Undergraduate Program - Writing a Thesis

- Pursuing a Thesis
- Department Timeline of Thesis Preparation
  - Overview of Key Dates for Thesis Preparation
    - Spring Semester, Junior Year
    - Fall Semester, Senior Year
    - Spring Semester, Senior Year
- Advising
  - Senior Thesis Adviser
  - Faculty Thesis Adviser
  - Program Director, Harvard Undergraduate Architecture Studies Track
  - Undergraduate Program Coordinator
- Academic Requirements – Written Thesis
  - Academic Requirements: Design Thesis in the Architecture Track
    - Course Requirements for Honors Consideration with a Design Thesis
      - Senior Year – Fall Term
      - Senior Year – Spring Term
    - Submission Requirements for the Design Thesis Project (due March 06, 2023)
- Grading of the Senior Thesis
- Thesis Readers
- Grade Report and Honors Recommendation
- Discontinuance of a Thesis
- Examples of Past Theses

Pursuing a Thesis

Senior Concentrators wishing to graduate with honors in the Department must produce a senior thesis and carry academic standing of Group II or better, with a minimum GPA of 3.00 in concentration grades. In deciding whether one wishes to fulfill the honors requirements, students should consider their academic interests, commitment to independent research, and other deadlines and obligations during the thesis year. Many students find the task of producing a substantial piece of critical scholarship interesting and rewarding, but others find the senior thesis can become a frustrating and unwieldy burden. Some students prefer the freedom to take elective courses or savor extra-curricular pursuits during their last year at the College unhampered by the encroaching demands of thesis preparation. In general, it may be remarked that students are unlikely to do well in the honors program who are not already proven practiced writers committed to the process of scholarship; the senior thesis is not the place to acquire basic skills in writing, design, and/or research. In considering the Department's honors requirements, it should be remembered that students with honors grades overall may graduate with University Honors (Cum Laude) even if they do not receive Honors in History of Art and Architecture.

Department Timeline of Thesis Preparation

A schedule of departmental dates and deadlines relative to the thesis will be available by the beginning of each Fall Term. The thesis writer and faculty thesis adviser should agree on a working schedule which will adequately conform to these deadlines.

Concentrators undertaking a thesis are required to enroll in HAA 99A (fall) and B (spring) for course credit. Students in the architecture track pursuing a design thesis should enroll in HAA 99r (fall) and 99B (spring). Joint concentrators will enroll in the 99 course of their primary concentration.

Overseen by the Senior Thesis Adviser, HAA 99A – “The Senior Thesis Seminar” – will meet several times during the fall semester for two-hour sessions devoted to facilitating the preparation and writing of a thesis. These sessions will cover such topics as compiling a bibliography, using archives, the use of key technology and software, and constructing and presenting an effective argument. All concentrators pursuing a written thesis project are required to enroll in this seminar. Joint concentrators enrolled in another department’s thesis seminar, and HAA design thesis students enrolled in HAA 99r, are welcome and encouraged to attend some or all sessions of 99A in addition to their primary thesis preparation course.

Late in the fall semester, each concentrator pursuing a thesis will deliver a twenty-minute presentation on the thesis topic, illustrated with digitally projected images, at the Senior Thesis Presentations. All departmental faculty and students will be invited to these presentations. By the end of winter break, each student will submit a complete first draft of the thesis, complete with illustrations.

Overview of Key Dates for Thesis Preparation

These dates apply to all HAA students wishing to pursue an honors thesis. For further criteria specific to students preparing a design thesis in the Architecture Track, see Academic Requirements: Design Thesis in the Architecture Track

Spring Semester, Junior Year

- February: Initial Meeting. Junior concentrators are invited to meet with the Senior Thesis Adviser for an introduction to the senior thesis writing process.
- Early April: Short Proposals Due. Students submit a basic proposal outlining preliminary ideas, along with a list of potential faculty advisers. Faculty advisers are assigned to thesis projects in late April or early May.
- Late April: Applications due for Pulitzer and Abramson Travel Grants. See Undergraduate Prizes, Grants and Opportunities for details on grants and applications. Information on how to apply will be provided by the Undergraduate Program Coordinator. Grant recipients will be notified by email.

