Spring Thesis Prep  
MIT DUSP 11.THG  
Spring 2019 | Tuesdays 9-11am  
Class location: 9-217

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Course website: http://stellar.mit.edu/S/course/11/sp19/11.THG/  
* FAQs, link to DUSP handbook thesis guide, and a list of funding resources are on Stellar

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The Spring Thesis Prep course is an introduction to “doing” research for the MCP thesis. By the end of the course, each participant will have drafted a thesis proposal. A good proposal will:
1) identify the main questions that guide your research; 2) articulate an argument for why your topic is significant; and 3) propose how (by what methods) you will conduct your study. This course provides a process to help you identify or refine your research questions and design. You do not need a fully developed thesis topic to take the course but you should have a few general areas of interest and expect to develop a thesis proposal by the end of the semester. If you have a clear sense of your research topic now—excellent—this course will help you develop your ideas and situate your research in a particular sub-field in urban studies and planning. The Spring 11.THG course is ideal preparation for a student who wants to take advantage of the summer months to begin research. However, it is not a methods course; students should plan to enroll in separate courses for research methodology training.

This is a course that emphasizes learning while doing. It will model thesis research development through our collective engagement with a local site (as proxy for your own research site). It will also ask you to experiment with research methods and draft components of a thesis proposal before you might feel fully ready. The course emphasizes experiential learning of this type because research design and research are not linear processes; mistakes and trials are valuable opportunities for reflection and creativity. Together we will be able to discuss some of the challenges to designing and conducting research as you encounter them. While the course is ultimately oriented to drafting a thesis proposal, you are likely to learn equally if not more from individual assignments. As a result, the course asks for your active participation in every session.

Course objectives:
1. Demystify the MCP thesis.
2. Provide a general process to embolden student ownership of their thesis research development.
3. Introduce qualitative methods to help students refine their research questions and/or critical contributions to the field of urban studies and planning.
4. Engage students in a comparative analysis of how they each approach their research.
5. Identify a primary advisor and submit a thesis proposal.
Grading:
This is a required core course that is graded either Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. You will receive a “J” or Satisfactory grade in this course if you participate in every class discussion, attempt all iterative assignments, and draft a thesis proposal. Note that while the course is ultimately oriented to completing that thesis proposal, students will also be evaluated by their active participation in discussions and assignments.

Late assignments will not be accepted. Excused absences will be considered with advance notice, doctors’ notes, or approval from ODGE (Office of the Dean for Graduate Education).

Assignment Submissions:
Details for each assignment are included in the below Session Descriptions. Assignments are typically due by 3pm the day before class. Exceptions are noted in the Session Descriptions. Submit all assignments to the course website with the following filename format:
YYMMDD_ExerciseNumber_LASTNAME (e.g. 190423_Ex08_SMITH)

Readings:
PDFs of required readings are available on the course website. Optional readings can be found via MIT Library journal databases or physical holdings. Books marked by an asterisk * can be found in the course reserve at the Rotch Library info desk.

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SESSIONS, READINGS & ASSIGNMENTS

Feb 05: Course Introduction

Our first meeting will introduce the logic of the course’s progression, including the schedule of sessions and assignments. Come to class having read the below excerpts and prepare a couple of keywords that describe your proposed topic of research (e.g. “I am thinking about researching refugee policies in Beirut”).

Required Reading:

Optional:

Feb 12: Developing a Research Question

Developing a question to guide your research is one of the first and most difficult things that you’ll do in the research process. Developing a research question involves: 1) identifying and focusing your topic; 2) developing narrow and critical questions about that topic; and 3a) determining how your topic might be significant to a field (in this case: urban studies and planning); or 3b) how your training/ knowledge of a field (e.g. urban studies) might make your research topic relevant to a different audience (e.g. public health). This is not a linear endeavor—you will continue to refine your questions in relation to what you discover during your research.

