

Critical Thinking and Making: The Visual Archive

Fall 2026 | Parsons School of Design

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Meeting Info:

Days: Monday

Times: 12:10pm - 2:50pm

Building: Parsons 2 W 13th

Room: 702

Course Description

This class explores the relationship between form and content: how is meaning constructed and communicated through visual language? Through observing, collecting, analyzing, writing, and form making, students will apply design processes involving visual research, concept generation, and craft skills.

Driven by research interest, students will use digital and analog means to build visual archives. These collections will be approached as a resource of critical inquiry and will respond to current socio-political issues. Students will develop projects and build skills across media ranging from physical collaging to digital artifacts and more complex visual essays for paper and for screen .

Course Content

There are many definitions of what an archive is, which we will spend time discussing in class. For our project purposes, we will be working with this definition: “a collection of items which form evidence of the activities of a person or institution and are preserved for their enduring value and historical significance.” *King’s College (Cambridge) Archive Centre*

Over the course of this semester, you will create a growing visual research collection—while developing your own definition of what your archive is, how it might become part of your design practice, and the roles archives play in a larger socio-political context.

1. Discover: Building the Archive

In the first phase, we will explore principles of design and communication to populate your visual archive. Through a series of experimental exercises, you’ll create recordings (visuals) in response to your evolving research interest.

This research inquiry is a set of questions based on your previous life experience, education, or any current socio-political interest. While you will establish a research direction early in the semester, you may realign your focus at any time.

Your archive is *yours*: it reflects your perspective, interests, and ways of seeing. In addition to completing class assignments, you are encouraged to document inspirational resources independently (for example, pictures from magazines, books, flyers, or random artifacts you find in the streets).

The idea of phase 1 is to explore, experiment, learn, understand, and create the records that will help you to define a focus in phase 2:

2. Define, Develop, Deliver: Prototyping the Archive

In the second phase, you will refine the focus of your archive—whether around content, visual direction, or both. You'll ask: What is the purpose of this archive? How could it have a positive impact on a specific community? Which media channel is most appropriate for your archive—where and how does it live?

Consider how design decisions—layout, navigation, interaction, and visual style—shape the way your archive is experienced. The goal is to explore how the act of displaying and conveying your archive can enhance its meaning and reveal new insights.

Course Evaluation

- Meaningful Participation 15%
- Phase 1) Discover: Building the Archive
 - a. Field Study I 5%
 - b. Field Study II 5%
 - c. Field Study III 10%
 - d. Field Study IV 10%
 - e. Field Study V 10%
 - f. Typology 15%
- Phase 2) Define, Develop, Deliver: Prototyping the Archive
 - a. Final Archive, Process Documentation 30%

Learning Outcomes

1. Apply a vocabulary of communication design to describe and critique your work well as your classmates, with attention to how meaning is constructed through visual language;

2. Work through all the steps of the design research process, e.g. brainstorming, assembling, drafting, editing, critically analyzing, and prototyping ideas through the means of visual language;
3. Evaluate how visual language and its variables are applied to reading/writing systems to facilitate orientation and create consistency;
4. Demonstrate iterative making and reflection by incorporating feedback, testing ideas, and evolving the archive across phases of discovery, definition, and delivery.
5. Develop critical questions in relation to historical and contemporary sources, and to accurately evaluate the validity of the context of these sources.

Readings

Readings will be distributed in class as a soft copy. However, it is equally important to find your own readings that are related to your topic. As I become more familiar with your individual research interests, I will make recommendations.

Here are a few of the readings we will discuss:

- Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive*
- Ursula K Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction"
- Kenya Hara, *Designing Design* ("Ex-Formation")
- Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*
- Colomina, Beatriz, and Mark Wigley, *Are We Human? Notes on an Archeology of Design*.
- Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning"
- Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"
- Hal Foster, "The Archival Impulse"

Schedule

This schedule is an outline of topics and approximate dates. Please check the [class website](#) for detailed information, homework and expected preparations.

Week 1: Introduction

September 1

Week 2: What is an archive?

September 14

Week 3: Field Studies I: Record (Texture)

September 21

Week 4: Field Studies II: Contextualize (Time)
September 28

Week 5: Field Studies III: Recontextualize (Site/Nonsite)
October 5

Week 6: Field Studies IV: Classify (Color)
October 12

Week 7: Field Studies V: Compose & Compare (Constellation)
October 19

Week 8: Field Trip
October 26

Week 9: Typology
November 2

Week 10: Typology Continued
November 9

Week 11: Presentations & Pitches
November 16

Week 12-13: Studio & One-on-Ones
Extra Individual Hours Week of 11/16 & Async, November 23

Week 14-15: Presentations
December 1, December 8