Fall Semester, Senior Year
• During the semester, students enroll in HAA 99A or 92r and follow course deadlines (Please consult the HAA 99A and 92r Canvas sites for additional details).
• Students meet regularly with their faculty advisers.
• Early December: Senior Thesis Presentations. All students pursuing a thesis will give a twenty-minute presentation to department students and faculty followed by discussion.

Spring Semester, Senior Year

• Late January: First Draft. Before the spring semester begins, students submit a full draft of the thesis, with illustrations, to the faculty adviser for comments.
• Early March: Second Draft. Students submit the near-final draft to the faculty adviser for a final review before formal submission to the Department.
• Friday before Spring Break: Final Submission Deadline. Late submissions will not be accepted. On the afternoon of submission, all students are invited to attend the Thesis Reception.
• Late March: Gallery-Style public reception and presentation of Design Thesis projects. All architecture track students that have prepared a design thesis will present their work informally at this event. All HAA thesis writers, as well as faculty and graduate students, are encouraged to attend.
• April: Thesis Review and Honors Recommendation. Senior Honors Theses are read and critiqued by Members of the Faculty in HAA (and the GSD and the Harvard Art Museums, where relevant) at the request of the Senior Thesis Adviser. Department Faculty meet to vote on final honors recommendations, after which thesis writers will receive an email from the Senior Thesis Adviser notifying them of their thesis grade and recommendation for honors. Students should speak with their Allston Burr Senior Tutor for the anticipated final honors decision of the College.
• Mid-April: Senior Thesis Poster. All senior thesis writers are expected to prepare a digital file for a 24 x 36" poster summarizing the thesis to be exhibited in the HAA Department for the following academic year. A suggested template will be provided and a workshop will be held in late March for assistance with poster preparation. The printing and associated costs are taken care of by the Department.

Advising

Senior Thesis Adviser

The process of taking honors and producing the thesis in the Department is overseen for all concentrators by the Senior Thesis Adviser, Professor Felipe Pereda. The Senior Thesis Adviser leads the Fall Term thesis-writing seminar (HAA 99A) and directs the meetings for departmental approval once theses have been submitted.

Faculty Thesis Adviser

When submitting their initial proposal in the spring of the junior year, students should include a list of three possible faculty advisers. The Department will then match students with advisers according to student preference and faculty availability. Faculty thesis advisers should generally be full faculty members of the History of Art and Architecture Department, although Harvard museum curators with relevant expertise may also serve as advisers at the discretion of the Senior Thesis Adviser. Students in the architecture track pursuing a design thesis must also secure a second adviser from the faculty of the Graduate School of Design. Joint concentrators will generally select one faculty adviser from each department.

The adviser ought to serve as a critic of synthesized ideas and writings/designs, rather than as a director of the project. The adviser should be chosen with consideration more to compatibility in overseeing the process of the work than to being an expert in the field. If you have trouble identifying an appropriate adviser, please consult with the Senior Thesis Adviser or Undergraduate Program Coordinator before the spring deadline for the Thesis Proposal.

Graduate students in the Department of History of Art and Architecture do not advise Senior Theses.

Program Director, Harvard Undergraduate Architecture Studies Track

Megan Panzano, Program Director of the Harvard Undergraduate Architecture Studies Track, oversees the execution of the two studio courses “HAA 96A – Architecture Studio I: Transformations” and “HAA 96B – Architecture Studio II: Connections”, as well as the senior design-thesis seminar “HAA 92R – Design Speculations.” She is available to consult for general advice on the design-thesis process and in finding a suitable advisor from the GSD. She coordinates the assignment of readers to senior design-thesis projects in consultation with the Senior Thesis Adviser and Undergraduate Program Coordinator.

