Preparation for SMArchS Thesis: Urbanism and Design

MIT 4.288 Section D-1. Fall 2020

Units/Level: 3-0-6 G
Class time: Mondays, 10 am–1 pm EST
Zoom link: https://mit.zoom.us/j/98152564924?pwd=ZXVHSTJuVXBrbjNzVko3Qlg0NEFJZz09
Meeting-ID: 981 5256 4924
Password: 384649
Office Hours: By appointment
Instructors: Susanne Schindler // schindls@mit.edu
TA: tbc

Class Description and Goals
In this class we will work together to achieve three main goals:
1. To develop a coherent and well-calibrated thesis proposal,
2. To test a range of methods, forms of representation, perspectives and voices,
3. To sharpen your ability to critically analyze existing research and design proposals.
General Structure and Requirements

The class is organized to promote continuous research and production. Toward that end, it involves three parallel strands of work.

Strand I: 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 building and refining the thesis proposal over the course of the semester, presenting it once to outside critics, before a final presentation mid-December. The thesis proposal document typically is 15 to 20 pages in length, text and images, and includes:

• an abstract
• problem statement
• description of the state of the field
• object of study and research question(s)
• conceptual framework and method
• work plan (timeline and deliverables)
• primary and secondary sources, organized thematically

Strand II: weekly probes

Regardless of your topic, or whether your thesis is more research-based or proposal-oriented, as the list above makes clear, all thesis projects need to address certain aspects in order to frame a coherent, calibrated, and provocative argument. The class is thus set-up around weekly probes—short exercises, some graphic, some written—in which you will investigate partial aspects of your thesis. The main idea is to prompt you to test, with a quick turnaround, a range of formats and questions. You will be able to build on these fragments as you put together your thesis proposal. Submit your probes by Sunday at 5 pm to the shared Dropbox in order to receive feedback on your work.

Strand III: discussion and critique

We will use our shared class time toward three ends: discussion of readings; discussion of probes and peers’ work; and two methods workshops (using the library, conducting interviews). Once during the semester, you will lead the discussion on a reading and prepare a “fiche de lecture” of the reading and the discussion. Another time you will present and critique a peer’s proposal. All readings will be posted on Dropbox unless they are available online or through MIT Libraries.
## Overview of Class Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Read</th>
<th>Prepare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Monday, 9/14</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Present your thesis goals in relation to two existing publications or projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Monday, 9/21</td>
<td>Problem statement / What’s your hook? / In-class Workshop: How to use the library, with Kai Alexis Smith</td>
<td>Capps</td>
<td>Op-Ed for a publication of your choice / 500 words, one illustration</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 By Friday, 9/25</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Set up an interview to take place in the week of 9/28</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Monday, 10/5</td>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>Tsing</td>
<td>Interview in narrative or essay form / 1000 words max</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Tuesday, 10/13</td>
<td>Conceptual framework / Relating object and question</td>
<td>Sarkis/Salgueiro/Kozlowski</td>
<td>Drawings of your object of study in relation to a system of reference</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Monday, 10/19</td>
<td>Method / Relating analysis and intervention</td>
<td>Miller; Napawan/Burke/Yui</td>
<td>Mock-up your method</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 By Friday, 10/23</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Confirm Thesis Adviser</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Monday, 10/26</td>
<td>Mid-Review with Guests</td>
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<td>10 minute presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Monday, 11/2</td>
<td>Visualizing data: Making the intangible tangible</td>
<td>Who Builds Your Architecture?</td>
<td>A map, a graph</td>
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<td>10 Monday, 11/9</td>
<td>Asking who and what: The question of agency:</td>
<td>Selections from Perspecta 53/Onus</td>
<td>A network of actors, a timeline</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Monday, 11/16</td>
<td>Keywords: Language matters.</td>
<td>Leary; Herscher</td>
<td>Dictionary entries for three keywords / 150 words each</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 By Friday, 11/20</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Submit draft of full proposal, expect feedback by Monday, 11/30</td>
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<td>11/23–11/27</td>
<td>Thanksgiving Break</td>
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<td>11 Monday, 11/30</td>
<td>Each student presents another student’s proposal and offers constructive criticism</td>
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<td>Prepare a 10-minute review of one of your classmates’ proposals</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 Monday, 12/7</td>
<td>Test run of final presentation</td>
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<td>Format tbd</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday, 12/10 &amp; Friday 12/11</td>
<td>Final Presentation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Format and time tbd</td>
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Attendance

Work in the class will build sequentially. Therefore, student commitment to incremental development on a weekly basis is of great importance. The 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:

30% attendance and participation in class
30% weekly probes
40% 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.
Schedule and Assignments

Monday, 9/14: Outcome

No Reading.

