

**Harvard University**  
Graduate School of Design  
Urban Planning and Design

**URBAN PLANNING AND DESIGN  
THESIS HANDBOOK**

**2017-18**

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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 department's three master's 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 selection of a topic to submission of the final thesis.

For UPD students interested in completing a thesis, the process begins in the first year of their degree. In the spring term of the first year, students identify a potential advisor and research topic. In their third term, students then complete a detailed thesis proposal. In their fourth and final term, students complete, defend and submit their thesis. Each of these stages, and associated requirements, are described in detail in the following pages.

## **2. THE FIRST YEAR: ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION**

### **2.1. Identifying a Prospective Thesis Topic**

Identification of 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. Identification of a final topic will likely be an iterative process whereby you establish whether different faculty members have expertise or interest in your emerging ideas and you then refine your ideas with their input. As with the identification of a potential advisor, it will be important to begin as early as possible to identify areas of interest for the thesis.

### **2.2. Identifying an Advisor**

In the first year, students interested in pursuing a thesis should begin to identify potential thesis advisors. The selection of a compatible advisor – both intellectually and personally – is critical to successful completion of the thesis. Students will work closely with their advisor over the proposal development and thesis completion stages. 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 the availability of faculty 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.

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

In 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 “Decision on Project-Based Requirement (Studio, Thesis, or Courses)” form, while MAUD/MLAUD students must submit the “Decision Regarding Studio Options and Independent Thesis” form. These forms are available for download on the departmental website.

Second, in May, students must submit the “UPD Petition to Undertake Thesis” form, on which the student identifies a thesis topic and advisor. Identification of the student’s topic and advisor during 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 incorporating a period of field or archival research into their thesis, 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.

A third form – the “Petition for Alternative Thesis Preparation” – is submitted only by MAUD/MLAUD students who *do not* intend to fulfill the department’s thesis preparation requirement by participating in the standard thesis preparation seminar (GSD 9204). Both GSD 9204 and the alternative route to undertaking thesis preparation are described in greater detail in the following section of the handbook. In summary, while all MUP thesis students must take GSD 9204, MAUD/MLAUD students may choose to receive formal preparation in theory and methods for thesis research through a four-unit independent study with their thesis advisor. If a student intends to pursue thesis preparation through an independent study, the faculty member providing the instruction must be their thesis advisor. Please note that MAUD/MLAUD student who choose alternative thesis preparation must still participate in all thesis reviews, including the fall midterm and final reviews and the spring midterm, pre-final and final reviews.

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

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

The fall term of the second year sees students embark on a formal process of thesis preparation. Over the term, students develop a thesis proposal in which they refine their ideas and begin to embark on the substantive work of thesis completion. Most students complete the thesis preparation phase through the department's thesis preparation seminar (GSD 9024), a four-unit course held during the fall term. 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. Alternatively, MAUD/MLAUD students may choose to complete their thesis preparation requirement via a four-unit independent study course with their thesis advisor. Students will be allowed to pursue alternative thesis preparation only when the faculty member providing the alternative instruction is their thesis advisor. All thesis students, including those pursuing alternative thesis preparation, participate in all fall and spring reviews.

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

This seminar provides the theoretical and methodological foundation necessary for completing a graduate thesis in the Department of Urban Planning and Design. The seminar is appropriate for both planning and design students. Over the semester, students will produce a solid thesis proposal and gain the preparation needed to 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. The seminar meets for three hours each week and carries four units of course credit. Sessions focus on discussion and analysis of relevant readings, examination of different thesis models and approaches, and exploration of emergent student work.

The seminar will begin by introducing the thesis as a conceptual frame and by identifying the key elements that cut across the different types of theses that might be produced by students, for example written, design-focused or based in another medium, such as film. It will then address the following issues, among others: topic and question identification, 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 seminar asks students to share their ideas and get feedback on the development of their thesis from their peers, visiting reviewers and faculty. Students will complete weekly assignments relevant to their theses and present in class on most weeks. Since the seminar will be run as a graduate seminar, students will be expected to provide critical and thoughtful responses to their peers' work and engage in informed and mature discussion of the issues found in the readings.

