



GEOG247: Digital Transformations of Land, Housing, and Property

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Class time: Tuesday, 1-4pm, 575 McCone Hall

Office hours: Wednesdays, 1-3pm or by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Technology shapes how landed property is known, used, valued and imagined. This seminar responds to how 21st century digital innovations are changing real estate planning and development; the commodification and trade of land, housing, and property; and the politics and practices of dwelling globally. The seminar consists of three parts. First, we will draw on science and technology studies, political economy, and economic sociology to develop theoretical perspectives on what the digital brings to property. Second, we will read across critical geography, housing studies, agrarian studies, and information studies, to study cloud computing infrastructures, urban housing markets, and agrarian and rural land. Third, we will advance knowledge production in this emerging research area through developing student projects. The seminar is therefore best suited to those either already working on relevant research or who wish to carry out preliminary work addressing course themes.

Our goals are to:

- Understand how the state, capital, and grassroots actors employ digital technologies to remake global land, housing, and property

- Situate digital transformations within existing property relations that characterize particular geographies
- Attend to how these transformations extend and shift patterns of state control, capital accumulation, and grassroots politics

The chief material outcome of the course is a seminar paper, which will be expected to incorporate these themes and draw substantially on course texts. You will have an opportunity to develop the paper by 1) submitting a short literature review; 2) submitting a project introduction; and 3) giving a presentation of a draft.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

The core components of your grade in this course are:

- Engagement, preparedness, and follow through (ongoing): 20%
- Paper 1 (Feb. 24): 20%
- Paper 2 (March 26): 20%
- Presentation (April 25): 10%
- Seminar paper (May 9): 30%

[Berkeley's Disabled Students' Program](#) provides a wide range of resources to ensure equal access to educational opportunities, including advising, diagnostics, note-taking services, and academic accommodations. Please bring any accommodation or scheduling requirements to the attention of the DSP office and me as soon as possible; once I have heard from the DSP office we can work together to ensure you receive the appropriate accommodations.

Detailed overview of assignments:

Engagement, preparedness, and follow through (20% of final grade): Doctoral seminars are a rare opportunity to immerse ourselves in collective study through discussion and activities. Pulling this off requires a shared commitment to engagement, preparedness, and follow-through. In this seminar, students are asked to demonstrate this commitment through:

- Pairs of students volunteering to lead our discussions in weeks 2-13 (except weeks 6 and 10); this means everyone should have the opportunity to facilitate twice.
- Discussants for subsequent weeks adding to the collective notes document (e.g. discussants for week 3 take notes for week 2)
- When not facilitating, submitting at least two **discussion questions to our class Google Doc¹ by 1pm on Mondays**. Kyla Wazana Tompkins offers some helpful guidelines on "[how to ask a good question about theory that will provoke conversation and further discussion from your colleagues](#)"

Discussion leaders are encouraged to make use of active learning strategies rather than preparing a mini-lecture; examples include digital artifact show-and-tell, incorporating other media (maps/sound/art/video), rapid writing, collective outlines, concept maps, populating a timeline; think-pair-share, etc. Situating the author in their place/time/field is often helpful.

¹ Given the intimate size of our seminar, we will share questions and resources using Google Docs/Drive rather than bCourses.

Discussion leaders should take the opportunity to build meaningful discussions that engage us in recalling the substance of the texts, exploring and testing our comprehension of the material, analyzing the assumptions and implications of the material, and *then* evaluating the validity and ramifications of the texts (also known as critique). In other words, seminar discussions should not only consist of critique or evaluation, and certainly need not start here.

Contributors to the collective notes document should keep notes of our discussion under headings like: announcements, key terms and definitions with examples, main takeaways, references, connections, material to feed forward. This is not meant to be an exhaustive transcript, but a way to map and track our ideas and for discussion facilitators to shape their work.

All students should schedule extended time to read the weekly assigned texts and submit questions for discussion the day before we meet. Prepare your contributions to our seminars in the form of questions and clarifications, ruminations on selected passages, and select additional material to share in our discussions. Everyone should take the opportunity to contribute to seminar discussions. If you find this to be difficult, please schedule time to speak with me about how to support your participation.

Paper 1: Literature review (20% of final grade, due February 24): In weeks 2-5 we read a range of texts that theoretically situate digital property transformations. In this paper, select 6-10 texts and prepare a brief paper that summarizes both a) how they contribute to your individual research-in-formation and b) what weaknesses, limitations, or blind spots they carry into your research area. Reflect on the issues/perspectives/provocations introduced by these texts, the questions they pose for your work, and what questions or issues they leave unasked.

