In the seminar *On Whose Terms?* we will unpack the ideologies embedded in the language we use to talk about housing. Words are powerful vehicles to advance ideological agendas and hence frame not only the financial, social, and political dimensions of housing, but its design. Studying the trajectory of how words evolve across time, place, and disciplines reveals not only the instrumentality of language, but also allows designers and planners to better understand the meaning and impact of their work today. This is particularly urgent at a moment in which the housing “crisis” has moved back to center stage both nationally and globally. The course posits that architects and planners need to be able to contribute to and change the conversation on an issue that is largely framed in economic and political terms.

Every term we use encapsulates normative assumptions. Architects, policy makers, and users alike incessantly invoke “community,” for example, to suggest positively-connoted ideas of participation and belonging, and yet rarely address who this framing may in fact exclude or why it so often leads to “contextual” urban design. We almost invariably quantify housing in terms of “units,” but seldom question the underlying notion of “household,” which in turn leads to a limited range of dwelling “types.”

Some terms are so ubiquitous and so fundamentally part of our capitalist mode of development that we no longer question what they entail. Why, for instance, is “affordable housing” not only defined in relation to, but almost exclusively generated as a by-product of “market-rate” housing? And what does it mean that the term emerged only in the mid-1980s? Other terms have fallen out of use, and yet their rationale lives on: in the early twentieth century, “obsolescent” was used to justify slum clearance and urban renewal; today, “underused” is given as a reason to upzone a site. Underlying both terms is a similar striving for economic maximization through “density,” and the outcome is the same: redevelopment.

A central question motivating the seminar is thus: can we envision a form of housing as existing beyond the market, and if yes, how can architecture contribute to this proposition?
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### Learning Objectives and Pedagogy

The class is structured around a selection of key terms used to talk about how we live in the United States today.

We will dissect these terms through the close reading of canonical and more recent texts written both by practitioners and scholars, and seek to connect these to contemporary developments in housing. We will seek to bridge theory and practice through selected case studies, including two field trips in the Boston area.

As a final project, students will select a term of their choice, a policy or a project as a point of departure to develop their own exploration of how design, policy, and finance intersect in housing.

The seminar’s goal is *not* to develop a set of normative practices or replicable models or to coin new terms. Rather, the intent is to sharpen students’ awareness of the assumptions embedded in the way architects talk and think about housing. Rather than immediately jumping to addressing issue like affordability through design in ways that are often subsumed as “smarter, more creative, more efficient”—, we will aim to understand what is at stake when architecture is asked to be smart, creative, and efficient, and explore the implications of certain design solutions that have had astonishing persistence in search for cheaper housing, including shrinking, prefabricating, standardizing, and leaving unfinished.

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### Assignments and Grading

**Class Participation** 20%

This class is a reading, writing, and discussion seminar. It requires the participation of all. Each week, a group of students will lead the discussion of the assigned texts in light of the questions posed by that week’s term. Every student will lead one class discussion over the course of the semester.

*For the discussion leaders:*

Identify what you think are the two most provocative issues raised in the texts and contemporary policy studied that week. Reflect on concepts or issues as they emerge across several texts and how different authors treat a similar question; how they do so in terms of theoretical assumptions and rhetorical tools; where their argument is strong, and where it is weak. Select one or several passages to analyze in detail and to illustrate your point. In addition to the contemporary policy we are looking at, select another case study—this could be a particular project, a financing program, a policy proposal, in the US or elsewhere—to speculate on a way to consider the week’s socio-economic issues in tandem with architectural form. Conclude with two or three questions left open by the text which you want to use to structure the discussion.

**Weekly Response Papers** 30%

Every week, all students—except those leading the discussion—will write and submit a short essay of 300 to 500 words in response to that week’s readings and contemporary policy.

The goal of the response papers is for you to synthesize the readings in your own words and position yourselves vis-à-vis the authors’ arguments by articulating two or three questions they raise for you. The practical goal of the response papers is for you to prepare for the class discussion, and to create a document, a kind of *fiche de lecture*, that you can refer back to in the future.

Response papers can focus on identifying authors’ underlying assumptions and contradictions in their argument; the use of a particular term; the resonance the text has in your own experience. Always include key passages or quotations, correctly cited. In addition to articulating key takeaways, all response papers should attempt to bridge theory and practice, historical events and contemporary developments by identifying a case study—whether that be a project, a program, or a policy—which connects to the issues discussed.

