EXPERIENCE DESIGN

Fall 2026

CFA AR 597

LEVEL	Advanced elective · graduate and undergraduate
CREDITS	2
MEETS	Wednesdays, 2:30–5:15 pm
DATES	September 2 – December 2, 2026 · 13 sessions
LOCATION	808 Commonwealth Avenue, Room 409
INSTRUCTOR	Associate Professor Nicholas Rock (he/him)
OFFICE	808 Commonwealth Ave — 406A
CONTACT	nickrock@bu.edu — please use BU email for all course communication
OFFICE HOURS	By appointment — Tue 10:30–12:30, Wed 10:30–2:00, Thu 10:30–12:30 · fantastical.app/nick-kSSb/office-hours

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Overview

Experience design may not be what you think, as the term is slightly misleading. We do not design an experience. We design or develop a plan to create opportunities for experiences and interactions. As designers, we draw from our life experiences, influences, and exposure to different things to build these opportunities. It is, therefore, crucial to be exposed to and have perspective on a broad range of knowledge, culture, views, etc. We also need to understand that when we design, we design for real people who will bring their own experiences and influences to the project. Our decisions as designers can lead directly to emotional responses of the people who engage with our work.

This studio's goal is to help you begin to develop a process of approaching, defining, and framing opportunities, considering both your voice as a designer and the needs of an audience. The intent is not to focus on a specific aspect of experience design but to set you up to become a better design thinker. You will complete a series of projects — the first on your own, the rest collaboratively — confronting this idea and building opportunities for experience in different contexts to evoke specific emotional responses.

The course is an advanced elective, open to graduate and undergraduate students, and regularly includes students from engineering, architecture, and theater. That mix is deliberate: the ideas here are only worth teaching if they hold across disciplines.

Students also contribute case studies to the **Experience Design Handbook**, a public, web-based research database of designed experiences, and are credited as contributors.

02

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. **See.** Observe and interpret people and contexts to find an opportunity for experience, before proposing a solution.
2. **Make.** Design and implement opportunities for experience that real people can encounter, working alone and on interdisciplinary teams, with consent and care for participants outside the classroom.
3. **Learn.** Report honestly on the gap between intended and encountered experience, using evidence from participants, and let what comes back shape the next decision.
4. **Analyze.** Read and catalog designed experiences across disciplines through a shared framework (medium, type, participation structure, emotional response) and contribute that analysis to a public research archive.

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Course Structure

How We Work

SEE → MAKE → LEARN → SEE AGAIN

You begin by noticing something real — observing, researching, listening, interpreting — rather than waiting for an idea. You make something real enough to be encountered; a proposal is not an encounter. Then you pay attention to what actually came back, and what you learn changes what you are able to see next.

For critique: **INTENDED → MADE → ENCOUNTERED → LEARNED**

What you set out to do, and what you created. What people actually experienced, and what that tells us.

There is no failure of a project in this class unless you don't engage with the work. An unexpected response is not automatically a failure. A thoughtful project that was made, encountered, and honestly understood — even one that missed what you intended — can be excellent work. Not making enough to discover anything is the greater problem.

Critique

Every project ends with an in-class critique. Each team shares their work, followed by the same sequence:

1. **Encounter** — Experience the work. No explanation.
2. **Reception** — What did you notice, think, feel, or do? Describe, don't evaluate.

3. **Intention** — The team shares what they intended.
4. **Gap** — Where did intention and experience align or differ?
5. **Learning** — What can we learn from what happened?

Critique is a moment in the process, not a verdict. **We critique the work, not the people who made it.** The goal is to understand the relationship between what was intended, what was made, and what was experienced — and learn from the distance between them.

Class as Community

I come into this class from a place of respect and trust, and I hope you do too. We are a microcosm of the department, the school, and the university — students from all over the world, from multiple disciplines, with all sorts of backgrounds. Our class is inclusive and accessible. If you feel comfortable, I ask that you share your gender pronouns with the class. I made a syllabus and a schedule; I will shift and adjust to adapt to our class.

A Few Rules

Show up, on time. Engage in the conversation. Do the best you can, week to week — we'll meet you where you are. Make it exist. Have fun, and make space for joy. And the printer is always broken.

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Projects

Four projects, each a different condition through which you practice the same methodology. They do not increase in complexity; they are four lenses on the same practice.

PERSON → CONTEXT → INTERVENTION → PROPAGATION

Each project gives you less to hold onto — not because you are losing control, but because you cannot control how an experience is received. A chef sends out a dish believing it is good, knowing it will not be loved by everyone. You design with a belief and intent.

01 · Reception — Person

Individual · fixed-frame video · Weeks 1–3

A specific point of view. Paired with one person and given ten minutes to interview them, you make a three-minute fixed-frame video designed as an opportunity for experience for that person. The camera does not move; you choose what it sees. Inspired in part by Window Swap.

02 · Junction — Context

Team · Weeks 3–6

A place where things come together. Discover an existing junction — a public place, a threshold, a product, a screen, a moment — and design an opportunity for an experience there. Read the context before you change it.

