SECOND YEAR GRADUATE STUDIO

Fall 2026

CFA AR 883

Design Inquiry

LEVEL	MFA 2 · Graduate studio
CREDITS	8
MEETS	Two sections, Tuesday and Thursday · six-hour studio blocks · 24 candidates
DATES	September 3 – December 9, 2026
LOCATION	[confirm room]
INSTRUCTOR	Associate Professor Nicholas Rock (he/him)
OFFICE	808 Commonwealth Ave — 406A
CONTACT	nickrock@bu.edu
OFFICE HOURS	[confirm Fall 2026 times]

01

Overview

I believe design is deeply intertwined with your life experience.

The designers who work at the highest level are able to reach back through their own memories, interests, inspirations, and experiences. They are hungry consumers of culture — many cultures, most cultures, all cultures. They pay attention. They notice relationships between things that other people might not see. And they are able to make the invisible connections and unconventional leaps that turn those relationships into new ideas.

That capacity is not something you either have or don't. It is something you develop through inquiry, curiosity, experimentation, and making.

Design Inquiry is where that work begins.

This course is a framework and foundation for your thesis, not the thesis itself. Over the semester, we will gather widely, ask questions, make things, follow what we notice, and edit our way toward a direction.

That direction might be an idea, a perspective, a methodology, a set of questions, or some combination of these. What matters is that it becomes large enough to hold a body of work beneath it.

In my view, a thesis is not a single project. It is the larger idea that gives you a reason to make many projects. The work you make becomes a way of testing, understanding, challenging, and expanding that idea.

At the beginning of this process, I am less interested in whether you know what your thesis is than whether you are willing to look for it.

Treat your interests as material. Pay attention to what you return to. Follow questions further than you normally would. Make things before you know exactly why you are making them. Look for connections between what you care about, what you notice, what you have already made, and what you might make next.

The direction we arrive at by December is meant to be a beginning, not a conclusion. It should be specific enough to give you somewhere to go and open enough that you still have something to discover.

02

Learning Outcomes

Design Inquiry is the first half of your thesis development. By the end of the semester, you should be able to:

- Name a thesis direction of your own — an idea, perspective, methodology, or set of questions large enough to hold a body of work — and begin to understand where it sits within contemporary design.
- Develop and sustain your own line of inquiry: generate questions, follow them, recognize which ones have energy, and edit toward a more focused position.
- Find connections between your interests, references, experiences, and previous work, and begin to develop a vocabulary for describing them.
- Make a range of experimental work across forms and media, using making as a way to think, test, discover, and ask new questions.
- Look hard at your own work and the work of others from more than one perspective, and use critique to decide what happens next.
- Communicate your developing direction visually, verbally, and in writing.

How these map to graduate standards: these are the course's own outcomes, written in its own terms. For accreditation, they correspond to the competencies the terminal MFA degree is expected to develop — independent inquiry and synthesis, a sustained body of work and its presentation, critical contextualization, and the ability to make and defend judgments — as set out in the shared NASAD and CAA guidelines for graduate art and design.

03

Course Structure

Structure creates room to explore

I will be highly structured about **how** we work and deliberately open about **where** that work leads you.

A blank page is rarely freedom. More often, it gives you nothing to push against.

The exercises, prompts, deadlines, and constraints in this course are there to get you moving — to give you something to respond to, question, resist, combine, change, and make from. They create conditions for discovery.

Trust the process enough to do the work before deciding where it will lead.

I don't know what you will find. That's the point.

My direction is a perspective to weigh

I bring my own experience, values, references, and point of view into the studio. When I give you feedback or direction, I expect you to take it seriously — but I do not expect you to simply follow it.

Treat my direction as a perspective to weigh, analyze, and consider alongside your own.

Listen. Ask questions. Consider what the feedback reveals. Then decide what you believe and what the work needs.

My job is to help you get to an answer, not to give you one.

The core practice — finding the invisible threads

A large part of this semester is learning to recognize connections between things that may not seem connected at first: what you read, what you notice, what you care about, what you have made, where you come from, and what you keep returning to.

We are looking for the invisible threads.

Sometimes those connections are already there and only need to be recognized. Sometimes we make them — by putting things next to each other that don't obviously belong together and seeing what happens.

What do they share? Where do they disagree? What becomes visible because these two things are now in relationship?

We will work at this directly in the studio, in specific ways, throughout the semester. Over time, these connections give you a vocabulary for your own practice — language that helps you understand what makes your perspective yours, and begins to reveal the larger idea capable of holding the work you make next.

The shape of the semester

We begin wide.