During the semester, one of these response papers should refer to a public event—whether a panel discussion, lecture, or community meeting. Consider a lecture organized by the Joint Center for Housing Studies, a community meeting organized by the City of Cambridge, or a lecture at MIT.
Response papers are due by the start of each class session, and should be submitted as a pdf to the class website as a pdf with the file name LASTNAME_Date. Bring a printed copy to class to help you formulate questions and comments in the discussion.

Final Project 50%

Your final project is a research paper prompted by an observation around the terminology of housing. Take a project, plan, policy, or debate related to housing as a point of departure to analyze how language has been used, by whom, and towards which ends, to advance competing goals prompted by your case study. Draw on primary and secondary sources, and venture into identifying and connecting atypical sources of evidence. Aim for 3,000 words, and experiment with the types of illustrations and graphics to support your analysis, argument, and narrative.

We will have two intermediate deadlines, since continuously working on an idea and incorporating feedback is key to developing it into something you’ll like. A two-page proposal which includes your research question, methods, and primary and secondary sources is due on October 22. A preliminary draft for a workshopping session is due before November 26. And we will present once more, in very short form, all papers in the concluding class session on December 9. The final deadline for the paper is tbc.

Thinking through language and building and policies by taking any one as a point of departure—“informal,” “vibrant,” or “sustainable”; NYC’s pencil towers, Texas’s stick-built mid-rises, or privately-developed amenity-rich dormitories; best practices, guidelines, tax shelters—to understand how one enables and reinforces the other; this is the experiment of On Whose Terms?

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Overview of Class Sessions, Topics, and Deadlines

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>September 10</td>
<td>Housing</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>September 17</td>
<td>Crisis</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>September 24</td>
<td>Affordable</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>October 1</td>
<td>Unit</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>October 8</td>
<td>Community</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>October 15</td>
<td>No Class–Columbus Day/Indigenous People’s Day  Meet with Dr. Schindler before October 15 to discuss paper proposal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>October 22</td>
<td>Efficient  Site Visit Boston with Utile. Details tbc.  Two-page paper proposal due.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>October 29</td>
<td>Public  Site Visit Cambridge with CHA. Details tbc.</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>November 5</td>
<td>Equity</td>
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<td>Context</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>November 19</td>
<td>Quality</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>November 26</td>
<td>Student Project Workshop  Submit paper draft before class, time tbc.</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>December 2</td>
<td>Kitchen</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>December 9</td>
<td>Conclusion and Outlook  Final paper due, date tbc.</td>
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Grading Definition

A Exceptionally good performance demonstrating a superior understanding of the subject matter, a foundation of extensive knowledge, and a skillful use of concepts and/or materials.

B Good performance demonstrating capacity to use the appropriate concepts, a good understanding of the subject matter, and an ability to handle the problems and materials encountered in the subject.

C Adequate performance demonstrating an adequate understanding of the subject matter, an ability to handle relatively simple problems, and adequate preparation for moving on to more advanced work in the field.

D Minimally acceptable performance demonstrating at least partial familiarity with the subject matter and some capacity to deal with relatively simple problems, but also demonstrating deficiencies serious enough to make it inadvisable to proceed further in the field without additional work.

F Failed. This grade also signifies that the student must repeat the subject to receive credit.

Absence and Deadline Policy

Work in the seminar builds sequentially and requires the active participation of all. Absences will be excused only with prior notification. Late assignments will result in a lowering of your grade.

Seminar Culture

The Department of Architecture promotes a learning environment that supports the diverse values of the entire MIT community of students, faculty, administration, staff and guests. Fundamental to the mission of architectural education is the stewardship of this diversity in a positive and respectful learning environment that promotes the highest intellectual integrity and cultural literacy.

Academic Integrity and Honesty

MIT’s expectations and policies regarding academic integrity should be read carefully and adhered to diligently: http://integrity.mit.edu/

The MIT Writing Center

The MIT Writing and Communication Center offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts. The WCC is staffed completely by MIT lecturers. All have advanced degrees. All are experienced college classroom teachers of communication. All are published scholars and writers. WCC lecturers have a combined 130 years’ worth of teaching here at MIT (ranging from 1 to 26 years).

We work with undergraduates, graduate students, post-docs, faculty, staff, alumni, and spouses. The WCC helps everyone strategize about all types of academic and professional writing as well as oral presentations and slide design.

No matter what department or discipline you are in, the WCC helps you think your way more deeply into your topic, and helps you see new implications in your data, research, and ideas. The WCC also helps with non-native speaker issues, from writing and grammar to pronunciation and conversation practice. To make an appointment, go to https://mit.mywconline.com and register with our online scheduler. The WCC is at E18-233, 50 Ames Street.
Seminar Sessions

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**Week 1, September 10**

**Introduction: Keywords of Housing** (v Home, House, Dwelling)

**Required Reading:**


*Challenge:* Formulate a 3-minute pitch to present in class. What exactly, to you, is the problem with housing today? And how would you solve it?