If you are not already working on relevant research, use this assignment to identify a phenomenon, platform, local struggle, etc. to ground your work going forward.

Come to class on February 21 prepared to workshop a draft.

Formatting and submission guidelines: Essays should be no more than 1500 words (not including references) double-spaced, and include a bibliography formatted in Chicago, Harvard, or another recognized citation format. Email essays to me as a Word document on the due date. A 3-day no-questions asked extension is available to all students, provided you complete an extension request before February 23, however I am not able to provide written feedback on late work.

Paper 2: Project introduction (20% of final grade, due March 26): Prepare an introduction to your seminar paper that provides initial general background for your project, introduces your specific research in this area and states why it is important, how your research builds on related work, and the (conceptual, empirical, and/or methodological) objectives of your project. End with a 'road map' paragraph outlining the structure of the paper to come. This assignment should read like an introduction to a journal article.

Formatting and submission guidelines: Essays should be no more than 1200 words (not including references) double-spaced, and include a bibliography formatted in Chicago, Harvard, or another recognized citation format. Email essays to me as a Word document on the due date.

A 3-day no-questions asked extension is available to all students, provided you complete an extension request before March 26, however I am not able to provide written feedback on late work.

Seminar paper and presentation (30% and 10% of final grade, presentations in class April 25; paper due May 9): Use your literature review and project introduction to inform a complete paper on your research topic. Your seminar paper should include an introduction, conceptual framework, methodological and/or analytic discussion, and conclusion. Papers should draw substantively on course readings and outside readings as appropriate.

The last week of class is devoted to student presentations of draft seminar papers.

Formatting and submission guidelines: Essays should be no more than 4000 words (not including references) double-spaced, and include a bibliography formatted in Chicago, Harvard, or another recognized citation format. Email essays to me as a Word document on the due date. A 3-day no-questions asked extension is available to all students, provided you complete an extension request before May 9, however I am not able to provide written feedback on late work.

READING EXPECTATIONS AND INFORMATION

Seminar participants are expected to complete assigned reading should be completed before the relevant class meeting and bring annotated physical or digital copies of assigned texts to each class meeting so we can refer to key passages together.

Readings are listed in alphabetical order of author last name, not in order of reading priority; optional reading is optional.

Where to find readings: Readings are collected in the Zotero Group Library “**GEOG247**”; feel free to use the note/tag functions of Zotero to annotate files. The full text of journal articles and most book sections is also available online through UCB library by entering the title into the “[search anything](#)” bar, or via Google Scholar. Readings marked with an asterisk are available in the class Google drive folder.

COURSE OUTLINE

WEEK 1/Jan. 17: Introductions: digital show and tell

Come to our first meeting with a digital artifact to “show and tell” that connects your research interests with the course themes. This could be a website, an app, an image, a real estate listing, a site on Google Maps, etc. Be prepared to share your artifact and introduce yourself, your artifact, and how it relates to the course themes. You might discuss your motivations for the work you anticipate doing; key intellectual, personal, and/or political foundations that currently

guide you; and how you envision your research-in-formation at this point. We will also complete a short collective reading and discussion, and sign up for discussion facilitation.

Collective reading exercise: “Who Wants to Live in a Filter Bubble? From ‘Zillow-Surfing’ to Data-Driven Segregation”, Yanni Alexander Loukissas.

WEEK2/January 24: Technology

Sarah Barns (2019). Negotiating the platform pivot: From participatory digital ecosystems to infrastructures of everyday life. *Geography Compass*.

Ruha Benjamin (2019). Engineered Inequity (33-48). In: *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*.

*Nick Srnicek (2017). The Long Downturn. In: *Platform Capitalism*. Polity Books

*Langdon Winner (2020). Do Artefacts have Politics? (19-39). In: *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*.

Optional: Jenna Burrell and Marion Fourcade. 2021. [The Society of Algorithms](#)

WEEK 3/January 31: Land

Thomas Cowan (2021). Uncertain Grounds: Cartographic Negotiation and Digitized Property on the Urban Frontier. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 45(3), 442–457. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.13016>

*Sud, N. (2021). Land, in the Making. In: *The making of land and the making of India* (First edition). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Tania Murray Li (2014). [What is land? Assembling a resource for global investment](#). *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 39(4), 589-602.