**Exercise 01: Develop a Research Question Outline** (due by 3pm on Monday Feb 11)

After reading Chapters 3 and 4 in *The Craft of Research*, answer the following questions for at least one and up to three of your research ideas. Develop economical answers: try to be both concise and illustrative. If you do not know how to answer one of the below questions, use that as a helpful indicator of where you need to do more preliminary research. Notate the latter and try to identify where and how you might find out more.

1. **TOPIC:** What is your research topic?
   
   *I am studying ___________

2. **QUESTION:** Why are you studying this topic?
   
   …because *I want to find out what/why/how ___________

3. **SIGNIFICANCE:** Why would this topic be of interest to your reader?

   …in order to help my reader understand ___________

4. **FIELD RELEVANCE:** a) How will your research contribute to knowledge in urban studies and planning; OR b) How will your research, as influenced by urban studies training/methods/knowledge, contribute to another field?

Required Reading:
* Booth, Colomb, & Williams, “Chapter 3: From Topics to Questions” and “Chapter 4: From
**Feb 19: Preliminary Research: Mapping**

This session has two objectives. It asks you to critically consider how you are defining the spatial boundaries of your research. We’ll do this primarily through the below exercise, which draws on your previous semester’s training in geospatial analysis to interpret your research question in/through Kendall Square. We will then engage in a comparative analysis of our individual research approaches in class discussion. The latter will have the benefit of our collective focus on the same site (though how we each define that site and frame our research will vary).

**Exercise 02: Mapping Kendall Square** (due by 3pm on Monday Feb 18)

Note: if you have sufficient spatial data for your own research site, you may use that information for this exercise. The choice is entirely up to you, but you may find the Kendall Square “translation” of your project and related class comparisons useful nonetheless.

This exercise first asks you to interpret your existing research question in a proposed study of Kendall Square. For example, say you were interested in analyzing planning for sea level rise in Staten Island, or the rapid urbanization of Luanda as an example of a “world-class” city and uneven development. How might you frame these research interests for Kendall Square instead? The idea here is not to suggest that every place is the same. Rather, we’re undertaking this translation because we have reliable spatial data for the exercise and to limit variables related to our later research comparison. Doing so will have the added benefit of drawing out and allowing you to identify the specific reasons for why you chose your original research site.

The second task of this exercise is to identify an element of your research that you would need to map in order to communicate the problematic around which your project is centered. If you were interested in sea level rise, that might be a map of projected flooding in 2050; if you were interested in uneven urban development, your map might be comparative or show changes over time in household incomes and property values. In both cases, you need to set the boundaries and scale of your study. Where is Kendall Square? At what scale does your study become legible? Do you need to develop comparisons with other places or representations of historical change?

What to do: develop two maps to communicate the central problematic of your research (as interpreted through Kendall Square). Use these maps as means to critically engage the spatial boundaries, scales, temporal conditions, and/or place comparisons that are foundational to your study. I’d rather you produce rough drafts of your maps so that you can focus your energies on the above conceptual questions. Upload a PDF that includes your two maps along with a short paragraph that identifies your research question, how your maps communicate the central
problematic of your study, and how the spatial boundaries/ comparisons/ scales of your maps impact your study.

Utilize resources such as Social Explorer or ArcGIS, government maps and spatial data:

- MIT’s link to Social Explorer: //libraries.mit.edu/get/explorer
- DUSP spatial data library link: https://libguides.mit.edu/gis/GISdata
- https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/factsandmaps/mappingtools
- https://massgis.maps.arcgis.com/home/index.html

**Required Reading:**

**Optional:**

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Generally speaking, historical research asks why and how certain phenomena change over time; urban and environmental histories further specify those inquiries in place and relationships between people and to place. In this session, we will continue our translation work by asking you to 1) consider the historical dimensions of your research; and 2) continue to interpret that project through Kendall Square. The session will include a visit to the library for first-hand experience with primary source materials available in the archives and training in finding secondary sources.

*Exercise 03: Historicizing Kendall Square (Part 1 due 3pm Mon Feb 25; Part 2 due Fri Mar 01)*

The aim of this exercise is to distinguish between primary and secondary sources and to practice “doing” historical research. You do not need to incorporate a historical dimension in your MCP thesis—but at the very least, this exercise will help you to differentiate between different types of evidence and contextualization for the arguments that you will make.

