Public Art, Graffiti and the Right to the City

Module Overview
This module is an introduction to creativity and crime in cities, with a focus on graffiti, street art and other types of public surface communications. Throughout the three weeks, the module will introduce concepts and methods that enable us to understand contemporary urban environments, as they are shaped through architecture, creativity and the maintenance of order. We will examine different visual languages from graffiti to public art and hostile architecture, to understand who uses and produces the city, and who urban spaces belong to.

The module will start with an overview of contemporary urban theories and introduce an international history of graffiti and street art, to examine how these practices produce conversations about publicness and privacy, art and crime, transgression and the law. Students will be taken on journeys across the city and will debate the role of graffiti in claiming and shaping public spaces, within a context of a rapidly developing and increasingly exclusionary London.

Week One: concepts, methods, frameworks
- Neoliberal urbanism: privatisation, securitisation, publicness
- Urban semiotics: signs, images, codes; visual culture; meaning production in cities
- Surface city: walls, surfaces, territories: political, cultural and symbolic meanings of surfaces

Week Two: practices, histories, case studies
- Graffiti, street art, posters, murals: a history of typologies and examples
- Art, crime, politics: the paradoxes of illegality and creativity
- London graffiti and street art: types, spaces, developments

Please note that this module description is indicative and may be subject to change.
Week Three: *projects, analyses, interventions*

- The right to the city and urban activism: changing the city, not just understanding it
- Documentation, interpretation, proposal: individual and team projects on different London sites
- Final presentations of projects and suggestions for further work

**Module Aims**

This module aims to provide a multidisciplinary reading of contemporary urban environments through political expressions such as graffiti and street art. The module will examine the role of these practices to interrogate visibility and belonging in cities, and to develop a critical capacity to read contemporary urban cultures.

The module also aims to expand students’ knowledge and awareness of social, architectural and political theories that underpin the management and research of urban environments, with a particular emphasis on London. Who should decide what cities look like, and how do we negotiate this question?

Finally, the module aims to widen students’ understanding of London urbanism, culture and architecture by examining the displays on its surfaces. Students will learn to interpret these through writing and photography, and will be encouraged to formulate their own stances in relation to contemporary urban phenomena.

**Teaching Methods**

This module will use lectures, seminars, site visits, guest talks, film screenings and individual projects to introduce students to London’s graffiti and street art. Contact time will be divided between lectures, seminars and site visits, in addition to film screenings, group workshops and project tutorials. Students are expected to critically engage with the topics during lectures and site visits, not just during the seminars, and will be assessed through two outcomes: photography projects and written essays. Resources will be provided via Moodle and email support will be available.

**Learning Outcomes**

Upon successful completion of this module, students will:

1. develop a comprehensive understanding of contemporary wall writing phenomena, from graffiti to street art and muralism, and acquire an adequate language to evaluate their social, political and artistic standing
2. operate with concepts such as regeneration, order, visibility, creative urbanism, law and spatial ownership, the right to the city and spatial justice
3. articulate a critical discourse about neoliberal urbanism and public creativity, which are key frameworks in the development of any spatial practice (suitable for architects, designers, planners, sociologists, geographers, artists, activists, cultural theorists etc)
4. form a politicised and radical engagement with issues around contemporary urbanism and urban art, to contribute to the production of more diverse and inclusive cities
5. acquire transferable methodological skills around the production and interpretation of space, and familiarise themselves with London as a complex neoliberal urban environment

**Assessment Methods**

- Photography project (25%)
- 2,000 word essay (75%)

*Please note that this module description is indicative and may be subject to change.*
Key Texts


Avramidis, Kostas and Tsilimpoundi, Myrto (eds.), Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City, New York: Routledge, 2017.


Module Leader

Dr Sabina Andron is a London-based architectural historian and urban scholar. Her research interests focus on the right to the city, urban surface inscriptions and materialities, crime and transgression, and urban semiotics. She completed her PhD in 2018 at the Bartlett School of Architecture, with a thesis titled “Graffiti, Street Art and the Right to the Surface: For a Semiotic, Cultural and Legal Approach to Urban Surfaces and Inscriptions”. Sabina currently lectures across London, at the Bartlett, the University of East London, and Ravensbourne University. Her work includes modules on the history of London architecture, the history of the home and interior design, neoliberal urbanism and city cultures, and graffiti, spatial justice and the image of the city. She was a UCL Grand Challenges grantee and organiser of the international Graffiti Sessions conference in 2014, and a British Council fellow at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2016. She is co-convenor, with Susan Hansen, of the Art on the Streets symposium.