Undergraduate Program Coordinator

The Undergraduate Program Coordinator, Marcus Mayo, is available to consult at any point regarding general questions about the senior thesis writing process. In conjunction with the Senior Thesis Adviser, they will coordinate the initial meeting of concentrators interested in writing a thesis in the spring term of their junior year. The Undergraduate Program Coordinator collects and distributes thesis proposals, summer funding proposals, advisor assignments, as well as completed theses, grades and reader comments. They hold examples of the written requirements (thesis proposal and prospectus) and of the Pulitzer and Abramson Grant applications which students might wish to consult as paradigms.

Academic Requirements – Written Thesis

The writing and evaluation of the thesis is a year-long process, during which the writer enrolls in a senior thesis preparation seminar (HAA 99A) and meets at scheduled intervals with their faculty adviser to formulate, develop, and ultimately refine their thesis work.
The Department encourages seniors to think broadly and explore a problem of interest. The thesis topic does not necessarily have to be within the writer's declared major field, except when required for a joint concentration, in which case, the topic must address an issue shared by both concentrations. The thesis should demonstrate an ability to pose a meaningful question, present a well-reasoned and structured argument, and marshal appropriate evidence. The student should apply a clear methodology and be aware of the assumptions behind the argument, the possible deficiencies of the sources and data used, and the implications of the conclusions. The various parts of the thesis should cohere in an integrated argument; the thesis should not be a series of loosely connected short essays. A primary expectation of the thesis is that it is a work of independent scholarship, directed and crafted by the student, with the thesis adviser serving in a capacity of "indirect overseeing of the project."

There is no set pattern for an acceptable thesis. The writer should demonstrate familiarity with scholarly methods in the use of sources, but this should not be the sole criterion for evaluation. Of equal if not greater importance is the development of the central argument and the significance of the interpretation. A thesis may be research on a little-studied problem or a perceptive reassessment of a familiar question. A well-pondered and well-presented interpretive essay may be as good a thesis as a miniature doctoral dissertation.

Skill in exposition is a primary objective, and pristine editing is expected. The Department encourages writers to keep to a short page count, so as to craft a clear, concise paper, and further edit it to an exemplary presentation. In general, a History of Art and Architecture thesis will have a text ranging from 20,000 to 25,000 words. Students are encouraged to explore the resources available to writing consultants at the Harvard College Writing Center.

The writer must indicate the source of material drawn from others' work, whether quoted, paraphrased, or summarized. Students who, for whatever reason, submit work either not their own or without clear attribution to its sources will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including requirement to withdraw from the College.

Academic Requirements: Design Thesis in the Architecture Track

The HAA Architecture Track asks students to select an Area of Emphasis for fulfillment of their degree -- either Design Studies or History and Theory. Students wishing to pursue an honors thesis in the History and Theory Area of Emphasis will usually complete a written senior thesis paper and presentation on the same model as the thesis for general concentrators (see Academic Requirements: Written Thesis).

Students in the Design Studies Area of Emphasis who wish to pursue a thesis project may choose either a traditional thesis or a design thesis project. Design theses are creative thesis projects featuring a combination of written analysis and visual and physical design materials, as described below.

Course Requirements for Honors Consideration with a Design Thesis

Senior Year – Fall Term

1. HAA 92r Design Speculations Seminar – required
   a. Course prerequisite: Completion of either HAA 96A ("Transformations") or HAA 96B ("Connections") studios.
   b. This course requires that students secure a pair of faculty advisers – one from Harvard History of Art and Architecture (HAA) Faculty and one from the Harvard GSD to support their research work within the course; course faculty advisers then serve as the faculty thesis advisers for the design thesis.
   c. Megan Panzano, GSD Architecture Studies Director, and Jennifer Roberts, HAA DUS, can both help make faculty adviser connections for students pursuing this path.

2. (optional) HAA 99A Senior Thesis Tutorial – attendance in this seminar is encouraged but not required in parallel with HAA 92r.

3. Presentation of design work to HAA and select GSD Faculty as part of HAA Thesis Colloquium in December) – required

Senior Year – Spring Term

1. Throughout the semester: Advising meetings with individual faculty advisers to guide production and iterative refinement of design work (architectural analytical drawings and/or physical models), and edits to digital presentation made in fall term HAA Thesis Thesis Presentations.