### **3.3. Alternative Thesis Preparation: Independent Study**

MAUD/MLAUD students may choose to satisfy the thesis preparation requirement by completing a four-unit independent study with their thesis advisor. To satisfy the thesis preparation requirement, this independent study must be taught by the thesis advisor, explicitly address thesis preparation (including theory and methods for thesis research) and result in a formal thesis proposal. Students interested in pursuing this alternative thesis preparation route must submit the “Petition for Alternative Thesis Preparation” in May of their first year. Any students pursuing the alternative preparation route must participate in all fall and spring reviews with those students taking the thesis preparation seminar.

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

A positive and respectful advisor-advisee relationship is central to successful completion of the thesis proposal. Students should try to establish a strong relationship with their advisor early in the thesis process, beginning with early identification of an advisor in the first year. Students should meet as regularly as possible with their advisor over the thesis proposal term, 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 term. 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 term 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.

### **3.5. Human Subjects Review**

Students should determine as soon as possible after deciding on a topic and methodology whether their research requires human subjects approval. Approval is granted by the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB), which for the GSD is housed in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. The scope of research requiring human subjects review is broader than often assumed and includes research involving interaction with a wide range of informants, interviewees and subjects. Don’t assume that, just because you’re doing work that doesn’t seem focused on experiments or the social sciences, you don’t need approval. 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 methodology. More information on this important aspect of thesis research will be provided in the thesis preparation seminar, but students are nonetheless recommended to investigate whether they will have to submit documentation for human subjects review before the topic is formally introduced in the seminar. 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 term, mid-term and final reviews of the thesis proposal will be held, during which all thesis students will present their proposals and receive feedback from outside reviewers and GSD faculty. MAUD/MLAUD students who receive their thesis preparation through an independent study will also participate in all reviews. Precise dates for the reviews will be determined and announced to students and advisors at the start of the fall term. 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 December. The deadline for submitting the final thesis proposal at the end of the term will be communicated to students and their advisors early in the term. While the final thesis proposal is due at the end of the term, students should bring work in progress to their advisors for feedback and review over the course of the term.

### **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 include the following elements (which will be described in greater detail in the thesis preparation seminar): a clear statement of the student's thesis topic or question, a compelling argument for why the question merits study and is of intellectual interest, a description of the frontier of knowledge with respect to the thesis question, a detailed presentation of the methodology and approach that will be adopted in the project and a robust justification for why this is appropriate, a summary of relevant literature and precedents on the subject, and a timeline for completion of the thesis.

### **3.8. Grading**

The grading basis for students who receive their thesis preparation through the formal seminar (GSD 9204) is provided in the course syllabus. For MAUD/MLAUD students who obtain permission to undertake thesis preparation through an independent study, grades will be established by the thesis advisor. It should be noted that students who pursue alternative thesis preparation still participate in the thesis proposal mid-term and final reviews during the semester.

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

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

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

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

In the spring term, students register in GSD 9302: Independent Thesis, counting for eight units. Working closely with their advisors, students complete, defend and submit their thesis over the course of the term.

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

As with the thesis proposal, a positive advisor-advisee relationship is central to successful and timely completion, defense and submission of the thesis. Building on the relationship established with their advisor in the first year and in the fall term of the second year, students are encouraged to maintain a strong working relationship with their advisor as they complete their thesis. Students should meet as regularly as possible with their advisor over the term. Regular meetings are especially important during the final term as the iterative process of submitting work and receiving feedback is critical to development of a robust thesis. In the final term, 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 during completion of your thesis.

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

During the spring term, mid-term, pre-final 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 term 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.

The pre-final review, a school-wide requirement, takes place approximately one month prior to the final review and is scheduled and convened by each advisor at their and their student's convenience. This review has been instituted by the Dean to ensure that all thesis students are sufficiently prepared to complete and present their work by the end of the term. The format of this review differs from both the mid-term and final review in that it is convened by each student's advisor and includes at least two additional critics who can provide feedback on the status of the thesis project. The timing, format and location of the pre-final review are left to the discretion of each thesis advisor, with the only stipulations being that: 1) it should take place approximately one month prior to the final review during the week-long window set by the school for pre-final reviews, 2) the student should present their work verbally, 3) at least two additional critics/faculty should be present and 4) the student should receive feedback on their work that helps them in the push to the final review.

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

For the spring term 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 and every effort will be made to bring together a dynamic group of reviewers who can speak directly to the content of students' theses.

