Neoliberalism is a political philosophy and an ‘art of government’ that has become hegemonic within capitalist countries since the economic crisis of the mid-1970s and the consequent dismantling of economic and institutional relationships based on the Fordist-Keynesian mode of production and regulation. Within the critical social sciences, two main theoretical approaches have been taken to the conceptualisation and the empirical analysis of neoliberalism. First, in political economy scholarship, neoliberalism has been understood as a hegemonic mode of societal governance and a capital accumulation strategy, which resorts to supply-side economic policies in order to improve the competitiveness of firms and territories, including cities and their economic actors. Second, in the literature inspired by Foucauldian thinking, neoliberalism has been interpreted as a governmental rationality and an art of government conducted in the name of ‘freedom’ and ‘accountability’, seeking to turn citizens – such as city dwellers from different social and ethnic backgrounds – into responsible, disciplined and active individuals through the functioning of increasingly more sophisticated and rationalised systems of evaluation, surveillance and education.

Both these approaches have played a distinctive role in the field of urban studies. In this lecture, we will challenge the conventionally dualistic understanding of neoliberalism, showing how these two dimensions mutually reinforce each other. In so doing, we will deconstruct two commonly used definitions associating cities and neoliberalism: urban neoliberalism and neoliberal urbanism. In the scholarly literature these two terms customarily used interchangeably. Here we differentiate between them, associating the notion of ‘urban neoliberalism’ with the urbanisation of neoliberalism and the notion of ‘neoliberal urbanism’ with the neoliberalisation of the urban experience.