2. March 06, 2023: Submission of final senior thesis design project including digital images and written text as a single PDF file (see "Submission Requirements for Honors Consideration").

3. March 31, 2023: Participation in a gallery-style final presentation with faculty and peers after submission of thesis. The design presentations for the gallery-style event should include an updated digital presentation comprised of the project title, author’s name, the most current versions of all elements listed below in the Final Project Requirements (with the exception of the Written Manifesto which should be consolidated to a single slide containing 3-4 sentences of a thesis statement capturing the topic of study, a position on this topic, your claim about design agency to address this topic, and specifically, what design elements you’ve explored in your thesis in this address). Students may elect to also print or plot selected original design drawings they produced (analytical or projective) from their digital presentation to pin up in the space. Likewise, students are encouraged to bring any sketch and/or final models they have created to display as well.

4. April 10, 2023: Preparation of a digital file for a 24 x 36” poster summarizing the thesis to be exhibited in the HAA department for the academic year to follow. A suggested template will be provided and a workshop will be held on March 28 (2023) for assistance with poster preparation.

Submission Requirements for the Design Thesis Project (due March 06, 2023)

A single multi-page PDF file labeled with student’s full last name and first initial should be submitted. It should contain the following elements and should incorporate thesis research and design work from both fall and spring terms.

1. Visual Bibliography (visual project references with annotated description)
   a. Assemble a visual bibliography of references for your research project. The references included should be sorted into categories of your own authoring in relation to the research. Each reference should be appropriately cited using the Chicago Manual of Style, and each reference should also include an affiliated image. The bibliography should include a brief (approx. 200-word) annotation, describing the rationale behind the sorted categories.

2. Written Manifesto (text describing specific research focus and the role of design in its address)
   a. A written design manifesto of approximately 2,000 words that concisely articulates the issues, problems, and questions embedded in and engaged by your research project. The manifesto should address:
      b. Discourse: the role and significance of architecture relative to the project topic of interest, and;
c. Context: the relationship of the project topic to broader surroundings which include but are not limited to the discipline of architecture, cultural contexts, technical developments, and/or typologies.

d. The final 2,000-word statement should reflect deeply upon the character of the design process for the project, and discuss how the design process reinforced, inflected, or complicated the initial research questions. For most students, this final 2,000-word statement will be an elaboration upon the presentation text prepared for the fall senior thesis colloquium. The final text should capture and discuss the design elements that were further explored in the spring term as means to address initial research questions (i.e. include written descriptions of the drawings and/or physical models produced in relation to the thesis topic).

3. Visual Method(s) Diagram (description of design methodology for research)

a. A visual drawing or info-graphic that describes the process of design research undertaken for your topic. This should include the initial criteria developed for evaluating the project, the steps taken in examining the topic, the points in the process where it became necessary to stop and assess outputs and findings, and final adjustments to the methodology as the project neared completion.

4. High resolution drawings, animations, and/or diagrams and photographs of physical models (if applicable) that were produced through research. These should be assembled in single-page layouts of slides to follow preceding elements listed here.

Grading of the Senior Thesis

Theses are read and critiqued by faculty members applying a higher standard than expected for work written in courses or tutorials. Faculty must make use of the full range of grades, and students should consider that any honors grade is a distinction of merit. If you have any questions, please contact the Senior Thesis Adviser, the Director of Undergraduate Studies, or the Undergraduate Program Coordinator.

SUMMA CUM LAUDE: A summa thesis is a work of "highest honor." It is a contribution to knowledge, though it need not be an important contribution. It reveals a promise of high intellectual attainments both in selection of problems and facts for consideration and in the manner in which conclusions are drawn from these facts. A summa thesis includes, potentially at least, the makings of a publishable article. The writer's use of sources and data is judicious. The thesis is well written and proofread. The arguments are concise and logically organized, and the allocation of space appropriate. A summa is not equivalent to just any A, but the sort given by instructors who reserve them for exceptional merit. A summa minus is a near miss at a summa and is also equivalent to an A of unusual quality.