03 · Redirection — Intervention

Team · named outside participant · Weeks 6–9

A change in direction. Intentionally alter something already in motion — attention, movement, pace, perception, expectation. This project introduces questions of agency, participation, consent, and responsibility, and requires a named participant from outside the class with real authority over the work.

04 · Spark Hope — Propagation

Team · Weeks 10–13

Something you can give away. Translate a source of joy into something four people can carry into four different contexts and give away. It must be able to continue without you.

The Handbook & the Framework

Individual · five case studies · due Weeks 2, 4, 6, 8, 11

Each week builds toward a shared body of knowledge. You will contribute **five case studies** to the Experience Design Handbook across the semester, tagged on the framework and written in your own discipline — theater students catalog performance, engineers catalog systems. This is how the course's evidence base stops reproducing any single point of view.

Every entry is described through four lenses. They are not rules for what an experience should be. They are questions about what it does.

- **Medium** — where does it live? *Physical, digital, or genuinely both. Choose 1–2.*
- **Type** — what kind of thing is it? *Eighteen forms, from Installation and Performance to Infrastructure and Research / Workshop. Choose 1–3.*
- **Participation Structure** — who is it designed for, and how are they meant to relate to each other while having it? *Solo · One-to-One · Small Group · Participatory · Audience · Open / Public · Networked. Choose 1.*

- **Emotional Response** — what does it actually produce in the people who have it? *101 terms in eleven families, from Joyful and Wonder through Tension and Disengaged. Choose 2–4; strong work often produces several at once, and they frequently conflict.*

One rule governs all four: tag what the experience **produces**, not what its designers hoped it would. An experience that bored people is as useful to this archive as one that moved them.

Every entry also carries your writing — what the case teaches that transfers to other work, and what surprised you about it. The tags say what it is; the writing says what you saw.

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Assessment

CATEGORY	WEIGHT
Four Projects (Reception, Junction, Redirection, Spark Hope)	75%
Studio Practice (critique + discussion, five Handbook contributions, attendance + preparedness)	25%

Each project is evaluated in three areas:

- **Seeing** — Did you notice something meaningful and develop a point of view?
- **Making** — Did you turn that point of view into something people could encounter?
- **Learning** — Did you pay attention to what happened and learn from the gap between intention and experience?

1 — MISSING	2 — DEVELOPING	3 — COMPLETE	4 — STRONG	5 — EXCEPTIONAL
Work or engagement is not present.	Work is present, but incomplete or underdeveloped.	Expected work is present, thoughtful, and competently done.	Work goes beyond expectations through depth, rigor, or engagement.	Work demonstrates exceptional insight, commitment, or development.

This is an **engagement model.** A successful project does not require a successful outcome. An honest miss — thoughtfully made, encountered, and learned from — is a complete project. Higher scores reflect the depth of your engagement with the process and what you learn from it.

Team projects receive a shared grade, with individual adjustments when a student's contribution differs significantly from the team.

Assessment moments: P01 (Sep 16) and P02 (Oct 7) function as the course's early checkpoints; the P04 critique on Dec 2 is the final. There is no separate final exam.

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Calendar

Fourteen Wednesdays fall between September 2 and December 2. One is Thanksgiving recess, leaving thirteen meetings. Readings listed for a date are due that day.

WEEK	DATE	SESSION	PROJECT STATE
01	Sep 2	Course intro. What is experience design? SEE → MAKE → LEARN introduced. Handbook + framework introduced. **P01 launch:** fixed-frame video. Begin "what I know / infer / intend."	P01 — SEE
02	Sep 9	P01 work + discussion. Move from observation toward intention. Seal the one-sentence intention statement before implementation. *Handbook 01 due.*	P01 — SEE → MAKE
03	Sep 16	**P01 encounter + critique.** Compare intended experience with what was encountered. **P02 launch.**	P01 — LEARN / P02 — SEE
04	Sep 23	P02 inquiry + development. Research, observation, framing, early making. Generative constraints as provocations. *Handbook 02 due.*	P02 — SEE → MAKE
05	Sep 30	P02 prototyping. Put ideas into a form that can be encountered. Peer encounters.	P02 — MAKE
06	Oct 7	**P02 encounter + critique. P03 launch.** *Handbook 03 due.*	P02 — LEARN / P03 — SEE
07	Oct 14	P03 inquiry + development. Identify opportunity, audience, and intended conditions.	P03 — SEE → MAKE
08	Oct 21	P03 work + testing. Encounter prototypes, observe reception, revise. *Handbook 04 due.*	P03 — MAKE
09	Oct 28	**P03 encounter + critique. P04 launch.**	P03 — LEARN / P04 — SEE
10	Nov 4	P04 inquiry + framing. Establish intention, begin making. Draw deliberately from the Handbook and prior learning.	P04 — SEE → MAKE
11	Nov 11	P04 development, prototyping, critique. Test while there's still time to change it. *Handbook 05 due.*	P04 — MAKE
12	Nov 18	P04 advanced work. Implementation, observation, revision. Prepare final encounter.	P04 — MAKE → ENCOUNTER

