How can we speak of the subjectivity of the urban poor without resorting to the language of victims or survivors?

Why is it that habitats are given secondary importance in explanations of the wellbeing, identity and mental life of the dispossessed? This lecture explores the ways of the dwelling environment and dwelling practices in subject formation. It draws on evidence of forbearance in a Delhi slum showing dependencies between biography, materiality and spatial atmosphere, and on evidence of abjection in a strip on the Yamuna river where the homeless camp out without the benefits of commoned ground, dependent on the vital work of intermediaries. The lecture makes the case for co-habitability, place curation and baseline service in a political economy of equal opportunity and welfare.

Ash Amin is professor of geography at Cambridge University and a Fellow of the British Academy, having held the post of Foreign Secretary and Vice-President from 2015 to 2019. His recent books include Land of Strangers; Arts of the Political, with Nigel Thrift (Duke University Press); Releasing the Commons, coedited with Philip Howell and Seeing Like a City, with Nigel Thrift. He is currently writing a book on the politics of coexistence in Europe.
Critical shortages of affordable housing force people into housing precarity across the globe. This seminar starts from my recent book Housing in the Margins, which was published by Wiley in 2021, to explore unruly housing practices and their regulation in the context of the German housing crisis. Through ethnographic research on the ways in which Berliners dwell in allotment gardens (despite a law that prohibits housing at these sites) I discuss how these gardeners negotiate the possibilities of residency with the local bureaucracy, gardening associations and amongst themselves. This analysis highlights the contested terrain of enacting regulations and the exclusions that these negotiations entail. Building on postcolonial theory, anthropology of the state and critical legal geography, the book draws attention to the power of negotiations in the governance of urban space. On this basis the seminar seeks to discuss novel approach to theorizing the nexus of informality and the state in ways that bridge analytical divides between debates about Northern and Southern states.

Hanna Hilbrandt is professor of social and cultural geography at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich. At the junction of social and cultural geography, and with a particular focus on the urban experience, her research focuses on the everyday politics of struggles, negotiations, and regulations through which global inequalities manifest themselves in cities. She has recently published "Negotiating Formalities. Housing, Governance and the State in Berlin’s Allotments" (Wiley, 2021).

The lecture series is organised by professors Camillo Boano, Francesco Chiodelli and Michele Lancione.
Cities are becoming increasingly fragmented materially, socially, and spatially. From broken toilets and everyday discards, to art and forms of writing, fragments are signatures of urban worlds and provocations for change. In this presentation, I consider how such fragments come to matter in the experience, politics, and expression of cities. Drawing on fieldwork and examples from different contexts, I argue that attending to the role of fragments can help us to understand how urban worlds are made, revealed, written, and changed.
This talk outlines the ways in which Palestinians living in Ramallah have engaged with the rapid and relatively recent growth of bank debt. Incorporated into a broader set of financial and non-financial relations, lived experiences of bank debt are heterogeneous and in the Palestinian context can only be understood in relation to longer-term experiences of living through colonial occupation. Moving beyond reductive accounts of the hyper-precariousness of life in debt, I pay particular attention to gendered experiences amid broader efforts to include women in finance.

Christopher Harker is Associate Professor and Deputy Director of the Institute for Global Prosperity, University College London. His current research examines how practices of financial inclusion can be reworked to create more inclusive and sustainable forms of prosperity. His recent publications include Spacing Debt: Obligations, Violence and Endurance in Ramallah, Palestine (Duke University Press, 2020) and Financing Prosperity by Dealing with Debt, (UCL Press, 2022) co-edited with Amy Horton.

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Italy is home to a vast range of housing informalities and its capital is no exception. In fact, much of Rome’s urban development has been driven by informal housing production, motivated both by survival needs and financial speculation. This seminar draws on the recent book Inhabiting Liminal Spaces, published in early 2022 by Routledge, to discuss how ambiguities in housing governance condition the daily lives and tactics of some of the city’s most disadvantaged inhabitants. Focusing on two groups in particular – squatters in a public housing complex and Roma living in camps – the discussion highlights how the lack of sustained public provision of low-cost accommodation, coupled with shifting and contradictory regulations, have impacted residents’ everyday security, stability, and informal self-help strategies. The analysis combines fine-grained ethnography with a political economy lens to question how far informalities are able to reconfigure historically rooted power dynamics and hierarchies. It then opens up a conversation about how to move towards realistic strategies of housing governance that recognize the agency and needs of marginalized groups.

Isabella Clough Marinaro is Professor of Sociology and Italian Studies in the Department of Psychology and Social Science, John Cabot University, Rome. Her research focuses on the sociology of how rules are produced, negotiated, bent and broken, especially in contemporary Italy. She is currently working on projects exploring how Italian social movements campaign on issues of crime, legislative reform and social justice. She has recently published Inhabiting Liminal Spaces: Informalities in Governance, Housing, and Economic Activity in Contemporary Italy (Routledge, 2022). She previously co-edited two books: Italian Mafias Today: Territory, Business and Politics (2019) and Global Rome: Changing Faces of the Eternal City (2014).

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Together with Agnes Gagy and Kerstin Jacobsson, we did an in-depth contextual analysis of multiple forms of contention addressing housing issues, in Budapest and Bucharest, their (often unintentional) interactions, and their broader political-structural background. Looking at these two East European cities that fall outside the usual focus of urban movements research, we can find illuminating cases of how similar structural conditions (such as the financialization of housing and the resulting inequalities and expulsions, which are a central characteristic of capitalist crises), when governed by different political forces at the national and local scales, get politicized differently - that is, when they get politicized at all. I will share the most intriguing comparative lessons that we drew of housing contention in Budapest and Bucharest, followed throughout the period 2008-2021, through what we propose as a “structural field of contention” approach.

Ioana Florea is post-doctoral researcher at the University of Gothenburg, Department of Sociology and Work Science, and associated researcher with the Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. Together with Agnes Gagy and Kerstin Jacobsson, they have recently published “Contemporary Housing Struggles. A Field of Contention Approach” (Palgrave, 2022) as part of the research project “Housing, social mobilizations and urban governance in Central and Eastern Europe”, coordinated by prof. Jacobsson, funded by The Swedish Research Council Formas. Together with a team coordinated by prof. Eniko Vincze, Ioana is also currently working on the project “Class formation and re-urbanization through real estate development at an Eastern periphery of global capitalism”, redurb.ro.

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