MAGNA CUM LAUDE: A magna level thesis is a work worthy of "great honor." It clearly demonstrates the capacity for a high level of achievement, is carried through carefully, and represents substantial industry. A magna plus thesis achieves a similar level of quality to a summa in some respects, though it falls short in others; it is equivalent to the usual type of A. A magna thesis is equivalent to an A-. For a magna minus, the results achieved may not be quite a successful one due to an unhappy choice of topic or approach; it is also equivalent to an A-

CUM LAUDE: As is appropriate for a grade "with honors," a cum level thesis shows serious thought and effort in its general approach, if not in every detail. A cum plus is equivalent to a B+, a cum to a B, and a cum minus to a B-. The cum does not merely represent the satisfactory completion of a task. It is, however, to be differentiated from the magna in the difficulty of the subject handled, the substantial nature of the project, and the success with which the subject is digested. Recall that, as students putting extraordinary effort into a thesis most frequently receive a magna, theses of a solid but not exceptional quality deserve a grade in the cum range. When expressed in numerical equivalents, the interval between a magna minus and a cum minus is double that between the other intervals on the grading scale.

NO DISTINCTION: Not all theses automatically deserve honors. Nevertheless, a grade of no distinction (C, D, or E) should be reserved only for those circumstances when the thesis is hastily constructed, a mere summary of existing material, or is poorly thought through. The high standards which are applied in critique of theses must clearly be violated for a thesis to merit a grade of no distinction.

Thesis Readers

Each thesis will have two readers chosen by the Department, ideally, but not exclusively, one from within the student's area of interest, and the thesis adviser. All readers will be asked to submit written comments and grades, which will be factored equally to produce the final grade of the thesis. Individual grades are not released. When grades and comments are distributed, the readers no longer remain anonymous. There exists a procedure by which a writer may request, via the Senior Thesis Adviser, to speak with a reader provided that they are willing to discuss the work in further detail or expound on the written critique.

For joint concentrators, the department will defer the reading process to their primary concentration. Students should reach out to their adviser in their primary concentration for further information.

Grade Report and Honors Recommendation

At the end of each term, Fall and Spring, the student's progress in the Senior Tutorial (HAA 99) will be graded SAT or UNSAT. At the end of the Department's Honors Review process, the Senior Thesis Adviser calculates a recommendation for Honors based on the factored grades of the thesis and the student's grades in concentration coursework. This recommendation is presented to the Faculty at their meeting in April for review. A faculty vote is taken and this decision is passed as an honors recommendation to the Registrar at the College. For joint concentrators, the faculty will make recommendations to a student's primary concentration but will defer the final grading process to them. The decision of Final Honors to be granted on the degree is made by the Registrar based on departmental recommendation and the student's College-GPA. Students should consult with their Allston Burr Senior Tutor to determine what final honors might be anticipated at Commencement.

The needs of the Department for fair deliberation dictate that there may be no report of decisions regarding the thesis until after the Faculty has considered and voted upon each recommendation for honors. After honors recommendations have been voted by the Faculty, students will be notified of the Department's recommendation to the College and will receive an ungraded copy of each evaluation of their thesis. The comments in these evaluations should provide the student with a clear explanation of the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, bearing in mind the difficulties of the field and the type of thesis submitted, and evaluating what was accomplished in terms of what was undertaken, given the student's limitation of time and experience.

Discontinuance of a Thesis

The process of writing the thesis is a serious commitment of time and energy for both the writer and the adviser. In some cases, however, it might be agreed that the thesis should be discontinued at mid-year. The Senior Tutorial year may be divided with credit through a procedure in which the student must submit a written paper presenting the project and research to that point.
Examples of Past Theses

Senior Honors Theses which are written by students who graduate Summa or Magna are deposited in the University Archives in Pusey Library. Copies of theses which are awarded the Hoopes Prize are held in Lamont Library. Students are urged to consult past theses as much can be gained in exploring precedent or seeking inspiration.