SECOND YEAR GRADUATE STUDIO

Fall 2024

CFA AR 883

Revelation Through Inquiry: Development of Thesis Research

LEVEL	MFA 2 · Graduate studio
CREDITS	8
MEETS	Section A1 Tuesdays · Section B1 Thursdays · 12:30–3:15 / 3:30–6:15
DATES	September 3 – December 10, 2024
LOCATION	[confirm room]
INSTRUCTOR	Associate Professor Nicholas Rock (he/him)
OFFICE	808 Commonwealth Ave — 406A
CONTACT	nickrock@bu.edu
OFFICE HOURS	By appointment — Tuesdays, Thursdays 10:30–12:30, Wednesday 12–2

01

Overview

The Design Thesis is more than an individual project, and while it could be very focused in terms of content and form, it is neither only one nor the other. The Thesis is a body of work, the culmination of design inquiry, research, and formal experimentation, which offer new perspectives, ideas, thoughts, and questions into the contemporary design conversation. The work developed this semester and built upon in the Spring is intended to be deep, rigorous, and intense. It, therefore, must be rooted in your values, beliefs, interests, and curiosities.

This semester will introduce opportunities to rigorously explore forms of inquiry and research, leading to broad experimentation with one's creative process while helping you get a hold of who you are, what you believe in, and what you care about in terms of content and formal issues.

Our main objective is to develop who you are as a designer while using inquiry and research as catalysts for your critical thinking and creative process. Additionally, this is a moment for you to reflect on and orient yourself to the current realities we are confronting in the world, which is the measure of a successful designer.

You will build on previous experiences and delve into unfamiliar territories. Guided by me, your peers, and outside critics, you will develop the foundation and framework of your Thesis through a series of inquiry-based projects, a formal professional presentation, and several challenging form-making assignments, culminating in a thesis abstract and semester-end reviews.

02

Learning Outcomes

- Demonstrate an advanced ability to create and curate content and leverage the content for advanced experimental form-making.
- Develop the basis for a personal design methodology applicable beyond the scope of this course.
- Develop an understanding of design inquiry and how driving questions can guide the growth and development of a design project.
- Develop the ability to leverage research as a basis for design projects.
- Demonstrate an advanced ability to communicate complex concepts and creative thinking to multiple audiences through writing and visual presentation.

Program Learning Outcomes

- Advance a unique graphic design process and master key design principles through programmatic studio work and discourse.
- Use a unique design process to shape content applicable to multiple/myriad mediums and targeted audiences.
- Approach design holistically — observe and respond to the social, political, economic, technological forces driving change and influencing communication formats.
- Articulate a unique point of view and method informed by a study of design history and theory, and an engagement in contemporary practice and discourse.
- Professionally develop through a measurable degree of advancement in creative work, research, writing, publication, and distribution.
- Participate in the expansion, disruption, and revision of discourse and practice to represent people, cultures, and aesthetics historically excluded from Eurocentric narratives about art and design.

We define learning outcomes vis-a-vis the profession's demands, considered in tandem with the department's strategic vision, school, college, and university. We measure the outcomes regularly, during progress and final critiques with individual faculty, and during end-of-semester reviews with a panel of faculty and guest critics.

03

Class as Community

I come into this class from a place of respect and trust, and I hope that you all do too.

Course Structure

We are a microcosm — of the department, the school, the university, and while small, we are still an incredibly diverse community. Our cohort includes students from all over the world with all sorts of backgrounds and experiences.

Our class is inclusive and accessible. We come from different places, backgrounds, and walks of life. We embrace the unique identities of each member of this community and commit to learning, growing, and understanding each other through historical contexts of race, gender, religion, sexuality, and other expressions of self. If they feel comfortable doing so, I ask that all members of this community share their gender pronouns with the class.

I understand that your trust is earned. I am committed to helping you grow and learn and change or solidify your perspective and knowledge in design, and I am committed to learning from you. I will ensure that our class is a safe space to teach and learn, as I see all of us working in both capacities.

We will explore diverse content. I am working to ensure that this course represents a vast range of perspectives, ideas, topics, people, and cultures through what I will provide and what I hope you all will bring to the conversation.

We will be flexible, patient, and understanding. I made a syllabus and a schedule of projects. I will shift and adjust the work and the due dates to adapt to our class.

Class Structure

Classes will be a mixture of mini-lectures, discussions, individual and small groups, and whole class meetings, critiques, and presentations. This semester we will have weekly full-group conversations and small group meetings, and additional outside critic meetings.

A Few Rules

- Show up, and show up on time, this is a matter of respect for everyone in the community and to ensure you have everything you need to grow.
- Engage in the conversation — we are all here to make each other better designers (and maybe even better people!)
- Do the best you can week in and week out. We will meet you wherever you are.
- Have fun. Make space for joy.
- And finally, the printer is always broken.

Thesis Groups + Virtual Critics

Students are organized into groups of five that bridge both sections. Each group coordinates and conducts four sessions across the semester with an assigned outside critic. Critics this semester: Sarah Pratt and Mohammed Nassem (BFA alumni), Regina Acra and Nicholas Samendinger (MFA alumni), and regular critic Ryan Diaz.

Approach to the Semester

Form. Two experimental form-making projects run parallel to the broader inquiry and thesis development work, keeping you making experimental forms and expressing ideas that appear along the way.

Inquiry. Three distinct but complementary forms of inquiry, intentionally sequential, the first building a foundation for the second, providing the basis and context necessary for the third. Each requires a designed research document of sorts.

