

AESOP Excellence in Teaching Award 2025

Urban informality

Melanie Lombard, Philipp Horn

School of Geography and Planning, University of Sheffield



Figure 1: Core teaching team

Abstract

This module takes a novel focus to urban informality, a phenomenon that is increasing in cities globally (Harris 2018), yet remains a challenge for planning. To explore patterns and causes of informality, and assess strengths and limitations of diverse theoretical approaches, it applies a new three-part framework of living, working, and governing informally. It analyses the success of different real-world planning responses to informality, defining planning inclusively to incorporate government-led, donor-led and community-focused initiatives. It takes a global approach, incorporating theory and practice from Southern contexts where informality is well-established, while acknowledging the increasingly prevalent nature of this issue in the global North.

The module's pedagogical innovation rests on its problem-based learning approach supported by the critical interrogation of planning theory and practice via alternative representations, co-created resources and repositioning of community knowledge. Weekly lectures convey concepts necessary for understanding informality and providing a critical appraisal of diverse real-world planning responses. Seminars offer an interactive setting for students to prepare assignments via discussion of core readings, which bring academic texts into conversation with alternative representations of informality such as novels, films, photo essays, informal resident and worker testimonies, and media representations.

The module is offered to undergraduate students on MPlan Urban Studies and Planning, and postgraduate students on MSc Urban and Regional Planning, MA Urban Design and Planning, and MA International Development programmes.

Institutional context

By equipping students with cutting-edge knowledge and practical skills to address informality (as expressed in SDG 11), the module promotes the role of planning in shaping sustainable futures (in line with UK's RTPI international priorities) and Education for Sustainable Development (a core institutional priority of the University of Sheffield). It also aligns with the School of Geography and Planning's critical, interdisciplinary, and global perspective on contemporary urban challenges, seeking to create critically-engaged planning practitioners in pursuit of more just, fair, and sustainable urban places. The module develops students' skills in applying knowledge, research and critical thinking, group work – students gain experience in working with others through seminars and group presentations, equality and inclusion, global awareness, and ethics and sustainability – students are required to consider planning ethics recognising and evaluating different real-world urban planning responses to urban informality. The module typically attracts around 25 to 30 students per year.

Planning concept

The module takes an inclusive approach to conceptualising planning, understanding planning responses to informality as state-led, citizen-led or co-productive. Even in contexts where informality is prevalent, planning is often still understood as 'spatial public policies and practices' (Huxley and Yiftachel 2000), corresponding to our conceptualisation of state-led approaches. However, in such contexts, citizen-led practices are central to understanding how informal places and practices develop and are maintained. We place equal emphasis on these processes, informed by recent reformulations of 'participation as

planning' via a focus on 'collective forms of spatial production' (Frediani and Cocina 2019, 150) which may be led by households, communities or grassroots organisations. We encourage students to think beyond binaries and conceptualise co-productive approaches (Mitlin et al 2019; Watson 2014) to respond to urban informality at scale, for example through provision of formal infrastructure by the state with participation of local stakeholders.

Course aim and learning outcomes

The overall aim of this module is to critically examine urban informality, with a particular but not exclusive focus on cities of the Global South. The specific learning outcomes (LO) of this module are as follows:

LO1: Describe the key characteristics of informality, such as spatial, economic, cultural, environmental, political, social and historical/temporal factors, with particular focus on cities of the Global South;

LO2: Analyse and explain these characteristics, with reference to a range of theoretical approaches;

LO3: Critically appraise these theoretical approaches;

LO4: Recognise and evaluate different real-world urban planning responses, such as government-led, donor-led and community-focused ones, that address key urban issues in a context of informality;

LO5: Demonstrate theoretical and practical knowledge on informality in relation to a selected city;

LO6: Develop group work and presentation skills and express complex issues orally and in writing.

Learning and capacity development

Learning is promoted through lectures, interactive seminars, and self-study. Eight lectures provide an overview of urban informality. After the module introduction, the first substantive lecture focuses on the evolution of informality as phenomenon and concept (LO1, 2). The subsequent three lectures are structured around its main characteristics, through an innovative framework developed for the module, defined as living, working, and governing informally (LO1, 2). Two subsequent lectures focus on planning responses (broadly understood as state-led, citizen-led and co-productive efforts) to address informal living, working and governing informally (LO4). While all lectures focus on case studies from the global South and North, a final lecture discusses in greater detail Northern articulations of informality as well as emerging conceptual alternatives to informality such as popular urbanisation, collective life, and solidarity economies (LO2, 3).

Equality, diversity and inclusivity are embedded in the module, recognising students' differentiated exposure to the topic depending on their previous academic background and lived experience. The five seminars are structured to interactively support students' work on their assessed group presentation and individual essay. For the group presentation, students are required to evaluate articulations and responses to informality in a city of their choice (LO1-6). For the essay, students must analyse discourses, practices and planning responses related to a specific urban issue (such as housing, land management, service provision, employment, commerce) associated with informality in a specific city (ideally the same one) (LO1-6). Seminars model the

process of selecting a case study city, conceptualising and exploring informality in a given urban context, and exploring responses.

Students are supported with accessible reading lists for each session, highlighting key preparatory readings including core articles, policy reports and alternative representations. Our recently published book 'Urban Informality: An Introduction' now serves as supplementary course reading (see below for more detail).

Innovation in pedagogical/topical approaches

Through the module, we engage with diverse 'representations' of informality, including but also moving beyond the academic literature. These include popular and artistic accounts alongside academic and policy sources, as well as practice- and community-focused representations. We draw on novels, poems, blogs, vlogs, including our key reading Rohinton Mistry's 'A Fine Balance,' poems drafted by people living informally such as Patrick Magebhula Hunsley's 'Illegal,' and community-generated news pieces on informality such as RioOnWatch.