September is about gathering, questioning, making, and noticing. You will collect influences and references, revisit work you have already made, generate questions, and make new work without needing to know exactly where it is leading.

Then we begin to edit.

The **Inquiry Presentation** is our first significant moment of focus: a public articulation of where you have been, where you are now, and what questions might lead you forward.

From there, the semester narrows. You will continue making, but with greater intention. You will test emerging language, develop a taxonomy, and begin to articulate the idea, perspective, or methodology that could become the foundation for your thesis.

By December, you should be able to name a direction and propose a first move beneath it.

Both sections run on one weekly clock — the same work each week, on Tuesday and Thursday.

Practices & expectations

Are.na. Are.na is our primary space for gathering. Use it to collect references, images, texts, ideas, work, people, places, and things that catch your attention. Think of it less as a moodboard and more as an evolving cultural landscape. Gather first. Organize and understand later.

Thesis Journal. A light weekly practice through Basecamp. Use it to record what you are gathering, questions that are emerging, connections you are noticing, language you are trying out, and early taxonomy terms.

Critique. Critique is part of the rhythm of the studio. Come prepared to show work in progress, talk about what you are learning, listen carefully, and respond to the work of others. The purpose of critique is not simply to decide whether something is good or bad. It is to make the work visible from more than one perspective and help determine what should happen next.

Range over resolution. This semester is not about making one perfectly resolved thesis project. It is about building enough range to discover something.

04
Projects

Projects overlap on purpose. You will often have several things underway at once, at different stages of development. That is part of the practice. Full briefs are provided separately.

Filter of Perspective

Individual · launches September 3 · due Sep 29 / Oct 1

Gather what shapes you as a creative person — not just design. Build a cultural landscape on Are.na from your interests, influences, references, experiences, previous work, and the things you find yourself returning to. Organize it, study it, and look for the invisible threads that make the collection uniquely yours. Then make something from it: a designed artifact, print or digital, that curates, communicates, or represents your perspective.

50 Questions

Individual · begins Sep 15 / 17 · poster installed October 19

Generate questions before looking for answers. You will begin with quantity: questions about the things you notice, care about, don't understand, want to challenge, or want to know more about. Through editing and discussion, that field will narrow. You will then design a **poster** containing an edited set of those questions, installed in the hall for Design Week.

Remix

Individual · begins Sep 15 / 17 · due with critique Oct 6 / 8

An experimental form project that asks you to explore emerging thesis ideas indirectly. Rather than explain your interests, you will make through them — combining, altering, translating, or recontextualizing material to see what else becomes possible.

Inquiry Presentation

Individual · performed October 20–22

A public articulation of your developing direction organized around Past / Present / Future. Where have you been? What are you seeing now? What questions are pulling you forward? The presentation ends with an edited handful of questions that begin to point toward a focus.

Extreme Scale

Individual · second half of the semester

Another oblique making project, introduced as your direction begins to narrow. Extreme Scale asks you to test what happens when an emerging idea is pushed somewhere unexpected.

Thesis Direction

Individual · Final Reviews December 9

The semester concludes with three connected artifacts. **The Map** — taxonomy + methods: a visual and verbal map of the ideas, terms, relationships, and ways of working that define your emerging direction. **The Position** — a 300-word designed abstract. **The Move** — a proposal for something you could make in the spring to test your direction.

Your taxonomy is not a glossary. It is a vocabulary for your own practice.

06

Calendar

DATE	BOTH SECTIONS	MILESTONE
Sep 3	Whole-group kickoff	Filter of Perspective launches
Sep 8 / 10	All-studio charette	No formal class
Sep 15 / 17	Both sections begin identical content	50 Questions and Remix begin
Sep 29 / Oct 1	Studio	**Filter of Perspective due**
Oct 6 / 8	Critique	**Remix due**
Oct 19	Design Week	**50 Questions poster installed**
Oct 20 · 21 · 22	Tuesday · mixed sections · Thursday	**Inquiry Presentations**
Dec 8	All-group open desk-crit day	Individual studio crits
Dec 9	Both sections	**Final Reviews** — Map, Position, Move

07

Materials & Tools

- **Are.na** — the primary space for gathering and the course's shared collection surface.
- **Basecamp** — weekly Thesis Journal, briefs, and class communication.
- Companion documents: Semester Calendar, Semester Schedule, and individual project briefs.

10

Closing

The through-line

Question → Direction → Project

Questions open the field. Through gathering, making, connecting, and editing, those questions begin to reveal a direction. That direction gives you a reason to make a project. And the project gives you another way to question the direction.

That cycle is the work of this semester — and the beginning of the work you will carry into the spring.