**PART 1: Before class,** rephrase your research question to focus on historical changes, circumstances, or patterns. Complete the required readings (especially Cronon’s primer and Farge) and try your hand at identifying a primary and secondary source that would be helpful to your historical research. Upload your question and primary and secondary source citations (name the file: 190226_Ex03-Part01_LASTNAME).

**PART 2: During class,** identify two primary sources that might provide evidence for or help you approximate an answer to your research question. Primary sources of information provide first-hand accounts of the events, practices, places, or conditions that you are researching. They can be historical or contemporary, but in either case they have the closest relationships in time and place to the subject that you are studying. Some examples of primary sources include:
interviews with Boston residents last week, photographs of Cambridge from the 19th century, creative works, financial records, diaries, letters, newspaper articles, and oral histories (to name a few). Note that spatial data can be considered a primary source—the key here is that whether you collect it or someone else does, that it be available to you in some pre-analysis form. Please do not consider primary sources as unassailable truths by default. Like all sources, they must be contextualized, verified, and taken to be representative of some (but not a full) window on experience. Also, identify two secondary sources that you think would be relevant to both versions of your research project (Kendall Square and original research site). Ideally these would be two essay-length sources: one article and one chapter from a book. A secondary source addresses the themes related to your research subject or interprets or summarizes primary source material. Examples include the work of historians, journalists, social scientists, etc.—who draw from primary sources to make claims of significance. Choose secondary sources that would be helpful in unpacking key themes related to your general research topic.

Submit after class: document the above in a one page reflection to: 1) identify your historical research question; 2) describe what primary sources you chose and why; and 3) summarize the contribution your secondary sources make to your topic and analyze the perspectives from which the authors write. This write up is due on Friday after class (title your document: 190226_Ex03-Part02_LASTNAME).

Required Reading:
William Cronon, “Learning to Do Historical Research”—an online primer:
https://www.williamcronon.net/researching/
Read two essay-length secondary sources relevant to your research.

Optional:

Mar 05: Refining and Situating Your Topic

The DUSP Handbook tells us that the MCP thesis “is an independent piece of analytic work, organized around a set of research questions. A broad range of studies can qualify as a thesis…but each] must have an analytical dimension that addresses issues of implementation, design, public policy or planning practice.” This session will focus on how your thesis research is situated within the broad field of urban studies and planning and/or contributes methods or knowledge gained from urban studies to other fields. We will spend our time on peer reviews of your one-page thesis memos.

Exercise 04: One-Page Thesis Memo (due by 3pm on Monday Mar 04)
The purpose of the memo is to provide an overview of what you are researching and why it is important or significant. These are helpful for both clarifying your ideas at an early stage and introducing your research interests to potential advisors and others who can provide feedback.
The memo can take any form you wish, but suggest that you expand Exercise 01 and include the following elements:

1. A “hook”—open with a few sentences that generate interest; that provide brief and compelling context for your research topic.
2. Identify (revise previous) and elaborate on the questions that are guiding your research.
3. Define the key analytical concepts that you use in your own words, providing citations to others’ work as necessary.
4. Elaborate on the context—the site, historical period, phenomena, experiment, etc.—that animates your research project.
5. Tell your reader why and how your research topic is “significant”. This should be elaborated both in terms of what you hope to achieve through your research (e.g. to understand X and Y; to address what is lacking in previous studies or literature, etc.) and how your thesis research is situated within the broad field of urban studies and planning and/or contributes methods or knowledge gained from urban studies to other fields.
6. If you know how you will conduct your study, include a short summary and justification for why those methods are pertinent.
7. End with a few sentences that circle back to your hook and reiterate what you are researching and why.

**Required Reading:**  
Literature related to your research topic. Try to identify authors who are asking similar questions, or provide background on the topic that you are interested in, or subject areas to which your research might contribute.

