Addendum

Open Source Thesis Guide at the GSD

An interview with Michael Hooper on the topic of thesis and preparing to do thesis.


On the disputation of thesis with Kant.

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What do you understand to be a thesis and its purpose?

I think your question is a good one and it’s the one that provides the starting point for the UPD thesis prep seminar. It’s important to note that within the GSD, and certainly within UPD, the definition of what constitutes a thesis is more expansive than in some other academic contexts. In UPD, this is particularly the case, since we have both urban design and urban planning students working in the thesis track together. So the truth of the matter is that our theses, in the department and in the school, are considerably different, and more diverse, than those in many other parts of the university. If you go to, let’s say, anthropology, many theses look the same, they feel the same, even though they do focus on different sites and different subjects. But methodologically they feel relatively similar. And that is also true in many other fields, ranging from economics to sociology. These more standard theses are more uniform in methodology, length and presentation style than theses at the GSD. This is primarily because we have no canonical method. This could be considered a real weakness of our fields – and probably most economists or anthropologists would be troubled by our lack of a common methodology – but in fact it is incredibly helpful because it forces us to be open to the wide range of methods available to us as we work on our theses. And, importantly, the thesis is public – it doesn’t just go on your hard drive, it doesn’t just get submitted to a faculty member – you make a contribution to the body of ‘what is known.’ That means you also have to establish ‘what is known,’ and say “this is what is known about my topic, and this is how I have contributed beyond that.” So, the common threads of the thesis over time are that it’s public, it’s defensible, it involves arguments or claims that are substantiated, it involves choices that are justified, and it answers questions that respond to some abstract or real problem. I think that’s relatively common across most theses and this is where we start the UPD thesis prep seminar. This identification of common threads in theses – not only between current students, but also from centuries of thesis students – is really useful because otherwise, people can feel they have very little in common and are just working on their own private, personal assignment. One student might say “Ok, I’m working on urban landscapes in China” while another would say “I’m working on art installations in Rio de Janeiro” and they might think they have nothing in common. But, in fact, these two students have a lot to say to each other because they are engaged in the task of producing a thesis, which while they are diverse, also have these historically shared elements. They are making justifiable choices in forming an argument that relates to some problem in the world – they might be going about this in different ways, but their intellectual task in adding to the store of public knowledge and expanding the frontier of knowledge on their respective topics involves similar intellectual logic at the broadest level.

How do people begin if they come to thesis prep without a topic?

We talk about this as a kind of ‘dance’ – that you can’t really get an advisor until you know what you’re doing, but you can’t know what you’re doing totally until you have an advisor. There is an inherent tension there. So we help students articulate what their broad issue is – because most theses start with an issue or problem – and then start to work through how to nail that down into a tractable question. Part of this involves finding an
Ultimately, no one really wants to know what your arguments or claims are—and this is true whether your argument is a design or something else—until you open a series of important “doors” about why your thesis question is important in the first place. Once you open this question door, then you can open the second door, which is: what's the frontier of knowledge?
advisor who is supportive and has knowledge that you want to tap. But part of it also involves advancing your own thinking by finding out where the relevant frontier of knowledge lies.

What are the steps to producing a 'good' thesis?

I think a useful metaphor in this regard looks at a thesis as a way of “opening doors.” We talk about this a great deal in the UPD thesis prep course. Ultimately, no one really wants to know what your arguments or claims are—and this is true whether your argument is a design or something else—until you open a series of important “doors” about why your thesis question is important in the first place. Once you open this question door, then you can open the second door, which is: what's the frontier of knowledge? Because every thesis has some sort of frontier of knowledge related to it. What has been done? And how am I going to make a contribution beyond that? Now your audience can begin to say “You have an important topic on hand and it sounds like you know what has been done and that you're going to make a contribution beyond this threshold. This sounds interesting and like a contribution.” And then people are likely to ask: “but how are you going to make that contribution?” And then you, as the thesis student, can respond by saying: “…well this is my methodology.” If you skip any of those doors, which we often do in design theses, people often end up baffled and your thesis ends up seeming like a personal ruminations that is of little relevance to other people. In effect, people will be relatively uninterested in your arguments, whether rooted in design or some other mode of scholarship, until you establish what your methodology for making claims is, and in turn they need to know what the frontier of knowledge is before they can appreciate whether your work will make a contribution to it, and most importantly, this all hinges on what your question is and what the abstract or real problems are that are at its heart. So, I think a ‘good’ thesis can be many things, but at least in the UPD department, we try to drive home that a 'good' thesis is one that takes the listener and reader through these doors and builds an argument in such a way that, by the time you come to your argument, which is maybe a design, or maybe another mode of argumentation, people have been fully brought on board in terms of why this is important and why they should listen to you. Personally, I think that is a 'good' thesis, but this definition still leaves an incredible range of options open for how you might actually go about doing this, methodologically, etc.

