Module Specification

Design Thesis

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Part 1: Information

Module title: Design Thesis

Module code: UBLL4A-60-M

Level: Level 7

For implementation from: 2026-27

UWE credit rating: 60

ECTS credit rating: 30

College: College of Arts, Technology and Environment

School: CATE School of Architecture and Environment

Partner institutions: None

Field: Architecture and the Built Environment

Module type: Module

Pre-requisites: Exploratory Design Studio 2025-26, Pathway Studio 2025-26, Practice Studio 2026-27

Excluded combinations: None

Co-requisites: None

Continuing professional development: No

Professional, statutory or regulatory body requirements: None

Part 2: Description

Overview: The Design Thesis is the culminating module of the MArch program, guiding students through a complete design process that begins with rigorous research and culminates in a detailed architectural proposal. The module allows students to explore a unique research question and engage in site and context analysis to establish a well-defined design proposition.

Students transition from research to design application developing detailed proposals that integrate technical, spatial, social, environmental, and inclusive considerations. They produce the designs that consider the relationship between people and built environment, between buildings and their context, and the need to relate buildings and the spaces between them to human needs, inclusivity, user experience and scale. In their Professional Thesis Phase, students demonstrate their knowledge of legislation, building regulations (including fire safety), and equality/inclusivity frameworks, embedding these within their final design proposals. Their portfolio work demonstrates multi-modal communication skills, ensuring students can present their research and design outcomes clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences.

At least two general subject options, structured as ‘design units’ will be offered in each academic year. These may vary from year to year and will reflect current significant issues in architectural and/or urban design, faculty research activity and specialisms within the school. Within the agenda there will be a degree of freedom for each student to pursue a thesis of his or her own choosing that develops an individual interest. The module therefore acts as a framework to support the development of each student as an architectural designer exploring a specialism.

The module is closely integrated with the Ecological and Regenerative Approaches module which provides technical support and involves the preparation of a technical report on their proposals environmental performance, which can also inform the design decisions they make in the Studio.

The Design Thesis module reflects RIBA’s requirements for design skills (E5) and health and safety (E1). Students develop comprehensive proposals that incorporate principles of safety, social impact, and climate resilience, producing innovative and responsible architectural solutions.

Pre-requisite: Student must have completed UBLL47-30-3 Exploratory Design Studio AND EITHER UBLL4L-30-M Practice Studio OR UBLL46-30-3 Pathway Studio before starting this module.

Features: Integrated Design Research: The thesis project begins with elements design research, where students define a research question or thesis and use techniques of research, enquiry and experimentation to develop effective solutions to architectural problems and to broaden their knowledge base.

Comprehensive Design Proposal: Students apply their research findings to develop a detailed architectural proposal, addressing spatial, technical, and contextual requirements at various scales.

Professional Substantiation: Students may focus on a specialisation that aligns with their career aspirations or explore new thematic areas within architecture, creating a thesis that reflects their unique trajectory and professional goals. They are required to demonstrate their understanding of professional and regulatory requirements.

Educational aims: The Design Thesis module aims to cultivate students' ability to research, conceptualise, and execute advanced architectural solutions that address complex spatial, environmental, and social needs. By the end of the module, students will:

Employ research and experimentation to identify and critically investigate a unique design research question, establishing a clear theoretically-informed basis for an innovative design proposal.

Produce a comprehensive design solution that integrates artistic, technical, environmental, and social aspects of architecture.

Communicate design concepts effectively using a variety of media, demonstrating clarity and engagement with a diverse audience.

Develop responsive, responsible architectural solutions aligned with ethical standards and regulatory frameworks.

Outline syllabus: Students identify and develop a research question that frames their design approach through techniques of research, enquiry, experimentation, broadening their knowledge base. This involves critical exploration of a diverse

range of architectural precedents, site-specific analysis, and an examination of historical and contemporary architectural practices in order to inform design thinking.

Students engage in methods such as contextual mappings, spatial analysis, and stakeholder studies to establish a well-rounded design proposition that responds critically to a brief.

Building on the research phase, students develop a comprehensive design proposal that responds to their research question and integrates the artistic, spatial, environmental, social and experiential aspects of a building with the technical requirements of its construction. This stage requires the integration of spatial, structural, and environmental strategies to create a solution that accounts for client, user, site, environmental and contextual requirements.