Form + Inquiry. Using content and insights from both, you will catalog and analyze what you have made, collected, saved, archived, or bookmarked to date, and look for the threads or connections between everything. These will inform the foundational direction of your thesis work.

04

Projects

00 — Thesis Journal

Weekly, prompted through Basecamp

What things have you found or looked at, or thought of this week? Something you want to do next, what inspired you, what did you hate — or maybe: my thesis is _ _.

01 Inquiry — Filter of Perspective

6 weeks · begins Sep 3 / 5 · due Oct 8 / 10

Develop a content-specific cultural landscape that reflects your unique perspective as a designer. Catalog and analyze what you have created to date, then expand to the references and inspirations that have influenced your work. Identify three to five key themes or strategies and define them in your own words. The final deliverable is a custom-designed catalog, web-based or print-based, built to be added to and updated over the next year and beyond.

02 Inquiry — 50 Questions

Part 1 · Sep 10 / 12 – Oct 1 / 3 · Part 2 poster · Oct 22 – Nov 5

Develop a research methodology through conceptual and formal questioning. Generate and refine questions — first as a group, then individually — into a prioritized Top 50 list and a categorized archive. The second phase visualizes the Top 50 as a printed poster that reflects the themes, patterns, and connections discovered through the inquiry.

03 Form + Inquiry — Design Inquiry Presentation

5 weeks · begins Sep 17 / 19 · presented Oct 21–23

A formal public talk concerning the insights drawn from the Filter of Perspective project, built on a Past, Present, Future narrative structure. Deliverables: a written script and a designed digital presentation, performed for peers and an online audience.

04 Form — Remix

3 weeks · begins Sep 17 / 19 · due Oct 8 / 10

A formal project about recontextualizing content, ideas, and form. An experimental testing ground of ideas. It may or may not relate at all to your thesis work. It may or may not be a spectacular failure.

05 Form — Extreme Scale

3 weeks · begins Oct 29 / 31 · due Nov 19 / 21

A project about shifting understanding and perspective — the second experimental testing ground of ideas.

06 Form + Inquiry — Taxonomy + Methods

6 weeks · begins Oct 29 / 31 · due Dec 3 / 5

Develop a taxonomy of the language and terminology that emerged from the semester, defined and supported with references. Create a statement or series of methods that link, connect, or unify the taxonomy, visualize it as a piece of information design, and write a project brief informed by it.

07 Inquiry — Abstract

4 weeks · begins Nov 12 / 14 · due Dec 10, final reviews

Form the basis of your thesis ideas as a written, designed 300-word abstract on a single letter-sized sheet, using a framework from Design Incubation to prepare for the Spring semester.

05

Assessment

Evaluation Criteria

Engagement. A class as a community depends on the engagement of the class members. Part of a designer's job is communicating effectively, on a design team, in a studio environment, or with clients. Be an active class member, particularly during critiques, as all feedback is valuable and essential.

Project Execution. All projects require your full attention and effort. Projects must be submitted on time and completed according to the project brief. We will have a review

after each project, though you will not receive an individual grade for each project. You will have an opportunity to improve upon each project following that project's final critique.

Project Process. Document the process of each project throughout the semester. Save all sketches, writings, mockups, etc. The process for each project will make up a portion of your grade.

Professionalism. As you develop into design professionals, practice how you conduct and carry yourself in interactions with clients, employers, and peers. Practice humility, honesty, transparency and respect.

07

Materials & Tools

The Essentials

- Laptop
- Flash drive
- Camera
- Sketchbook
- X-Acto knife + extra blades
- Bone folder
- A flatfile drawer
- A sense of humor

Recommended

- Music; coffee, tea, water or other sustenance
- A projector adapter, a tripod, gaffer tape
- Bookbinding materials

Reading

- Required: *Decolonizing Reader (resources)*, collaborative open edition.
- Suggested: Monteiro, Mike. *Ruined by Design: How Designers Destroyed the World, and What We Can Do to Fix It.*

Software + Services

You will need access to Adobe Creative Cloud. It is obnoxious that our industry relies on prohibitively expensive design software from one giant corporation, so I encourage you to explore alternatives: Keynote, Pixelmator, Sketch, Procreate, Cinema4d, Figma, Miro.

We use Basecamp, a project management tool used by professionals in the design industry, as the central portal for class discussion and a digital library of class resources.

You must have a backup solution in place after the first week. I recommend Backblaze.

08

Policies

Attendance & Absences

Please make every effort to arrive punctually. You must attend all classes. According to the SVA Attendance Policy, unless specific permission for absence is arranged with the instructor of this course, students must attend class to receive credit for the course. Unexcused absences exceeding 1/4 of the total class hours in a given semester are considered excessive in all SVA courses. Tardiness and any unexcused absences will reduce your course grade. Three unexcused absences will earn you a failing grade for the course.

Academic Conduct

Academic Conduct Code: bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code

DEI Statement

As artists, designers, and educators, BU CFA School of Visual Arts values honesty, brave conversation, intellectual engagement and informed artistic freedom. We ask our community to recognize individual responsibility for actions, including the fact that impact on others may differ from intent. As an artistic community and as expressed in the BU Diversity Statement, SVA strives to be inclusive of all community members in regard to race, ethnicity, national origin, immigration status, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class, ability, and religion. We also commit to the importance of treating each student as an individual with intersectional, personal, lived experiences.