You mentioned that this becomes public. What is done with these theses after people graduate? Or what is your viewpoint on what should be happening? How is this knowledge shared?

The thesis is public in many senses. And, it's public in a way that other work at the GSD typically is not. For theses there is ostensibly the idea that a random person can come in and that they can ask you a question where there is a burden of proof on you to justify your argument to them. So, the thesis is public in that it is defended publicly. But, also, the kinds of justifications you bring to bear in making your arguments have to be credible through some external source of knowledge, in that some person could come in, and they would still have to find your arguments credible, even if they haven't been fully ingrained in the culture of the GSD – and even if they're not even a Designer, or Architect, or Urban Planner. So with a thesis, there is the idea that there is a burden on you to make arguments that are credible beyond the walls of this building and even beyond the university. This convention is at least 500 years old and has evolved from the public “disputation” that was the form that most theses took. People still view theses as these public events, so you will find people saying, “Hang on, I'm really interested in that. It's a thesis review; I must go to that and ask a question.” So there's a deep norm there that goes all the way back to the beginning of the thesis – that the argumentation at the heart of the thesis is public. In fact, the earliest theses, which predated print, were just verbal arguments, and those were open. People were able to come dispute the claims you were making. In most thesis programs around the world, still to this day, this is still somehow at their core – it's public in the sense that anybody should be able to dispute the claims you make. As a result, the argument you make must be able to withstand the disputation of these potential disputants. Which is quite different than other kinds of work we do at the university. No member of the public is likely to come into your seminar class and say, “Sorry is that your term paper? I need to read that. I dispute your claims!” But in a thesis, the wider public can come and say “I dispute this, or at least I have questions about this.” And instead of going, “Can someone call security?” there is a burden on the thesis producer to say, “Ok, thank you for your comment. Here's how I respond.” Finally, the thesis is also public in the sense that it goes in the library. Anybody in the world can look at them, particularly now that they are digitized.

With this ‘disputation,’ is there a misalignment with how some of the departments conduct their thesis program? This is actually the first time I'm hearing about this, and I'm coming from Architecture – and now I'm also within Urban Planning. With Architecture, Landscape Architecture, etc. is there something missing there?

I don’t think so. I think the way reviews are advertised – thesis reviews – they're very public. There's a list, and I'm not saying that someone from the public is always in every thesis review, but I can assure you that if a member
of the public went to a thesis review, because of those very powerful norms, it would not feel strange. And that person could ask questions, and the student’s thesis coordinator would likely encourage the students to really defend their claims against those questions. I’m sure that across the departments there is a strong idea that the thesis is a “public document” and that the contribution is public and open to scrutiny in a way that few studio reports or final papers ever are.

On sharing the thesis – I don’t know if it’s a department or program by program basis – but there are a lot of students who express the willingness and desire to cross boundaries, or to cross-fertilize. This may also depend on a student’s individual will to go out and find the potentiality, or could be more of an informal process that happens on the trays. I was wondering if you could comment on this process – how the thesis program may allow or encourage it, or if informal, what that means for theses development.

I think interdisciplinarity is very important. We were just talking about this the other day with the thesis prep students, and they are really eager for that. One of the aspects about the UPD thesis track is that it is already quite interdisciplinary, in that you have urban design and urban planning students together in the program, and it always becomes a little bit murky who is who. Once you start to align yourself with ideas and arguments rather than with your degree program, what you find is that an urban design student might be working on Indonesia and so is an urban planning student. So they have more in common in some ways – at least in this one dimension – than two students working in urban design, but on radically different sites, at different scales, and relying on different methods. One of the things we’re trying to do in UPD is to say “Look, here you all are in these different degree programs, and you’re working on a thesis. That’s great. Now let’s start to think a little bit more specifically at how you’re going about posing questions and establishing arguments. Some of you are doing interviews in your theses. Three of those are leading to designs. Two of those are historically oriented. So there are differences and similarities. Where there are similarities, let’s say in terms of doing interviews – might you be able to share similar experiences, or how to fill out an IRB submission, or simply stories of hard knocks and successes?” Or you might observe, eight students in the cohort are drawing on historical design precedents. Very interesting. Some of those are planners, some of those are designers. What do you have to share methodologically there? Looking at these topical and methodological overlaps between students is often more useful than saying, “Well we are all in the MAUD degree, and you are all in a MUP degree.” This kind of interdisciplinarity is again important because, as mentioned earlier, we don’t have a canonical research method that is a standard method that connects our questions to our claims regarding that question. So we inevitably have to draw on other fields’ methods. Theses also tend to be interdisciplinary because usually when you’re at the forefront of a field, you’re bleeding over into other fields. Most interesting work starts to get interdisciplinary. Thinking about what you’re doing, and why you’re doing it, rather than focusing on which degree program you’re in is probably very healthy.

