discussion; or devise another mode of engagement appropriate to the research. The format of the critique is not incidental to the work—it should be considered and designed as part of the exercise itself.

The crit-space depends upon reciprocal participation. The presenting student is responsible for bringing their classmates into the work; classmates are responsible for arriving prepared to engage it seriously and generously. Faculty establish the exercises and their parameters, and serve to foster and maintain the conditions for productive critique. The discussion itself belongs to the room: a collective effort to test the work, expose its assumptions and possibilities, and help determine where it might go next.

Note: The final hour of a crit day will be dedicated to a class breakout session.

Evaluation Criteria and Grading

The following criteria will be used for the evaluation of your work, both in terms of helping your progress and in final grading:

- **Development of Design Research:** How substantially does your design-research trajectory develop over the course of the semester?
- **Preparation:** How thoughtfully and rigorously do you prepare your work and the conditions for its critique?
- **Participation:** How actively and constructively do you engage in the design-research trajectories and critiques of your peers?
- **Completion + Rigor:** How fully and rigorously do you pursue the exercises and their established parameters?
- **Presentation + Communication:** How clearly and effectively do you communicate your design research through the modes appropriate to your work?

A: Excellent - Project surpasses expectations regarding inventiveness, appropriateness, verbal and visual ability, conceptual rigor, craft, and personal development. Student pursues concepts and techniques above and beyond what is discussed in class.

B: Above Average - Project is thorough, well researched, diligently pursued, and successfully completed. Student pursues ideas and suggestions presented in class and puts in effort to resolve required projects. The project is complete on all levels and demonstrates potential for excellence.

C: Average - Project meets the minimum requirements. Suggestions made in class are not pursued with dedication or rigor. The project is incomplete in one or more areas.

D: Poor - Project is incomplete. Basic skills including graphic skills, modelmaking skills, verbal clarity or logic of presentation are not level appropriate. Student does not demonstrate the required design skill and knowledge base.

F: Failure - Project is unresolved. Minimum objectives are not met. Performance is not acceptable. This grade will be assigned when you have more than two unexcused absences.

Policies

Attendance at all class meetings is mandatory. If any meeting is to be missed, please notify the instructor prior to the scheduled class. Please remember to silence cell phones and be courteous when using devices in class. This course is committed to the principle of equal access. Students who need disability accommodations are encouraged to speak with the faculty member/department administrator early in the semester so that accommodations can be implemented in a timely fashion.

Graduates: A variety of issues may impact your academic career including faculty/student relationships, funding, and interpersonal concerns. In the Office of Graduate Education (OGE), GradSupport provides consultation, coaching, and advocacy to graduate students on matters related to academic and life challenges. If you are dealing with an issue that is impacting your ability to attend class, complete work, or take an exam, you may contact GradSupport by email at gradsupport@mit.edu or via phone at (617) 253-4860.

Schedule

09/10	Introduction	
09/17	CRIT 1	2 nd year (<i>thesis prep</i>)
09/24	CRIT 1	1 st year (<i>methods</i>)
10/01	<i>breakout</i>	
10/08	CRIT 2	a, b <i>w/ thesis advisor confirmation 10/9</i>
10/15	CRIT 2	c, d
10/22	CRIT 2	e, f
10/29	CRIT 2	g, h
11/05	<i>breakout</i>	
11/12	CRIT 3	b, a
11/19	CRIT 3	d, c
11/26	HOLIDAY – Thanksgiving Week	
12/03	CRIT 3	f, e
12/10	CRIT 3	h, g