Start identifying and scheduling office hour visits with faculty members who might be able to advise your research. The thesis memo can help to focus your conversations and identify questions to ask.

**Optional:**


Recently completed DUSP MCP thesis proposals [a few examples on the course website]

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**Mar 12:** Developing a Literature Review

A literature review is an approach to reading and documenting previous research that is relevant to your topic of study. It is an opportunity to extend your thinking about your topic into a wider context. It is also a means to critically consider how your research might enter into a dialog with what precedes it. Ultimately, when written into your thesis, a literature review will help provide the background and justification for your project. We’ll spend our time in break-out groups to provide feedback on your literature review outlines as they pertain to your topic and proposed field significance.

**Exercise 05:** Literature Review Outline (due by 3pm Monday Mar 11)  
Identify at least three topics that provide background for your research topic—choose ones that chart major developments/debates in related research, define key concepts or theories, and/or
present challenges to your proposed study. Readings that inform the historical or geographical context of your study can also be included, but note that in a literature review, you should treat these sources not as neutral background but as precedent studies organized by particular arguments, milieux, or theoretical frameworks (which you should evaluate). Next, provide a brief description of those topics and their relationship to your research. Within each category, identify the authors, books, and articles that represent key contributions. You likely have encountered some of these sources previously; start to summarize how those works relate to your research. You are not expected to complete a full literature review for this assignment, but should expect to make substantial progress in identifying significant subject areas and authors.

Required Reading:
Literature related to your research topic. Make a concerted effort to identify the pressing questions and debates animating your chosen field or sub-field.

Optional:

Look for examples of Literature Reviews in recent DUSP Theses
https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/7704

Mar 19: Field Research and “Extracting” Data
Discussion for this session will primarily be focused on the required readings to elaborate on what counts as field research and reflect on how you view the data you collect from “the field”.

Exercise 06: Online COUHES Exam (due by Friday March 22)
Researchers that will be observing, speaking with, or conducting experiments with human subjects (and analyzing identifiable data) are required to receive training in responsible research and ethics. To these ends, take the online course and exam available via MIT’s COUHES (Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects) website: https://couhes.mit.edu/training-research-involving-human-subjects. This training is required of all participants in this course. Plan ahead: the training takes several hours to complete. Upload your certificate of completion to the online 11.THG assignments folder to receive credit for this assignment.

- Note that you do not need to complete the online CITI course until the Friday after class.
- Also, if you will be interviewing or observing individuals for research or using a data set that includes identifiable information about individuals, you will need to subject your research to IRB (Institutional Review Board) review before you begin research. Now is a good time to start to plan when and what you will submit (information is available on the COUHES website).

Required Readings:

Optional:

**Mar 26:** NO CLASS (Spring Break)

Highly recommend that you use this time to work on your thesis proposal drafts, due in 6 weeks.
Apr 02: Talking with People, Part 1

This session will provide an introduction to interviewing and ethnography. Both of these methods—which involve diverse means of observing, interacting, and speaking with people—may be helpful if you are interested in exploring how individuals understand, organize, and live/work in their worlds (or a specific phenomenon that you’re studying). The goal will be to gain some familiarity with the methods to try them out in class next week. Your MCP Thesis need not include these methods but they may be helpful as part of your general research design toolkit.

No assignment due

Required Reading:

Optional (highly recommended, given Lynch’s legacy at DUSP):

Apr 09: Talking with People, Part 2

We will spend the session practicing “doing” interviews and participant observation in Kendall Square (look for the class announcement as to where we’ll meet). Be sure to complete the pre-interview preparation and required readings before class.

Exercise 07: Interviewing and Participant Observation in/about Kendall Square
(exercise to be done in class and fieldnotes to be uploaded by the end of the day on Apr 09)
If you are not sure how to tailor your particular topic to this type of qualitative research, feel free to use the example below—but you may find that you’ll get the most out of Exercise 07 by attempting it within the framework of your general research subject.

