DESIGN STUDIES

INSTRUCTOR	CLASS NO.	OFFICE HOURS
Jamie Zhang (she/her/hers)	M, T, W, R, F	by appointment via email
Graduate Teaching Assistant	Periods 2-3 (9:30 am - 12:15 pm)	or link on Canvas
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Course Description

This course explores design as a way of seeing, making, and understanding the world. Moving beyond aesthetics or technical skills, we investigate how design influences daily life, shaping what we notice, how we interact, and what we value.

Through collaborative discussions, close observation, and creative exploration, students will examine how design connects to personal identity, shared routines, and broader cultural patterns. We will consider both the visible and less visible aspects of design—how it reflects and reinforces norms, behaviors, and expectations in everyday environments. The course is structured around three central questions:

- **What is design?**
- **How does design work?**
- **Who and what does design value?**

Students will be encouraged to develop a thoughtful, reflective design practice that recognizes the impact of design on people's lives and imagines new possibilities with care and intention.

Learning Objectives & Outcomes

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

1. **Identify, describe, explain, and critique** a) how design is defined across different contexts and histories, b) how design shapes both personal and socio-cultural identities, and c) who design is for—based on how the design process addresses the first two points. These skills will be evaluated through in-class design activities, discussions, visual reflections, and peer conversations.
2. **Understand and apply core concepts in design** by analyzing how design practices and artifacts shift across time, place, and cultural contexts. Students will connect design decisions to values, norms, and power through both writing and making, grounded in everyday examples and real-world case studies.

3. **Engage in collaborative, low-stakes design making** through design studio activities. Emphasis will be placed on process, exploration, and clarity of thinking rather than polished outcomes. Students will practice skills such as observation, ideation, iteration, and critique.
4. **Critically examine how design operates in everyday life and intersects with personal experience,** including themes such as economic class, race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, ability/disability, nationality, and religion/spirituality. Develop and present thoughtful, visually articulated responses through a final project that combines critical reflection and intentional design.

Land Acknowledgement

Based on the Smathers Libraries's land acknowledgment, I acknowledge that for thousands of years, the area now comprising the state of Florida has been and continues to be home to many Native Nations. I further recognize that the main campus of the University of Florida is in the heartland territory of two historically-known Native societies: those of the Potano and of the Alachua Seminole. The Potano, of Timucua affiliation, lived here in the Alachua region from before European arrival until the destruction of their towns in the early 1700s. The Seminole, also known as the Alachua Seminole, established towns here shortly after but were forced from the land as a result of a series of wars with the United States known as the Seminole Wars.

Textbook & Materials

All required and recommended readings will be provided weekly on Canvas.

Students will maintain a notebook to serve as a visual diary; specific guidelines will be provided below.

Attendance

Attendance is recorded promptly at the start of each face-to-face (F2F) meeting. You are allowed one personal days throughout the semester without penalty. After that, each unexcused absence will result in a **2% deduction** from your final grade. **Two late arrivals or early departures** will be counted as one unexcused absence. Acceptable excused absences follow university policy (e.g., doctor's note, instructor's letter for field trips in another course, etc.). Please notify the instructor in advance and provide documentation as needed.

If you miss class, you are expected to contact the instructor proactively to discuss possible alternatives for missed work. However, for collaborative in-class activities, make-up credit will only be offered if your absence is officially excused. These activities cannot be replicated outside class.

Assessment Breakdown

Participation (10%)

Active participation is essential for building a thoughtful, productive classroom environment. This includes not only contributing verbally but also practicing active listening. Please refrain from unrelated activities when others are speaking.

You are encouraged to bring different perspectives, challenge ideas, and engage in respectful debate. Academic discussion thrives on disagreement, as long as it's grounded in respect, curiosity, and professionalism.

If you face challenges that make open participation difficult, such as shyness, language barriers, or anxiety, please speak with the instructor early in the semester. We'll work together to find a form of participation that fits your strengths.

Design thinking /Studio Making (30%)

Each class session will include design thinking and/or studio making activities.

Credit is earned through active participation, including generating ideas, reflecting critically, staying consistently engaged, and delivering the assigned thinking or making outcomes with care and intention. Any new design skills will be introduced during class as needed.

Visual reflections & Dialogical Circle (30%)

The **Visual Diary** (physical) is a tool for sharpening your observational and reflective skills as a designer by cultivating a habit of documenting and analyzing design in everyday life. You may use any unlined notebook of any size. While the diary itself will not be collected or graded, it forms the foundation for two key assignments: **Visual Reflections** and **Dialogical Circle Weekly Reflections**.

Visual Reflections (0-2 posts per week)

Each week, you are expected to post **0-2 reflections** in the discussion section on Canvas. Each post should connect a design example from your Visual Diary to both the week's **core course question** (e.g., How might design redefine itself?) and your **individual research theme** (e.g., gender, race, class, etc.).