Projects are developed across multiple scales, from urban design down to detailed construction, ensuring that designs reflect the relationship between people and built environment, between buildings and their context, and the need to relate buildings and the spaces between them to human needs, inclusivity, user experience and scale.

Assessment 1: Design Portfolio showcases the thesis development and final design proposal, including detailed drawings, models, and supporting documentation that communicate the integration of research insights into practical design solutions.

2. Professional Substantiation portfolio
In this portfolio emphasis is placed on investigating sustainability, inclusivity, and regulatory standards as key components of responsible design in relation to the project.
Students identify and refine strategies for structure, construction technology, materials, services, ventilation, thermal environment and lighting and acoustics that are appropriate to a project’s brief and context. This portfolio will document how their design demonstrates appropriate consideration of fire safety, life safety and wellbeing and inclusivity of users, the public and building constructors.
Assessment 2 : Professional Substantiation documents the professional

development of the individual, enabling the student to identify their individual trajectory, learning needs required for further development within the profession, and enables them to demonstrate they are up to date with current standards and best practice.

3. Media and Communication Skills

Throughout the module, students refine their communication skills to, present their architectural design projects using a range of media, including digital models, physical prototypes, visual presentations, and written documentation. Students will select and use appropriate digital systems for creating, modelling, processing, presenting, and sharing design, building and project information. The emphasis is on clarity and engagement, ensuring that complex concepts are accessible to both specialists and non-specialist audiences through a range of media.

Alignment to ARB Competency Outcomes

The ARB Competency Outcomes listed below are assessed to a passing standard as required under ARB's Accreditation Standard 1.1.

D1: Prepare and present architectural design projects of diverse scale, complexity, and type in a variety of contexts, using a range of media, responding critically to a brief. (Ability)

D3: Demonstrate a critical and creative approach to architectural design. (Ability)

D4: Produce designs that integrate the artistic, spatial, environmental, social and experiential aspects of a building with the technical requirements of its construction. (Ability)

D6: Produce the designs that consider the relationship between people and built environment, between buildings and their context, and the need to relate buildings and the spaces between them to human needs, inclusivity, user experience and scale. (Ability)

M11: Communicate effectively with both specialists and non-specialist audiences through a range of media. (Understanding)

RE1: Use techniques of research, enquiry and experimentation to develop effective solutions to architectural problems and to broaden their knowledge base. (Ability)

RE4: Locate, evaluate and apply relevant legislation, regulations, standards, codes of practice and policies related to the development of the built environment. (Understanding)

PE7: Adopt a reflective approach to their work by identifying individual learning needs required for further development within the profession, ensuring they are up to date with current standards and best practice. (Ability)

Part 3: Teaching and learning methods

Teaching and learning methods: The module uses a combination of research seminars, studio-based learning, and independent study to support the comprehensive development of a design thesis:

Research Seminars: Initial seminars provide students with methods for developing research questions, analysing precedents, and conducting site and context analysis.

Studio Sessions: Structured studio time allows students to develop their thesis and design proposals with regular feedback from tutors and visiting experts, facilitating iterative improvement.

Individual and Group Tutorials: Tutorials, including in one-to-one format, offer personalised feedback on research progress and design application, supporting each student's unique thesis and design direction.

Reflective Practice: Reflective activities encourage students to assess their

professional growth, aligning their work with personal aspirations and industry standards.

Module Learning outcomes: On successful completion of this module students will achieve the following learning outcomes.

MO1 Use techniques of architectural research, enquiry and experimentation to develop an original design proposition, demonstrating the ability to synthesise complex contextual, theoretical, and spatial concerns. (Mapped to ARB Outcome: RE1)

MO2 Demonstrate a critical and creative approach to architectural design, formulating responses that reflect innovation and ethical awareness. (Mapped to ARB Outcome: D3)

MO3 Prepare and present a coherent architectural design project of appropriate scale and complexity, responding critically to a self-initiated brief and communicating effectively with both specialist and non-specialist audiences using a range of media. (Mapped to ARB Outcomes: D1, M11)

MO4 Integrate statutory, regulatory and sustainability requirements, including an integrated fire strategy, together with artistic, spatial, social, experiential and contextual considerations within the architectural design narrative, so that both compliance and human-centred design are demonstrably embedded in the resolved thesis project. (Mapped to ARB Outcome: D4, D6)

MO5 Identify, evaluate and apply all relevant legislation, regulations, standards, professional codes and policies inform and justify design decisions during the development of the thesis project. (Mapped to ARB Outcome: RE4)