Pre-exercise preparation (to do before class): Return to the Kendall Square version of your research topic. First, identify how speaking to people about their opinions, experiences, and/or perceptions might inform that topic. For example, say you were not planning to use interviews or participant observation in your research design on the efficacy of regional rail transportation in the greater Boston area. Nonetheless, what might your research gain from speaking with people? To answer this question, consider different types of people who might be accessible to you in and around Kendall Square (e.g. MBTA workers, commuters, MIT faculty, employees who bike to work and choose not to take the T, etc.) and what types of insights you might gain by speaking with them. Next, plan your interview approach. Provide each person with a short introduction as to who you are and the purpose of your questions. Ask for their consent to be interviewed (note that you will not use their names). Draft 1-2 questions that you can ask individuals in plain language and that would be pertinent to your research questions. Print or write out the above as an interview script and bring it to class.

In-class exercise: During class, we will spend the full two hours interviewing individuals and engaging in participant observation. Bring your interview script and a sketch book/paper to take
fieldnotes. To begin, identify one group of people whose insights you’d be interested in understanding (e.g. only commuters, MBTA employees, or planners, etc.). Speak to at least three people that you randomly select from that group of people. Take notes during and after each interview about respondents’ answers, body language, and your interactions with them. Next, choose an aspect of your research topic for which participant observation may provide insights. For example, if you are interested in commuters’ experiences with mass transit, ride the T, spend some time in a station, or find a local shop that commuters tend to stop into on their way into/out of the station. Take notes and sketch—but hold back on photography for now. Document, for example: What do you see? How does it feel to ride the train? How are stations organized? What behaviors do you observe that seem expected and unexpected? Spend the remainder of class time participating in the activity that you are observing and writing up or sketching your reflections on what you see/ feel/ hear/ experience.

After the exercise: Return to your interview and field notes, add any further reflections about the exercise, your observations, and conversations, etc. Upload scans of your fieldnotes to the course website by the end of the day.

Required Reading:

Optional:

Apr 16: NO CLASS (Student Holiday)
**Apr 23: Organizing and Analyzing Your Data**

Now that you have “done” field research or collected other qualitative data, how will you begin to organize and analyze it? This session provides an introduction to grounded theory concept development, coding, and discourse analysis. Oftentimes, these types of analyses help researchers make sense of their primary sources to build theories of generalizability and significance.

*Exercise 08: Coding Your Data* (to be completed in class and uploaded to the course website)

Exercise instructions to be distributed in class.

**Required Reading:**

**Optional:**

**Apr 30: Sampling and Identifying Case Studies**

In this session we will be considering “representativeness” in both your data samples and choice of case studies. The goal will be to develop critical reflections on why you chose your research design—what do you hope your data will say?

*No assignment due*

Complete readings before class. Continue to draft your thesis proposals, due in two weeks.

**Required Reading:**

**Optional:**

**May 07: Making Claims, Telling Stories**

The primary objectives of all research projects are to develop arguments and claims from credible and reliable evidence. What constitutes a “good” argument and what are some approaches to telling “good” stories?

*No assignment due*

Continue to make progress on your thesis proposals (due next week with your lightning talk).

**Required Reading:**


Optional:


Malcom Gladwell interview, “On Writing Well,” online: https://drt.fm/malcolm-gladwell

**May 14: Thesis Proposal Roundtable**

We will structure our concluding session with lightning talks and a roundtable discussion on your thesis research proposals and design. You should have a completed a full thesis proposal draft by today.

**Final Assignments:**

**Lightning Talk on Your Research:**

Come to class prepared with a 3 minute summary of your thesis topic, questions, and contributions. Experiment with a short “hook” or anecdote to animate your project. Focus your talk on one image that is representative of your thesis research. Upload that image as a JPG or PPT slide to the course website by 3pm on Monday May 13 (filename: 190514_ThesisImage_LASTNAME).

**Thesis Proposal Submission:**

DUSP requires your thesis proposals to be signed by your advisor and submitted to the department by last day of classes (May 16). Upload a copy with a coversheet signed by your thesis advisor to the course website by the end of the day (filename: 190515_ThesisProposal_LASTNAME).