

UW CBE ARCH →

ARCH 700: INDEPENDENT THESIS PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

The Independent Thesis is one of two culminating experiences available to our Master of Architecture students, the other being the Research Studios. Both of these options take place during the winter and spring quarters of year 3 of the program. The following document provides some guidance to students who choose the Independent Thesis path, including information on the nature of thesis and the requirements for preparing a proposal. A rough timeline is also included on the final page of this document.

BACKGROUND

The Master's Thesis is one of two options for the terminal project undertaken by students in the professional Master of Architecture degree program. The thesis is the student's opportunity to propose a defensible proposition and, in a scholarly fashion, analyze the subject, test the proposition, arrive at conclusions, and present the results in graphic, written and oral form. The thesis should be seen as the culmination of the student's years in architecture school, and as such, the thesis is the ideal opportunity to demonstrate creative and intellectual architectural talents. A well-executed thesis can serve as the student's test of their capabilities before crossing the threshold to a professional career. The thesis document can be presented to others as evidence of significant architectural achievement. While the thesis is the responsibility of the student, the faculty supervisory committee is concerned with its subject matter, organization, and expeditious execution. These guidelines are provided to assist the student in the completion of their thesis.

The Department of Architecture faculty believes that the awarding of the degree of "Master of Architecture" indicates a high level of accomplishment in architectural design. Therefore, students seeking a first professional degree that choose to do an Independent Thesis are advised to produce theses that are centered on design.

Students may also elect to do research theses, but will be required to obtain permission from the Thesis Committee to do so. To obtain permission for a research thesis, a student must provide background information indicating (1) why a research thesis has been selected and (2) demonstrate that sufficient "mastery" of design (including knowledge, skills and values) has already been achieved, e.g., academic record, copies of evaluation letters, samples of work, and the like. (Note: Students who have already received an accredited professional architectural degree [B.Arch. or previous accredited M.Arch.] may opt to write non-design theses without receiving special permission.)

WHAT IS A "THESIS?"

thesis ('thetaɪ:sɪs), ('thetaɪsɪs). Pl. theses ('thetaɪ:si:z). [a. Gr. theta-epsilon-sigma-iota-sigma- putting, placing; a proposition, affirmation, etc., f. root theta-epsilon-- of tau-iota--theta-epsilon--nu-alpha-iota- to put, place.] A proposition laid down or stated, esp. as a theme to be discussed and proved, or to be maintained against attack (from the OED)

In the medieval university, a thesis was a proposition to be maintained or defended in argument or disputation by a candidate for a degree. In the modern university, the thesis has come to be defined as "the essay... presented by a candidate for an academic degree as evidence of their knowledge of an individual research in a particular subject." The Master's Thesis is presented in support of the Master's degree.

How does the thesis differ from a typical studio or special project? First and foremost, it is a student-initiated problem. Further, the thesis requires a level of effort that is greater than is required of the typical studio project or research paper. Still, these features alone do not suffice to make a "thesis."

An understanding of the pedagogical intent that underlies the thesis may most easily be arrived at by beginning with the etymology of the term itself. "Thesis" is an English term derived from the Latin *thesis*, which in turn was taken from the Greek, *thesis*, meaning "a position" from the *tithenai*, "to put, place." In other words a thesis advances a defensible proposition; as such it must be more than mere description. Correspondingly, in architecture a thesis typically advances a defensible proposition pertaining to architecture. Since a design thesis usually simultaneously addresses a wide range of factors, the thesis proposition will often be more than a single statement. Thus, a series of interrelated statements, which together form a coherent framework for a design investigation, should be developed as the thesis proposition. In a design thesis, the *theoretical/conceptual framework* and the *design methodology* are of critical significance, and must be explicitly stated (see sections on "Theoretical/Conceptual position" and "Methodology").

The thesis project presents evidence supporting the thesis proposition in the form of demonstration by design (accompanied by written text or visual illustration.) The final thesis document is a *documentation* of the significant aspirations and findings of the thesis process.

SELECTION OF A THESIS TOPIC

Thesis topics may vary in scope and depth, limited only by the need to focus on an area concerned with architecture. Because architecture is a broad field, the range of appropriate topics is broad. Faculty interests and capabilities, as well as available resources, can also be considerations in selecting a topic. The best theses often build on and develop some aspect of the student's course of study in the graduate program. For instance, a thesis may be an empirical or theoretical investigation based on previous course work. Or it may be an outgrowth of a particularly challenging studio or other course. Interdisciplinary studies are also appropriate. Students are cautioned to not select a topic that is new to them.

