



# Spring Academy

## *Urban Scholarship and Activism*

9-12 June  
2026

## Call for Applications

Urban research today unfolds amid overlapping crises—ecological breakdown, deepening inequality, the dismantling of democracy, and the reconfiguration of capitalism and governance. In this unsettled terrain, researchers increasingly seek to engage beyond the academy, co-producing knowledge with urban communities, activists, and policy actors.

This turn is also reflected in an enhanced recognition of the value of transdisciplinary knowledge production, participatory and citizen-science methods, and impact-oriented work which has started to change the very structures of academia itself: Frameworks such as Horizon Europe or the National Science Foundation's "Civic Innovation Challenge" explicitly promote collaboration across academic, public, and civil society sectors. Academic institutions like the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy or the Centre for Urban Research (CURB) at the University of York have begun explicitly mobilise research to support social movements and aim to bridge scientific analysis, policy engagement, and creative practice.

These developments illustrate that activist and transdisciplinary scholarship is no longer peripheral but increasingly central to the international field of urban studies. Furthermore, they reflect an important institutional shift: an acknowledgement that addressing complex urban challenges requires forms of knowledge that are integrative, plural, and co-produced. However, they also introduce new tensions. Calls for "impact" and "societal relevance" can both open and close possibilities for critical and independent research. When engagement becomes an administrative requirement, it risks losing its political and epistemological edge.

**The turn towards engagement also raises fundamental questions about the role of scholarship: What does it mean to study the city critically and with others? What are the potentials, contradictions, and limits of urban scholarship that aspires to be both analytical and transformative?**

The Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS) hosts its annual Spring Academy this year on the theme of „Urban Scholarship and Activism.“ The event calls on doctoral and postdoctoral researchers to critically examine the role of engaged urban research.



# Spring Academy 2026

The Academy offers a vital forum where participants can contribute and discuss their own experiences, projects, and positionalities in depth. Using formats such as keynotes, workshops, and field trips, participants will join lecturers and practitioners to explore the opportunities, challenges, and contradictions of co-producing knowledge across academia, activism, and practice. Together, they will also interrogate how these entanglements reshape both urban politics and the very conditions of academic knowledge production.

## Themes and Questions

The Spring Academy welcomes participants who are interested in or working on the relations of urban scholarship and activism. It examines the intellectual foundations, strategies, opportunities, and problems connected with scholar-activist interactions and develop strategies and tactics for navigating the manifold contradictions they are accompanied by.

### Possible themes include:

- Engagement and contradiction: How do scholars negotiate the tension between analytical distance and political commitment?
- Alliances and co-production: What make collaborations between academics, activists, and communities equitable, sustainable, and transformative?
- Epistemic justice and rigour: How can participatory and activist methodologies redefine the meaning of rigour and credibility in the social sciences?
- Institutional change and impact frameworks: How do funding logics shape what forms of engagement are possible or desirable?
- Reflexivity and care: What practices of humility, care, and accountability sustain collaborative urban research?
- Imagining just urban futures: How can scholar-activist alliances contribute to alternative imaginaries of justice, solidarity, and sustainability?

Rather than promoting a single model of scholar-activism, the Spring Academy invites participants to reflect on how these contradictions shape their own projects. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a broader intellectual and institutional agenda: one that reclaims the academia as a space for engaged, critical, and transformative inquiry in the service of more just urban futures.

## Formats and Venues

Designed to foster interdisciplinary exchange, the IRS Spring Academy combines established formats, such as lectures and seminars, with less common ones, including doing-research workshops, paper pitches, and field trips. This structure provides participants with ample opportunities to discuss current concepts, methodological approaches and experiences from individual projects with leading scholars in the field. The Academy will be held at the IRS (in Erkner near Berlin) and at various locations in Berlin.

## Application and Participation

### Target group

Doctoral candidates and early post-doctoral researchers from disciplines such as Sociology, History, Geography, Architecture, Spatial and Environmental Planning, Economics, and others. Participants will be selected according to their academic qualification as well as the suitability of their current project to the topic of the IRS Spring Academy 2026.

### Costs and scholarship

Tuition fees will not be charged. Meals, snacks and drinks during the academy are included, as well as one evening reception and one dinner. Participants are required to organise accommodation and make travel arrangements themselves and to cover these expenses.

A limited number of scholarships (up to €500) are available to cover travel and accommodation costs for participants who cannot secure funding from their home institutions and whose participation would otherwise be prevented by these costs. To apply: Please briefly explain your financial situation and indicate the minimum amount required for your participation. Note that in case of strong demand, scholarships may be divided among eligible candidates.

### Application

Applications will be evaluated jointly by an internal Summer School selection committee. Selected candidates (up to 25) will be notified in mid-March 2025. Enrolment will take place until the end of March.

### Applications must include:

- a motivational letter (1–2 pages)
- your CV
- a short description of your current project, e.g., an abstract of your dissertation including name and affiliation of your supervisors
- if applicable: application for financial support (scholarship)

### Contact and submission address

Please send your application in one pdf file via email to [springacademy@leibniz-irs.de](mailto:springacademy@leibniz-irs.de)

If any questions arise feel free to contact PD Dr. Matthias Bernt (Scientific lead)

or Anika Posselius (Coordination) at the same email address.

Further Information: [leibniz-irs.de/springacademy-26](https://leibniz-irs.de/springacademy-26)

**Deadline for applications 16 February 2026**