**Additional Resources:**

Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, Meaghan Morris, and Raymond Williams, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005).


Alban Janson and Florian Tigges, *Fundamental Concepts of Architecture: The Vocabulary of Spatial Situations* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2014) [MIT has online access]. *Note:* This is only one example of a long list of dictionaries and glossaries produced by architects, including those by Gausa, Tschumi, Koolhaas and others.

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**Week 2, September 17**

**Crisis** (v Problem, Question, Failure)

**Required Reading:**


*Contemporary Debate: Democratic Presidential Candidates’ Debate, September 12.*

**Additional Resources:**


Week 3, September 24

**Affordable** (v Public, Social, Mass, Workforce, Cheap, Subsidized, Low-cost, Low-income…)


*Catalyst Policy Proposal: City of Cambridge, Affordable Housing Overlay, 2019.*

**Additional Resources:**


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Week 4, October 1

**Unit** (v Household, Family, Apartment, Cell, Type)


*Catalyst Policy Proposal: City of Boston, Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) pilot program*

**Additional Resources:**


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**Week 5, October 8**

**Community** (v Society, Neighborhood, Non-profit, Local, Self-Help)


*Contemporary Policy Proposal: Center for American Progress, Homes for All, 2018.*

Additional Resources:


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**Week 6, October 15**

**No Class: Columbus Day/Indigenous Peoples’ Day**

Meet with Dr. Schindler before October 15 to discuss Project/Paper proposal. Use the MIT holiday to develop your paper proposal. Submit Paper Proposal by October 22, expect feedback by October 29.

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**Week 7, October 22**

**Efficient: Site visit and discussion with Utile, Inc. (Matthew Littell and Nick Buehrens)**

Details tbc

Paper proposal due.

**Required Reading:**


*Contemporary Policy: City of Boston’s Affordable Housing Design Guidelines*
Week 8, October 29

Public: Site visit with the Cambridge Housing Authority (CHA)
Details tbc

Required Reading:


*Contemporary Policy: Current projects by the CHA, including those developed under RAD (Rental Assistance Demonstration Program)*

Additional Resources:


Week 9, November 5

**Equity** (Fairness, Ownership, Investment, Value)

Required Reading:


*Current Policy Proposals (choose one!): Pete Butigieg’s Homesteading Plan 2019; Elizabeth Warren’s Home Ownership Plan 2018; or the Trump Administration’s Opportunity Zones, 2017.*

Additional Resources:


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**Week 10, November 12**

**Context** (Fabric, Vibrant, Diversity, Mixed-Income, Mixed-Use)

**Required Reading:**

*Contemporary Policy: City of Minneapolis, Minneapolis 2040.*

**Additional Resources:**

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**Week 11, November 19**

**Quality** (aka Density, Urbanity)

**Required Reading:**


**Additional Resources:**
Raymond Unwin, *Nothing Gained by Overcrowding: How the Garden City type of development may benefit both owner and occupier* (Westminster, UK: 1912).
Working Session on Final Papers
Details tbc

Week 13, December 2

Kitchen (v household, family, reproduction)


Additional Resources:


Week 14, December 9

Presentation of Projects and Final Discussion
A Selection of Additional Resources

Books on Architecture and/or Housing Policy in the United States

A Small Selection of Sources on Architecture and Housing in a more global perspective

Recent Resources resulting from Events and Exhibitions:
After Belonging: The Objects, Spaces, and Territories of the Ways We Stay in Transit, edited by Lluis Alexandre Casanovas Blanco, Ignacio G. Galán, Carlos Mínguez Carrasco, Alejandra Navarrete Llopis, and Marina Otero Verzier (Switzerland: Lars Müller, 2016).
Urban Omnibus, Housing Brasstacks Series and other coverage on housing), https://urbanomnibus.net/series/housing-brass-tacks/

Recent Journal Issues and Publications focused on architecture and housing
Home Improvement, Jacobin No. 33 (Spring 2019), https://www.jacobinmag.com/issue/home-improvement

Newsletters on Housing in the United States
CityLab, citylab.com, in particular articles by Kriston Capps and Sarah Holder.
City Limits, citylimits.org, in particular the “Mapping the Future” newsletter
Housing Starts, NYU Furman Center, furmancenter.org
NextCity, nextcity.org, in particular “Backyard” newsletter by Jared Brey.
Shelterforce, shelterforce.org