#### **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. Submission of the Thesis**

The final thesis must be submitted by the thesis due date, which will be announced at the beginning of the spring term. The submission deadline is usually 9am 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, according to a timeline established by each advisor. 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 collections. As a result, only a digital version of the thesis needs 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 have a physical copy of the thesis stored in the Loeb Library are welcome to submit a bound version of the thesis to the UPD departmental 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 should be submitted by the submission deadline via email or a file sharing service to both the thesis coordinator, Michael Hooper, and the departmental administrator.

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 of the pdf. 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 I. 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 brief description of the thesis, including a title and summary of project's rationale, methodology and relevance to urban planning and/or urban design.
2. A description of the format of the thesis.

3. A description of the devices or equipment needed to locate, access and view the thesis.

4. 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 I.

Students who intend to produce a thesis in a non-traditional format should speak with the thesis coordinator early on to work out a plan for submission of their project in a manner which is compatible with the university's thesis cataloguing and storage protocols.

*Harvard Libraries Requirements for Hard Copy and Digital Versions of Submitted Theses*  
Staff at the Loeb Library have developed a set of clear protocols that describe how students should save and prepare the digital versions of their theses. All final thesis documents submitted to the department should follow these guidelines, which enable the consistent cataloguing and storage of student theses. The protocols can be found on the course site for the UPD thesis preparation seminar (GSD 9204) and will also be emailed to thesis students and their advisors at the start of the final thesis term. If students have questions about how to save and prepare their thesis files, they can contact the departmental thesis coordinator or speak with the Loeb Library special collections librarian.

#### **4.8. External Readers**

Subject to their advisor's approval, students may choose to ask external readers to provide formal comments and feedback on their theses. However, this is not a program requirement. Even if students and advisors choose not to solicit feedback from external readers formally, they are strongly recommended to obtain as much diverse feedback on the thesis as possible. This feedback will only strengthen the work and improve the likelihood of completion of a robust thesis.

#### **4.9. Grading**

The grade for the thesis is given by the thesis advisor. As with other grades, the thesis advisor must submit the grade in a timely fashion to the registrar.

#### **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 from UPD faculty are accepted at the end of the spring term and details on the nomination process will be circulated as the final thesis review approaches. Nominated theses are reviewed by the UPD Thesis Prize Committee, which is composed of faculty members appointed by the department chair. This committee may present 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 I: 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

Advisor Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Full Student Name Typed Here**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Full Thesis Advisor Name Typed Here**

# UPD THESIS TIMELINE



## Critical Dates:

- 1 Initial Thesis Track Meeting and Orientation (March)
- 2 Submit Coursework/Studio/Thesis Selection Form (early April)
- 3 Deadline to Submit Petition to Undertake Thesis *and* Petition to Pursue Alternative Thesis Prep (early May)

## Key Tasks:

- A. Identify thesis advisor and tentative thesis topic
- B. Submit Coursework/Studio/Thesis selection form
- C. Submit petition to undertake thesis and, if relevant, petition to pursue alternative thesis preparation

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## SUMMER

| Jun | Jul | Aug |

## Key Tasks:

- A. Cement role of thesis advisor; identify tentative project timeline
- B. Refine thesis topic; embark on thesis research in field, studio or library

Note: This timeline is for general guidance only. Precise dates for deadlines and reviews will be reported to thesis students directly. Further information on program requirements can be found in the UPD Thesis Handbook.

## UPD THESIS TIMELINE



### YEAR 2

#### Critical Dates:

- 4 Midterm Thesis Proposal Review, to Present Progress on Question/Topic (mid to late October)
- 5 Final Thesis Proposal Review (mid December)
- 6 Midterm Thesis Review (mid to late March)
- 7 Pre-Final Thesis Review (mid to late April)
- 8 Deadline to Submit Thesis to Advisor for Review (late April to mid May – to be determined by advisor)
- 9 Final Thesis Review and Submission of Completed Thesis (mid to late May)

#### Key Tasks:

- A. Complete GSD 9204 (or complete petition to pursue alternative thesis preparation – submit in May of first year)
- B. Meet regularly with thesis advisor
- C. Develop clear expectations for project and deliverables
- D. Present work at thesis proposal midterm and final reviews (fall) and thesis midterm, pre-final and final reviews (spring)
- E. Submit thesis deliverables to advisor prior to final review
- F. Submit digital copy of thesis