Well this is very helpful, thank you. Perhaps there is a closing statement we could give the students?

My pleasure. I think the thesis process is very exciting, partially because what constitutes a thesis at the GSD is so diverse. In many departments or schools you’d be much more constrained, with a necessary focus on the core method of the respective field, whether that is an ethnography or an econometric analysis. In our fields, we have more freedom in deciding how to go about our research, but this also puts a bigger burden on us to justify why we are doing our theses in the way we are. I think that’s actually really healthy to do, and actually very intellectually honest. It’s not about a methodology in particular that our field has normatively decided is appropriate. That would be actually quite unscientific. In principle, science is supposed to work in such a way that you have a question and you choose a methodology that’s most appropriate to answer the question at hand. I actually think theses at the GSD generally do that, or at least in UPD we strive to have students develop these kinds of robust justifications for the choices they make in their research. Perhaps it seems odd to say that the design school is a relatively scientific place when it comes to research, but I think we are, or should be, in that we ask questions then ask what methodology we can deploy to answer this question the best. In contrast, most disciplines, even ones that claim to be very scientific, are often very unscientific and they deploy a much more standard set of approaches that their field deems to have merit. I think our approach is actually quite intellectually robust, but it does (or should) also put a huge burden on students, because you have to say, “There’s no natural way to answer the question.” I have to look at the question and say, “How do I best try to resolve this problem?” And that often means learning new methodologies. But that’s also what makes thesis work so intellectually satisfying and so much fun.
By articulating one's rhythm between space and food, this thesis seeks to reconstruct consumer attitude and sincerity toward cultural cuisine. The industrialization of food provides opportunities for our diverse world to sample and taste extraordinary cuisines from the comfort of home. However, as these regional methods and culinary traditions become commodified, consumers are often divorced from the delectable and enticing knowledge ingrained within these intangible heritages.

As cultures are stirred together by technology and globalization, the identity of traditional ceremonial and theatrical foods is being challenged. The essence of cuisine cannot be defined by ingredients and manner of cooking alone; it needs to be justified through cultural characteristics and practice of making.

Using Sushi as a "main ingredient," this thesis proposes two culinary interventions to preserve, enhance, and transmit attributes of cultural practice and performative aspects of Japanese culinary art. The first intervention is situated within a culturally submersed site where a "simple" way of life is gradually being consumed by globalization. The second intervention is located in a globalized society where domestic foods of foreign cultures are being celebrated as exotic cuisines. How can architecture shape our intimacy with cuisines? How can our experience of cuisine reshape our perception towards culture and consumption?
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Yufeng Zheng is an M. Arch I AP student who recently wrapped up the last semester with his thesis that seeks to uncover the threshold of tradition and commodification within an aesthetics of an Architecture of and for Japanese Culinary Art. Doing most of his design work by hand – something done very little these days – resulted in a refined and meticulously well-crafted drawings and models that seemed to speak to the kind craft that is central to Japanese Culinary Art. As far as accomplishing all of this research and production work, Yufeng says that I just picked a topic of personal interest and went with it. In the beginning, I didn’t know if the topic would manifest itself into a thesis or not. My first thesis topic was on “methodology of design: analog and digital.” Over the course of thesis prep, I realized that this topic did not align with what I had in mind for a design thesis. Although my first topic did not find itself into my final thesis, all the research I conducted over the prep thesis semester definitely influenced my final design approach and execution.

Throughout his ‘thesis semester,’ Yufeng made it into a fun endeavor – even making a trip to Japan for more “thesis research.” While reflecting on his experience, we asked him to share a bit of advice for those who are just beginning to think about their thesis.

Pick a topic that is of personal interest and have fun. I think thesis is a project where students have the freedom to explore and discover their own design interests. After thesis prep, you will find yourself becoming a little expert in your topic. Sometimes you might feel like you are obliged to show all of your research during presentations, or produce diagrams for every discovery... It is ok not to present everything. “Less is more...” And plus, presentations usually go by faster than you expect.