Housing in the Margins: Negotiating Urban Formalities in Berlin’s Allotment Gardens

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Critical shortages of affordable housing force people into housing precarity across the globe. Drawing from my forthcoming book, Housing in the Margins (Hilbrandt 2020), this presentation explores 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, it illustrates how these gardeners negotiate the possibilities of residency with the local bureaucracy, gardening associations and amongst themselves. I pursue this project with empirical and theoretical objectives: studying empirically how people negotiate ways of staying put in allotment gardens and how boundaries around their dwelling practices are drawn, I aim at understanding the production and governance of housing precarity in a relatively rich European city. In theorizing these processes of governance, I seek to unveil the possibilities of conceptualizing informal housing in the context of bureaucracies that are commonly understood to regulate thoroughly, coherently, and according to fixed rules. 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 presentation draws attention to the power of negotiations in the governance of urban space.