

Syllabus

FORE 6359 Design Futures

Spring 2022, Session 1 Regular (Jan 24 – May 2) (note: no class March 15 Spring Holiday)

Course Time/Location: Mondays, 5:30–8:30pm CST, Zoom: <https://cmu.zoom.us/j/8426391993>

Instructor: Adam Cowart

Contact: adcowart@uh.edu

Office Hours: By appointment

Prerequisite: Graduate Standing

Overview

In this course we will explore the emerging discipline of Design Futures. The theory and practice of Design Futures seeks to address broad contemporary frustrations that have festered in both disciplines over a long period of time. Futurists have long lamented a perceived inability to influence real-world interventions to bring about preferred futures, while designers have become increasingly aware (and anxious) about the role of design and designers in contributing to overconsumption and short-term thinking. In essence, futures thinking is very good at worldbuilding, imagining alternative futures and their implications, but not at actioning and materializing. Design, on the other hand, is very good at worldmaking, acting and materializing, but with a limited temporal frame that does not consider implications and alternatives. Hence, Design Futures, in which we bring together the power to imagine alternative futures and the implications of those futures, and the power to materialize those futures and influence real-world interventions.

The major topics covered will explore design futures fields broadly, including speculative design and research, transition design, experiential futures, anthropological and ethnographic futures, discursive design, somaesthetic design, pluriversality, and more-than-human design, among others.

In Design Futures we will draw on a number of futures methods introduced in other courses, both in their purest forms and as hybrid methods with design. Previously knowledge of these tools will not be necessary, though familiarity is helpful.

Major assignments in this course include the group assignment *All Our Futures Unavenged* that will be a culmination of our work together in class, in which we will materialize a time machine of “used” and hopeful futures as articulated by ethnographic futures research we will conduct through interviews and research on futurists actively in the field. The major personal assignment will be a Design Futures research brief, in which each student will explore how they might go about utilizing design futures methods and frameworks to research and intervene in a systematic challenge of their choosing. Weekly activities and regular discussion posts and reading group discussion posts will also constitute regular, incremental assignments.

This course is for those who have moderate to significant experience in either futures or design, who wish to explore the natural strengths and combinatory capacities of the other discipline. While students do NOT need to have a deep background in either discipline, they will, at times, need to do a bit more

background work on specific methods related to futures. Students are highly encouraged to advise the instructor immediately if they require more context around specific theories or methods.

Ultimately, this course will provide students with the theoretical underpinnings, a short list of methodologies, and a long list of methods that fall broadly under the Design Futures umbrella. The hope, and the intention, is that the learnings from this course will empower students to become change-makers, catalyzers in their respective organizations and geographic situatedness, to both build and make preferred futures.

Objectives

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

1. Enumerate futures, design, and hybrid design futures theories and methods and examples of their application
2. Articulate strategies, postures, and ways in which design futures can extend the boundaries of traditional design and futures disciplines.
3. Apply design futures methodologies to a variety of domains at various levels of scale (macro to micro, product (form) to planetary (systems, wicked problems))
4. Differentiate between different methods, methodologies, frameworks and postures present in the design futures landscape.
5. Critique various speculative, discursive, and experiential futures encounters for the application and implications of design futures.
6. Construct sophisticated and rich futures research proposals and speculative design encounters utilizing design futures.

Readings/Texts

Readings are provided in Blackboard each week.

Required

- Design and Futures, Stuart Candy & Cher Potter (ed)
- Made Up: Design's Fictions, Tim Durfee & Mimi Zeigler (ed)
- Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming, Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby
- Design, When Everybody Designs, Ezio Manzini & Rachel Coad

Reading Group Selections

Students will self-select into reading groups at the beginning of the semester, choosing one of the optional reading group texts. Each team will be responsible for providing regular "reports" back to the larger group on their progression through the text, their discussion recaps, and relevant information that can inform and help the larger student body.

- Discursive Design: Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things: Bruce & Stephanie M. Tharp

- Designs for the Pluriverse: Arturo Escobar
- The Design Philosophy Reader: Anne-Marie Willis
- Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need
- Design Anthropological Futures: Rachel Charlotte, Kasper Tang Vangkilde, et al.
- Defuturing: A New Design Philosophy, Tony Fry

Approach

The foundation of the course is built around two documents – this syllabus and the schedule, found under the “Syllabus” menu on Blackboard. Your first step is to study these documents, ask any questions you wish, and then get into the introductory activities.