MO6 Critically evaluate their personal and professional development throughout the design process, identifying ongoing learning needs and aligning with current architectural standards and codes. (Mapped to ARB Outcome: PE7)

Hours to be allocated: 600

Contact hours:

Independent study/self-guided study = 456 hours

Face-to-face learning = 144 hours

Reading list: The reading list for this module can be accessed at readinglists.uwe.ac.uk via the following link https://rl.talis.com/3/uwe/lists/A991242F-D5EC-A4E3-E8BC-6F56F073722B.html?lang=en-GB&login=1

Part 4: Assessment

Assessment strategy: The module is assessed through two inter-dependent portfolios that trace a single thesis project from research conception to documented compliance, thereby testing every learning outcome and its mapped ARB Competency. Assessment 1 – the Design Thesis Portfolio (70%) demonstrates the journey from architectural research and experimentation (RE1), through a critical and creative design process (D3), to a resolved proposal that is clearly presented to specialist and non-specialist audiences (D1, M11). Within the same portfolio, students must also show that statutory, regulatory and sustainability requirements are integrated with artistic, spatial, social, experiential and contextual considerations (D4, D6). Assessment 2 – Professional Substantiation (30%) illustrates compliance with all relevant legislation, regulations, standards, professional codes and requires a critical appraisal of professional development (RE4, PE7). Together, the two submissions mirror professional practice, designing with compliance embedded.

Assessment 1 – Design Thesis Portfolio (70 %)
The portfolio tracks the entire design trajectory: it sets out the research question, site and contextual analysis, theoretical positioning, self-initiated brief and early design explorations that form the conceptual base of the thesis, then presents the resolved architectural proposal. Drawings, models and visualisations demonstrate spatial, social, technical and environmental integration. This assessment tests the capacity to conduct architectural research and experimentation (RE1), to pursue a critical and creative design process (D3), and to produce a coherent proposal that is contextually, socially and environmentally responsive (D1, D6). It also requires proof that artistic, spatial, experiential and technical considerations are integrated (D4) and that ideas are communicated clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences through varied media (M11). The work must show how contextual, technical and social factors inform design decisions and reveal an emerging professional identity.

Assessment 2 – Professional Substantiation (30 %)
The assessment also requires students to embed inclusive, ethical, and sustainable values within their design work and ensure the development of safe, sustainable, and compliant architectural proposals. The portfolio should demonstrate technical and professional resolution, as well as an inclusive and sustainable approach. It evaluates their capacity to resolve technical, regulatory and material requirements through appropriate structural and constructional strategies. It must include drawings, models, material specifications and regulatory compliance considerations including fire and life safety. Students must demonstrate the ability to critically reflect on their professional development and identify future learning goals aligned with current architectural standards and best practices through a personal reflective statement. This assessment measures the ability to locate, evaluate and apply legislation, regulations, standards and professional codes (RE4), and to engage in critical professional reflection (PE7).

Students must pass both assessments to pass the module. As per UWE Academic Regulations and Programme Specification, the pass mark for each assessment on the module is 50%. As per the ARB requirements compensation and/or condonement are not permitted for any module that will assess ARB's Outcomes to passing standard.

Formative Feedback: Students receive feedback throughout the module during studio reviews, tutorials, and research presentations, allowing for iterative refinement of both the research report and design portfolio.

Resit Assessment: If required, the resit assessment will follow the same brief and submission format as the main assessment, allowing students to develop and submit revised submissions that meets the original assessment objectives.

Assessment tasks:

Portfolio (First Sit)
Description: Design Thesis Portfolio

Weighting: 70 %
Final assessment: No
Group work: No
Learning outcomes tested: MO1, MO2, MO3, MO4

Portfolio (First Sit)
Description: Professional Substantiation Portfolio
Weighting: 30 %
Final assessment: Yes
Group work: No
Learning outcomes tested: MO5, MO6

Portfolio (Resit)
Description: Design Thesis Portfolio
Weighting: 70 %
Final assessment: No
Group work: No
Learning outcomes tested: MO1, MO2, MO3, MO4

Portfolio (Resit)
Description: Professional Substantiation Portfolio
Weighting: 30 %
Final assessment: Yes
Group work: No
Learning outcomes tested: MO5, MO6

Part 5: Contributes towards

This module contributes towards the following programmes of study:

Architecture [Frenchay] MArch 2025-26

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