Students frequently begin with thesis topics that are unclear and much too general in scope, and are, therefore, not amenable to rigorous development. Through preliminary study and discussion with members of the faculty and others, the topic can be refined in such a way as to be accessible to investigation and manageable by the student. For a design thesis, a thesis proposition (or set of propositions) which might be demonstrated by virtually any approach to design, will not prove very significant.

In selecting a topic and developing the thesis proposal, the student must find their own answers to pertinent questions such as: "What can I gain from this study?" "What may others gain?" "Will I be able to utilize my creative skills and abilities in a way that will be academically enriching?" In addition, each student should ask, "Is this a thesis I can thoroughly and competently complete?" An explicit and honest exploration of these questions at the proposal stage will help the student in preparing for the actual development and subsequent presentation of the thesis. Keep in mind that the Arch 599: Thesis Research and Preparation and Arch 700: Independent Thesis is an 18-credit undertaking, so please determine the scope of your thesis accordingly.

THESIS RESEARCH

Students who would like to pursue the Independent Thesis are encouraged to consider potential thesis topics and faculty advisors based upon their interests. Often, early investigations into a subject will reveal resources, such as people, courses and other material, that can inform the thesis.

During the winter quarter of year 2, students interested in pursuing an Independent Thesis will be required to submit a "Preliminary Thesis Proposal Form," which asks for a title and preliminary abstract. These students will then be permitted to take the Arch 592: Research Methods course during the spring of year 2, which will allow them to further develop their thesis topic and key areas of research.

During autumn quarter of year 3, those students will be required to submit a full "Thesis Proposal," including a list of potential faculty advisors for their Supervisory Committee, to the Thesis Proposal Review Committee for approval prior to registering for Arch 599: Thesis Research and Preparation and Arch 700: Thesis for winter quarter of year 3.

Please note that the selection of the members of the Supervisory Committee can be particularly important to the success of the thesis. Committee members who may challenge the student's assumptions and demand a high level of performance can aid in achieving fully developed thesis. Students are encouraged to consider faculty for the Supervisory Committee who can provide insight to resources pertaining to the thesis topic as well as direction in preparing the thesis. Students are also encouraged to consult local practitioners and faculty outside of the Department that may have experience or expertise not available from departmental faculty.

PREPARING THE THESIS PROPOSAL

The proposal should be thought of as a succinct but thorough statement of the student's intentions in undertaking the thesis study. Thesis proposals must be prepared and submitted in accordance with the list of topics in Parts I and II presented below. The pages of the thesis proposal must be numbered.

Once completed and approved by the Thesis Proposal Review Committee, the student agrees to complete the work described in the proposal and the Department agrees that, once this work is accepted, credit for ARCH 700 will be given as part of the requirements for the Master of Architecture degree.

PART I: Scholarly Framework

1. **Title:** A simple but descriptive title is best. An appropriate title will lead readers to select the thesis correctly when reviewing literature on a given topic. For example, the title may consist of two parts; the first part should announce the evocative thrust of the thesis, and the second should contain the shortest descriptive summary of thesis, containing the "keywords" that can be used to tag thesis.
2. **Thesis Statement:** This statement should be a succinct summary of the precise topic of the thesis that gives a brief but clear idea as to its scope and its focus; this is where the student should put in the thesis proposition. A short paragraph should suffice.
3. **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework:** In this section, the student should elaborate upon the theoretical and/or conceptual positions and concerns that will frame the thesis. Typically, this section advances a proposition, or a "school of thought," concerning the nature of architecture. It is best to advance this proposition by actively referring to existing academic and/or professional theoretical and conceptual positions concerning architecture. Such references should mostly be drawn from the field of architecture, but may also be drawn from other fields. Students do not have to singularly "subscribe" to a particular school of thought, but may actively bring their own ideas into constructive dialogue with those of others.

The Theoretical/Conceptual Framework that a student adopts has long term implications for project. Consequently, the student should carefully consider this section, and discuss it extensively with their Adviser, prior to submission. In the same spirit, the student should anticipate re-visiting and possibly modifying this framework as the thesis develops.

Please note that the Theoretical/Conceptual Framework must not be too brief—a single paragraph is seldom adequate. A complete statement may run a full page or more (double-spaced.)

4. **Methodology:** This section should describe the methodology by which the thesis will be pursued. The methodology advanced by the student must contain its own justification—why is the methodology appropriate

or best for the proposed thesis? Typically, the conceptual/theoretical framework should suggest a methodology.