WEEK	DATE	SESSION	PROJECT STATE
—	Nov 25	**Thanksgiving Recess — No Class**	—
13	Dec 2	**P04 final encounter + critique.** Semester synthesis: revisit SEE → MAKE → LEARN and the collective Handbook. What do we understand about designing experiences now that we didn't in September?	P04 — LEARN / Course — REFLECT

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Materials & Tools

Recommended Texts

- Georges Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (Wakefield Press, 2010). 72 pp, ~$12. Free to borrow at the Internet Archive.
- Ross Gay, *The Book of Delights* (Algonquin, 2019) — selected essays, excerpt provided.
- Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (Vintage, 2019) — opening section, excerpt provided.

Recommended Audio & Reading (free)

- 99% Invisible, "U Is for Urbanism," ep. 649.
- Design Lab with Bon Ku, ep. 115: Sara Hendren.
- Jackson, Haagaard & Williams, "Disability Dongle."

Supplies

Projects must be achievable with department resources, common materials, and your own ingenuity — structure is the cheapest design material there is. Bring a laptop, a camera that shoots 720p (a phone is fine), a way to hold it still, a sketchbook, gaffer tape, and a sense of humor.

If course materials are a financial hardship, talk with Beth Zerega at bzerega@bu.edu.

Courseware

- **Basecamp** — class portal: communication, briefs, readings, calendar. Also carries current office hours and TA contact.
- **The Experience Design Handbook** — experiencedesignhandbook.com
- **Adobe Creative Cloud** — free for BU students. You are not required to use it; Figma, Keynote, DaVinci Resolve, Blender and others are welcome.

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Policies

A Note on Scope

This course studies the full range of emotional response, including experiences that produce tension, alarm, or disengagement — dark patterns, failed products, and work that fails instructively are central to our analysis. Assigned projects, however, are never briefed toward negative emotional response. We examine how difficulty is produced; we do not ask students to produce it in people who did not consent to it.

Where a project takes you to people outside this class — Redirection in particular — the following is a course requirement: you may alter someone's attention, path, pace, or expectation, but you may not deceive, humiliate, endanger, distress, or extract from them. Anyone must be able to disengage at any moment without cost or awkwardness. If you cannot tell which side of that line your concept sits on, bring it to me before you build it.

Attendance

This class meets once a week, so a single absence is a significant portion of the semester. Per SVA policy, unexcused absences exceeding one quarter of class hours are excessive; three unexcused absences earn a failing grade. Critique sessions (Sep 16, Oct 7, Oct 28, Dec 2) cannot be made up — your team depends on your presence, and a critique requires an audience. BU's Policy on Religious Observance is affirmed; notify me in advance.

Late Work

Project work is due through Basecamp at the start of class on the due date and presented in class. Handbook contributions are due at the start of class. The 48-hour critique annotation window is short on purpose — it's only useful while the critique is fresh. Late individual work drops one step per session late. If something is going wrong, tell me early; I'm flexible with people who communicate.

Academic Conduct

All work must be your own or your team's, with sources, collaborators, and participants credited. Handbook entries require a verifiable source — no entries from memory — because they enter a public database under your name. **Generative AI** is permitted for research, drafting, and production, but never as a substitute for the two things this course assesses: making something that exists, and reporting honestly what people experienced. Never fabricate participant responses or reception data — that is the most serious dishonesty available in this course, because the whole methodology depends on that evidence being real. Disclose AI use in your documentation. See BU's Academic Conduct Code.

DEI

As artists, designers, and educators, BU CFA School of Visual Arts values honesty, brave conversation, intellectual engagement, and informed artistic freedom. We recognize that impact on others may differ from intent, and we strive to be inclusive of all community members across race, ethnicity, national origin, immigration status, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class, ability, and religion, treating each student as an individual with intersectional, lived experiences. In our courses, lectures, exhibitions, and library, SVA is attentive to showing and including artists, designers, and writers historically excluded from Eurocentric narratives about art and design.

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Resources

How to Succeed

Make things exist — the most common failure is a good idea that never left the studio. Build in time for people; more than one project depends on someone outside this class, and reaching them takes longer than you think. Listen harder than you explain — when the room describes your work and it doesn't match what you intended, that's the most valuable data you'll get all semester. Do the Handbook contributions on time, in your own discipline. Come to me before you build something you're unsure about, not after.

BU Resources

- CFA Undergraduate Advising · Graduate Advising
- SVA office: visuarts@bu.edu · 617-353-3371 (BUID / studio access)
- Educational Resource Center — academic skills, writing, tutoring
- CFA Mental Health & Wellness
- **Disability & Access Services** — bu.edu/disability · 617-353-3658 · access@bu.edu. If you have or think you may have a disability requiring accommodations, please reach out to coordinate.