For class: Prepare a five-minute presentation of your thesis goals in relation to two existing publications or projects. One should be a work that inspires you, something you would like to call your own. The other should be a work that you want nothing to do with, you dislike in tone, attitude, format. Show us succinctly which aspects you find particularly strong, which you find problematic, and why.

Monday, 9/21: Problem Statement

Read: Kriston Capps, “The Hidden Horror of Hudson Yards is How it was Financed,” City Lab, April 12, 2019.

Probe: Write an Op-Ed for a publication of your choice, ideally a general audience publication like the New York Times. The goal is to find a hook to pull in your audience, and articulate, in short and clear and possibly provocative language, a problem and your position. 500 words, one illustration.

In class: We will have a workshop with Kai Alexis Smith, MIT’s Architecture and Planning Librarian, on how to use the MIT Libraries during this time of limited physical access. Preparation may be required; details to follow.

By Friday, 9/25: Set up an interview for the week of 9/28

Set up a date and time for an interview with a person who you expect will/could/might be of interest for your thesis. We will have a workshop on interviewing techniques on Monday, 9/28 in class.

Monday, 9/28: State of the field

Read: Amanda Huron, Carving Out the Commons: Tenant Organizing and Housing Cooperatives in Washington, D.C., Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018; Introduction (pp. 1-16), Chapter 1 “What is the Commons: Merging Two Perspectives,” (pp. 17-42) and Chapter 2 “The Urban Commons: Contradictions of Community, Capital, and the State,” (pp. 43-66). Read with a focus on how Huron sets up the state of the field and articulates her own research project in relation to it.
Probe: Sketching the state of the field is akin to deciding who to invite to dinner and setting the table for the evening. Who do you want to engage with, who do you want to dispute, and how will you choreograph the evening? For the probe, create a dialogue between you and three interlocutors in form of a short graphic—a one-page comic, or animated format of your choice, designed to make clear, if in simplified form, what the key positions are and what is at stake.

In addition, compile a list of twenty sources—primary and secondary sources—, each annotated with two to three sentences—explaining how these are relevant to your project.

In class: Workshop with Yonah Freemark on ways to conduct an interview. Preparation may be required; details to follow.

**Monday, 10/5: Evidence**


Probe: Write up and edit the interview you conducted last week. This can be in the form of an interview, where all words are those that were spoken (even if edited for brevity and clarity), or it can be retold in narrative form (where quotes are featured as part of a description of the encounter). Note: you are not submitting a transcript of the conversation. Rather, you are conveying in a maximum of 1000 words the key insights that emerged in your encounter. Let yourself be inspired by Tsing.

**Tuesday, 10/13: Conceptual Framework**


Probe: It is important to distinguish between your object of study and the question you ask of it. How to relate the two has to do with your conceptual framework. In this probe, draw your object of study in relation to a question and the implied system of reference. Chose a format that works in relation to your imagined output: screen, book, or — ?
Monday, 10/19: Method


Probe: Mock up your method, in a format of your choice.

By Friday, 10/23: Confirm your thesis adviser

Monday, 10/26: Mid-review with Guests

Prepare a ten-minute presentation as a basis for discussion. Details to be confirmed.

Monday, 11/2: Visualizing Data


Probe: How will you make the intangible aspects of your project tangible? Whether you are dealing with property laws and the price of land, or the effects of pollution and the cost of energy: how can you relate these often hard-to-grasp aspects to your work as an architect and urbanist? Produce two visuals. One should address the question of territory, the spatial extent of your research. The other should be graph and convert otherwise abstract data into an intuitively graspable message.


Read: Selections from *Perspecta* 53/Onus, to be released October 2020, tbc.

Probe: Who and what are the actors in your story, and what is the temporal dimension of your work? Produce two visuals. One is a network of relevant actors. Actors can be individuals, institutions, buildings, animals. It is up to you to define. The point is to map out how they relate to each other. The other visual is a timeline. How far back will you go? How far into the future?
Monday, 11/16: Keywords


Probe: Language matters: keywords lets others understand how we want our work to be understood and helps them find it. But terminology also embeds spoken and unspoken assumptions, and is thus invariably used toward very precise ends. What are your keywords, and why? Write three very short statements of 150 words max on what is at stake in the words that are central to your project.

By Friday, 11/20: Submit a full draft of your proposal

Upload a full draft of your thesis proposal by the end of the day. Over the Thanksgiving Break you will read one of your peer’s proposal in detail to present on Monday, 11/30. You will receive written comments from the instructor by Monday, 11/30.

11/23–11/27 Thanksgiving Break

Monday, 11/30: Peer review

No reading.

We will use the class time to present and critique each other’s work.

Monday, 12/7: Test run of final presentation

Format tbd.

Thursday, 12/10 & Friday 12/11: Final Review

Format and times tbd.