Class Activities

This course, in a nod to the making and iterative nature of the design ethos, is more of a remote studio-style course. Classes will be highly interactive and students are highly encouraged to attend “in person”. Each week will follow a regular cadence:

- short lectures based off of the weekly topic(s)
- break out group discussions on the topic or theme of the week
- regroup discussions in which break out groups provide overviews of their more indepth discussions
- case study discussions
- activities related to both weekly topics
- working sessions on the major assignment that will be the culmination of the class: *All Our Futures Unavenged*.

Online Activities

There is typically one, and sometimes two, discussion forum questions each week, primarily reflections on the theory we have dug into for the week. ***We will look to diverge from the traditional posting of online discussions for this class. Mainly, shift the focus of these prepared discussion topics to the class itself. If this doesn't work out, we will revert to the conventional posting.***

Course Overview

Date	Episode	Day	Description
1/24/22	1	Monday	Design Futures
1/31/22	2	Monday	Design Minds
2/7/22	3	Monday	Anthropological Futures
2/14/22	4	Monday	Ethnographic (Experiential) Futures
2/21/22	5	Monday	TD 1
2/28/22	6	Monday	TD2

3/7/22	7	Monday	Fictions
3/14/22	8	Reading Week	
3/21/22	9	Monday	Story
3/28/22	10	Monday	Utopian Affordances
4/4/22	11	Monday	Embodiment
4/11/22	12	Monday	Pluriversality and Deliteralization
4/18/22	13	Monday	More-Than-Human Design
4/23/22	NA	Saturday	All Our Futures Unavenged Speculative Event/Spring Gathering
4/25/22	14	Monday	Spring Gathering Debrief
5/2/22	15	Monday	Speculative Research (now that you've done it, how would you structure it yourself to generate knowledge?)

Assignments

All Our Futures Unavenged

This large, semester long, group assignment is about applying anthropological, ethnographic, and design futures methods to explore, critique, materialize, and stage a speculative futures encounter. By leveraging the deep, rich, and varied experience of foresight alumni dating back 40 years, we will consider historical images of the future, used futures, and how futures, expressed by futurists themselves, have evolved over time.

These encounters with the future will be staged on April 23rd, 2022.

Questions to consider include: How does the trauma of futures unfulfilled shape us? How do we heal the scars left by these unrealized hopes? How does this manifest at different levels of scale (individual, collective, organizational, national, global, etc.)? What are the difference between preferred/protopian/utopian design as method versus as cultural recovery?

Part of the assignment will include the formulation of collecting research/feedback from participants and using qualitative research methods from class exercises to suggest next steps and formulate research outputs.

Design Futures Research Brief

The Design Futures Research Brief is meant as a speculative research proposal, bringing the thinking and methods explored in the course to bare on a topic of your choice. Students can (and indeed are encouraged) to imagine a research design proposal related to their current research interests. See *The Thousand Year Closet Design Brief* (add link) as one example, in which the future of fast fashion is explored across a radically distant time horizon. This assignment asks students to consider how knowledge can be generated through speculative and experiential design futures encounters, how

implications and ecologies of intervention (and ecologies of implications) can be materialized in ways that clarify and disrupt systems, epistemes, and ontologies.

Weekly Reflection

This individual assignment is due weekly. The weekly reflection should consist of two components: distillation and freeform. Freeform can take any shape you wish: point form, short paragraph, word bubbles, moodboard, images, etc. The distillation should be a radically concentrated representation of your thinking. The suggested form of this distillation is one to two haiku's. The haiku ([see here](#)) is a surprisingly effective medium for concentrating and distilling thoughts, but in a way that encourages emergence and abstractions in parallel with specificity. Other acceptable mediums would include such visualizations as the three-pane comic strip storyboard, or some other medium. Structure of the weekly reflection should have the distillation first, followed by freeform. The purpose of this assignment is to ensure a regular cadence of reflective practice is a part of the learning experience. Weekly submission need not be more than half a page, but can certainly be much longer in the freeform section.