Optional: Pritchard et al. 2015. [Knowledge and the Politics of Land](#) *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 48(4)616-625.

WEEK 4/February 7: Property

Brenna Bhandar (2018). Introduction (1-32). In: *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of ownership*.

Daniel Greene (2022). [Landlords of the internet: Big data and big real estate](#).

Erin McElroy (2020). [Property as technology](#). *City*.

Video: Robert Nichols (2020). [Theft is Property: Dispossession and Critical Theory](#).

Week 5/February 12: Markets

Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon (2010). [Economization, part 2: a research programme for the study of markets](#). *Economy and Society*.

Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy (2017). Seeing like a market. *Socio-Economic Review*, 15(1), 9–29. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mww033>

Boeing, G. (2020). [Online rental housing market representation and the digital reproduction of urban inequality](#). *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 52(2), 449–468.

Optional: Christian Berndt and Marc Boeckler (2009). [Geographies of circulation and exchange: constructions of markets](#). *Progress in Human Geography*.

WEEK 6/February 21: Writing workshop (Conceptual framing paper due Feb 24)

No reading; bring draft lit review to workshop

WEEK 7/: February 28: Development

Luis Alvarez León and Jovanna Rosen (2022). [The Digital Growth Machine: Urban Change and the Ideology of Technology](#).

Luke Munn (2020). [Thinking Through Silicon: Cables and Servers as Epistemic Infrastructures](#).

Andrea Pollio (2020). [Making the silicon cape of Africa: Tales, theories and the narration of startup urbanism](#).

Optional: Sharon Zukin (2020). [Planetary Silicon Valley: Deconstructing New York's Innovation Complex](#).

WEEK 8/Mar. 7: Digital agrarian change in Southeast Asia

Hilary Faxon and Courtney Wittekind (2022). [Networks of Speculation: Making Land Markets on Myanmar Facebook](#).

Hilary Faxon et al (2022). [Territorializing spatial data: Controlling land through One Map projects in Indonesia and Myanmar](#).

WEEK 9/Mar. 14: Cryptocurrency and technonatures

Ed Atkins, Luca Follis, Benjamin Neimark, Vanessa Thomas (2021). [Uneven development, crypto-regionalism, and the \(un-\)tethering of nature in Quebec](#). *Geoforum*.

Nick Lally, Kelly Kay, Jim Thatcher (2022). [Computational parasites and hydropower: A political ecology of Bitcoin mining on the Columbia River](#). *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*.

*Richard White (1995). Putting the River to Work (section I and II) and The Power of the River (section II). In: *The Organic Machine*.

Optional: Jacob Russell and Adam Hasan (2022). [Lebanon's neglected dams are powering a secret community of crypto miners](#).

WEEK 10/Mar. 21: Writing week (project overview due March 26)

American Association of Geographers conference; no reading and no class meeting; informal writing workshop encouraged!

WEEK 11/Mar. 28: SPRING BREAK (no class)

WEEK 12/Apr. 4: Technologies of racial capitalism (readings subject to change)

Tressie McMillan Cottom (2021). *Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet: The Sociology of Race and Racism in the Digital Society*.

Erin McElroy and Manon Vergerio (2022). [Automating Gentrification: landlord technologies and housing justice organizing in New York City](#).

Julien Migozzi (2022). [Apartheid by Algorithm](#).

Rea Zaimi (2020). [Making Real Estate Markets: The Co-Production of Race and Property Value in Early 20th Century Appraisal Science](#).

WEEK 13/Apr. 11: Contesting housing speculation and surveillance (readings subject to change)

Erin McElroy (2023). [Dis/Possessory Data Politics: From Tenant Screening to Anti-Eviction Organizing](#).

Maedhbh Nic Lochlainn (2021). [Digital/material housing financialisation and activism in post-crash Dublin](#).

Miranda Hall (2020). [How to Pick a Smart Lock](#).

WEEK 14/Apr. 18: Mapping and reflection

This week we will collectively reflect on the themes and connections of the course. Come to class prepared to discuss the texts/themes that were most important to you, and why.

WEEK 15/Apr. 25: Presentations and celebration (*class meets from 1-4:30pm, refreshments provided*)

This week students will give brief (no more than 8 minutes) presentations of draft seminar papers, with opportunities for feedback and questions.

R/R/R WEEK/May 2

Final project due: May 9