The creative process itself is probably not susceptible to analysis; we accept the “creative moment” uncritically. But the evaluative and transformative methodologies that structure that creative process must be subject to critical examination, and their examination is integral to the successful defense of a design thesis. Design methodologies, like theoretical/conceptual positions, are often habitual or assumed rather than stated, but a thesis requires a student to examine these assumptions.

Question such as the following may help clarify this section: Should the design methodology be based on precedent, convention, or architectural typology; on functional analysis, original research, or systematic investigation of design parameters; or on some combination? Should the mode of design inquiry to be more cultural or scientific? Should it be more linear and rational or more iterative and intuitive? Should it be more programmatic and realistic, or more speculative and exploratory? What relative role will be played and how much weight will be given to topics that program such as, site, users, program, climate, community, history, context, tectonics or budget? By what criteria will success be determined? How will provisional design solutions or alternatives be evaluated? Not all of these questions need be answered, but they are the type of questions that must be addressed.

The description of the proposed methodology should be brief but sufficiently thorough so that the Supervisory and Review Committee can understand the student's approach and point out potential problems.

Identification of the methodology will also begin to suggest the list of tasks, schedule and points for interaction with the Supervisory Committee. If a site has not been chosen, or program has not been developed prior to submitting the thesis proposal, the methodology section must also include the specific steps that will be taken to choose the site or to write the program.

5. Scope of Investigation: This statement will generally be a paragraph or paragraphs setting forth the limits of the thesis. The more clearly the thesis elements and limits are identified and described, the better the Supervisory Committee and the Review Committee will be able to judge the feasibility of completing the thesis in the time available.

For a design thesis, this section must include the identification of the project site and a summary of the project program. Brief background information will also be provided: How was the program generated? Will this program be tested or altered as part of the thesis work or is the program fully established? (The complete project program and a map locating the project site should be appended to the thesis proposal.)

The site selection and/or program development may be part of the actual thesis process itself. In this case, the proposal must include a detailed written description of the specific process by which the program will be developed and/or a written set of detailed site selection criteria indicating exactly the specific process by which the site will be chosen.

This section should explain the breadth of exploration anticipated as part of the thesis. What is the design or planning horizon? For example, does the thesis assume constraints and opportunities that apply today or does it anticipate ones that may apply 20 or 40 years in the future? Or, if the thesis is on a project for an urban site, how much will the focus be on urban planning issues, how much on urban design, and how much on architecture? To what extent will the context be explored? This section should also define what aspects are to be taken as "givens" and what aspects will be explored by the student. If the design will be explored in a

hierarchical sequence (e.g. developing drawings of a large area to a small scale,) this should be described as well.

6. **Preparatory Study:** In this paragraph (or paragraphs), the student's preparation for the thesis project should be described. This will often include an outline listing of course work that the student has taken that has had relevance to the selected thesis topic. A sentence or two about the relevance of each course should be provided. In particular, the student must reference the work done in the Arch 592: Research Methods class. In most cases where a design thesis is intended, the Arch 592 class should lead to the preparation of a project program and selection of a project site.
7. **Annotated Bibliography:** An annotated bibliography listing only the texts that have been read or are likely to be read and actively referred to in the thesis must be attached. The annotation must briefly describe:
 - a. The theme of the text, and
 - b. The specific importance or anticipated use of the text with respect to the thesis.
8. **Supporting Material:** Students may attach additional material as evidence of preparation to undertake the proposed thesis. This material should include:
 - a. Site Maps, drawings, photographs and complete program;
 - b. Research reports and supplemental material generated in ARCH 600 or similar thesis preparation process;
 - c. Other appropriate supplemental material.

PART II: Logistical Framework

1. **Outline of Tasks:** In outline format, the student should identify (step-by-step) the tasks to be completed. There should be a clear relationship between the Methodology and this list of tasks. Design should not be listed simply as "Design," but should be broken down into definite steps. Preparation of the graphic elements, preparation for the public presentation, preparation of the text and assembly of the thesis document should also be listed.
2. **Schedule:** The outline of tasks provides the basis for developing a schedule of the work. Thus, this schedule should be clearly related to the Outline of Tasks (described under 8) and reflect thesis registration (number of credits per quarter). This may be presented as a bar graph or in an outline. The thesis schedule must be tied to the academic calendar of the University and should be targeted to preparation of the public thesis reviews, which will be scheduled during the final weeks of Spring quarter.
3. **Available Resources:** The student should list resources in these areas: Supervisory committee, and Faculty Support and special resources.

Questions? Contact Graduate Program Coordinator, Rob Peña <rbpena@uw.edu>