Grading

Breakdown:

All Our Futures Unavenged Speculative Encounter: 40%

Design Futures Research Brief: 25%

Participation: General Class, Reading Group, Discussion Groups, Workshops, Crits: 25%

Weekly Reflection: 10%

Points	Category	Description
95	Excellent 100 for super awesome	Demonstrates exceptional mastery of concepts, expression, and application of course materials. No improvable items. In this course, special importance is given to how well you design the praxis "deliverable" using the various techniques we introduce.
90	Very Good	Only one or two minor improvable items. Typically, this involves a lack of clarity in applying the technique to the deliverable.
85	Solid Competence	Demonstrates good ability to meet specifications of assignments and evaluation criteria. Only one major or more than two minor improvable items. The major item typically involves a mis-interpretation of the technique.
80	Meets Minimum Expectation	Demonstrates a adequate performance on assignments and meeting evaluation criteria. More than one major improvable item. Typically requires revisiting the technique and adjusting how it is to be applied.
70	Below Expectations	Some value, but serious deficiencies.

Re-submission

The larger group assignments will include several “crits” throughout the semester, to provide feedback, etc. While this does not constitute “re-submission” there will be regular deliverables for the group assignment and there will be opportunities to “course correct” where appropriate. For the weekly reflections, this is really for individuals to reflect on what they are encountering and experiencing in class. Honest reflections are critical.

Lateness

For assignments, any submission more than one week late is reduced by a letter grade (10 points). That is the only penalty, so even a very late assignment should absolutely be turned in – in other words, there is no good reason to not turn in every assignment.

For discussion forums, students unable to attend in person should look at recording a short audio/video of their thoughts around the discussion topics. Should this prove too arduous, we may revert back to conventional word posts.

Interaction

The course is conducted online. All content, daily interactions, and assignments are housed on the Blackboard website (www.uh.edu/blackboard). Students should visit Blackboard regularly to see the weekly topics, readings, posts, and what the assignments are. The instructor will also regularly use email communication to advise of any updates/changes, and respond to questions.

Housekeeping

Classes The UH futures program offers a unique blend of different modes of interaction for each course depending on the student’s location and needs. The official course is conducted on the website (www.uh.edu/blackboard) but we will be using Zoom for the classroom experience.

But since one does not live by the internet alone, we also have personal modes of interaction. The one with the highest bandwidth is, of course, is attending virtual class on Monday evenings via Zoom. Those who cannot attend the class in either of these ways can also listen to a recording of the class and post any comments on the Archive Comments discussion board on the Home Page. The objective of the class time is to enhance and deepen the learning from each week’s lesson through discussion and activities. Those who do attend report that they learn more when they do so.

We also record the class for students who have a regular conflict with class time (work or other responsibilities). Finally, the website itself has an easy-to-use discussion tool that allows people to post and reply to any of the material posted. Use it in addition to or instead of the other modes of interaction. Even if you can’t read all the posts, you are encouraged to 1) respond to posts that are addressed to you and 2) routinely check for posts by the instructor.

Communication with the instructors can be 1) in class, 2) through Blackboard email, 3) through regular email (**adcowart@uh.edu**), or 4) by Zoom.

Difficulties with Blackboard can be reported/resolved in two ways. If the problem is technical (username, password, connectivity, Blackboard functions, etc.), then contact Instructional Support (713743-1475, blackboard@uh.edu). If the problem has to do with material (broken links, assignment drops, etc.), then contact me.

DROPPING THE COURSE: The last day to drop the course without a grade is February 3, 2021.

Disabilities: Students who require individualized accommodations for this course must inform the professor in order that appropriate arrangements can be made. For information about services provided by The Center for Students with Disabilities, please call 713-743-5480.

Academic honesty policy: All students are responsible for knowing the standards of academic honesty. Please refer to the UH catalog and the student Life Handbook for the University Academic Honesty Policy. Plagiarism, that is, using research without citations, or using a created production without crediting the source, will result in a grade penalty or failure of the course. Internet sources must be credited according to the sites recommended citation guideline if available. If no citation guideline is provided by the web source, then the date, URL site owner, author must be included with the web material used.