Your post must include **at least one clear photo** from your Visual Diary (more images are welcome). You may also incorporate sketches, labels, diagrams, or brief written notes to demonstrate your thinking. These reflections don't need to be lengthy or academic—but they should show depth by moving beyond simply naming the object and exploring its cultural, historical, or systemic dimensions.

Dialogical Circle Weekly Reflection (1 post per week)

Every Friday class will include a **Dialogical Circle**—a dialogue-based session that invites participants from diverse backgrounds to share experiences, exchange perspectives, and reflect on lived realities. These circles are inspired by **pedagogies of critical consciousness**, in

which participants raise questions from their lives and collaboratively explore potential actions and insights through discussion.

After each circle, you will write a **weekly reflection post** connecting your Visual Diary insights with the in-class discussion. This is a chance to synthesize your observations with perspectives shared in the circle and reflect on how your understanding has shifted.

Details and rubrics for both assignments will be provided on Canvas and introduced in Week 1. If you have questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to the instructor.

Final Project (30%)

For the final project, students will create a visual essay that critically examines how design shapes their everyday lives. Drawing on insights from the visual diary, course materials, and personal experiences, students are expected to read the world through a designer's lens, exploring the visible and invisible dimensions of design in shaping identity, routines, and social interactions.

Building on the essay, students will also create a design outcome that reflects on how the issue, object, or system discussed in the essay could be reimagined for the future. This may take the form of a speculative (re)design, propaganda poster, narrative storyboard, or another format appropriate to the topic. The goal is to demonstrate thoughtful reflection and an intentional design response to the issues students have examined. Students will present their final projects in class during the last week of the semester.

If you prefer to integrate your essay and design outcome into a single cohesive piece, you are welcome to discuss that option with the instructor.

Further information on these assignments, including delivery dates, evaluation rubrics, are available on Canvas.

Grading

Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies; read more about grade point assignment at UF. Grades are automatically reduced 10% per day late.

Grading Scale

A	94-100%	B-	80-83%	D+	67-69%
A-	90-93%	C+	77-79%	D	64-66%
B+	87-89%	C	74-76%	D-	60-63%
B	84-86%	C-	70-73%	E	<60%

UF Policies & Resources

To ensure all students have access to the most current academic policies and campus support services, please refer to the following official link: https://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolicies. This page includes information on academic honesty, accommodations, mental health resources, and other important university-wide guidelines. All course-specific expectations will align with these policies.

Course Outline

Please note that the instructor may need to modify the course syllabus and may do so at any time. Notice of such changes will be announced quickly through email & Canvas.

Module 1: What is Design?		
WEEK 1	6/30	**Course Overview**
	7/1 - 7/2	**1.1 Design Lens:** Reading the designed world & sketching
	7/3	**1.2 Design & Definition:** How has design been defined in the past? How might we re-define design?
	7/4	**HOLIDAY**
WEEK 2	7/7 - 7/8	**1.3 Design & Form:** How does design address form? How is design moving beyond form? **Final Project** Choose Your Theme. DUE Monday 11:59 pm
Module 2: How Does Design Work?		
	7/9- 7/10	**2.1 Design & Culture:** Design as culture. Design culture as world-making
	7/11	**Focus Session: Your Story** **Dialogical Circle #1** **Topic: Design shapes the world that shapes us.** **Weekly Reflection Post** DUE Monday 11:59 pm
Week 3	7/14	**2.2 Design & Data:** How does design shape information access?
	7/15	**2.3 Design & (In)equities:** How does design shape (in)equity?
	7/16- 7/17	**2.4 Design & Propaganda:** How does design shape public opinions?
	7/18	**Focus Session: Typography** **Dialogical Circle #2** Topic: Design is never neutral.

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Final Project Direction Check-In. DUE 11:59 pm

Weekly Reflection Post DUE Monday 11:59 pm

Module 3: Who & What does Design Value

Week 4	7/21-7/22	**3.1 Design & Functionality:** How might design value functionality?
	7/23-7/24	**3.2 Design & Democracy:** How might design value democracy?
	7/25	**Focus Session: TBD** **Dialogical Circle #3** **Topic: TBD** **Weekly Reflection Post** DUE Monday 11:59 pm
Week 5	7/28-7/29	**3.3 Design & Universality:** How might design value "universal" access?
	7/30-7/31	**3.4 Design & Pluriversity:** How might we design across worlds?
	8/1	**Focus Session: TBD** **Dialogical Circle #4** **Topic: TBD** **Weekly Reflection Post** DUE Monday 11:59 pm

Final Week

Week 6	8/4-8/5	**Design for Futures: Speculative Design**
	8/6	**Design for Futures: Explore Your Design Values**
	8/7	**Presentation Day** **Final Project** DUE 9 am
	8/8	**Semester Synthesis** **Dialogical Circle #5**