

Urban informality in the Global North: boat living and the negotiation of urban space on London's waterways

Lauren Johnston, University of Cambridge

Abstract

This paper examines boat dwelling on London's waterways as a manifestation of urban informality in the Global North. Situating this phenomenon within debates on informal housing and postcolonial urban theory, the study challenges conventional dichotomies that associate informality with the Global South. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with boaters and discourse analysis of regulatory frameworks, the research explores the motivations behind boat living, the lived experiences of mobile habitation, and the governance structures that shape boat life. The findings reveal that houseboat dwelling is driven by a mix of economic necessity, lifestyle choice, and strategic adaptation. Despite operating within legal licensing regimes, the governance of houseboat living reveals how informality is not an absence of regulation, but a produced condition managed through discretionary enforcement and selective formalisation. This study contributes to urban informality scholarship by advancing calls for a more nuanced and geographically inclusive theorisation of informal urbanism and demonstrates that houseboats are not simply informal or formal but hybrid, contested forms of dwelling that reconfigure the production of urban life in the Global North.