In addition to teaching staff setting core readings, students are invited to co-create a collective resource on alternative representations of informality by uploading relevant films, novels, blogs, photo-essays and other non-academic representations onto a 'living' shared document. This not only fosters community-building, but also serves as a basis for a more horizontal learning environment where students and academic staff co-learn about informality while critically reflecting on their different positions. In-class exercises also encourage students to think about how, in one way or the other, their own individual lives are shaped by informality - whether this is through previous lived experience of

living or working informally, exposure to informal practices in their cities and countries of origin, or through engaging with goods and products that, somewhere in the value chain, involved informal work. For example, inspired by Ledeneva's (2018) 'The Global Encyclopedia of Informality', we invite students in the introductory lecture to identify and describe a particular informal practice associated with a place they previously inhabited.

Building on our approach to move beyond conventional academic representations and reposition expert knowledge through more diverse, inclusive and equitable teaching, the module also includes a lecture and group discussion delivered by community leaders, practitioners and community activists from the Community Savers network, a women-led regional network of savings groups that draws on practices developed by Shack/ Slum Dwellers International. Drawing on their lived experience, members of this network reflect on the relevance of informality in the global North and the important role women-led co-production plays in achieving poverty reduction in Manchester and Sheffield.



Figure 2: Leaders from Community Savers giving guest lecture, 2024.

Theory and practice integration

To prepare students for their assignment (see below) and to enhance their understanding of the theory-practice

interface, two lectures focus on 'responses' to informality where we highlight how top-down, citizen-led and co-productive interventions shifted over time, from initial efforts seeking to stamp out informal markets and neighbourhoods to more contemporary efforts that better embrace informality. Here, we engage with core debates in planning and urban development practice, reflecting particularly on the three Habitat Agendas and their translation into government interventions. We also recognise the importance of the efforts expended by those living and working informally. By focusing on citizen-led, bottom-up and co-produced efforts, we emphasise how the practices by those labelled as informal have specific qualities that should be valued and supported in their own right. To make these points, we engage practitioners and community-based activists directly, either by inviting them to deliver lectures (see above discussion on Community Savers, previous lectures also involved Sheffield City Council) or by drawing on practitioner 'representations'. For example, within our textbook that accompanies the module, students engage with practitioner contributions within planning response chapters, for example from organisations such as Catalytic Communities who address living informally in Rio (Brazil) and Asiye eTelufani (WIEGO affiliate addressing informal work in Durban South Africa).

Student assessment

Assessment on the module is through two assignments as follows:

Assignment 1, 15-minute group presentation (20%): Each group must prepare and deliver a presentation describing, explaining and critically analysing different and interrelated characteristics and representations of, as well as planning responses towards

different articulations of informality (e.g. related to living, working, and governing informally) in one specific city in the global South.

Assignment 2, 2,500-word individual essay (80%): This final assignment requires students to analyse discourses, practices and planning responses related to a specific urban issue (such as housing, land management, service provision, employment, commerce) associated with one or multiple articulations of informality in one city in the global South or North. Draw on theoretical approaches, policy/planning debates, and alternative representations encountered within the course.

Feedback on the module

The module regularly receives very high student ratings via teaching evaluations. For example, in 2024/25, students on the module responded positively (agree or strongly agree) to the following questions:

- This module was intellectually stimulating (100%)
- The interactive activities helped to develop my understanding (100%)
- There were sufficient opportunities to interact with teaching staff (100%)

Some comments from students:

'An exceptionally engaging module, this has incredibly advanced my understanding of informality in a short space of time'.

'The modules aim to look at other forms of information and learning, not just academic articles, and not just from the global north. It was refreshing'.

'This was such a positive choice in terms of my MSc modules. So pleased that I decided to take this option. The teaching staff were proactive, engaging and helpful.'

Resources (and the variety of formats they were presented in) were well considered and gave a mixture of reading, watching and listening. I feel that the whole course was structured in a very progressive way, continually building on prior knowledge..

'The global approach to understanding informality allows us to contextualise concepts learnt in class and relate with our personal experiences and knowledge, especially for international students this greatly matured our understanding of urban informality'.

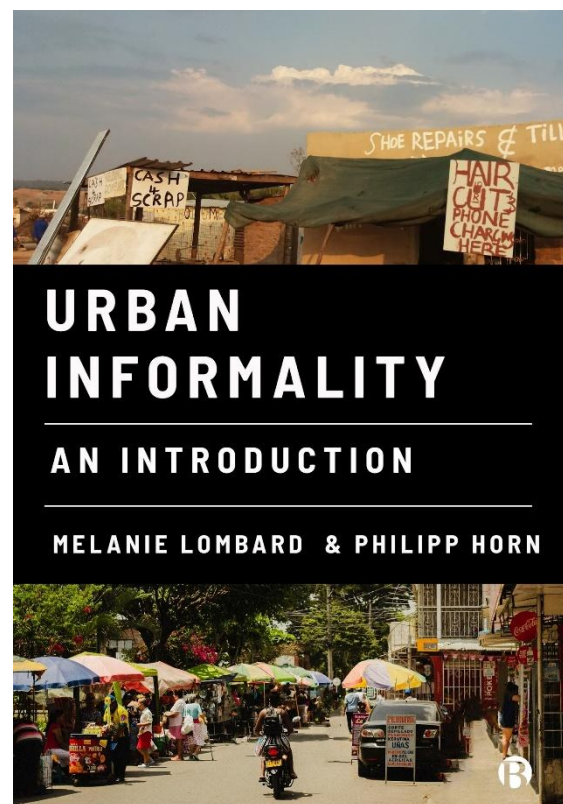


Figure 3: Module textbook.

Lessons learned and transferability

Recognising that there is an absence of teaching-oriented material on informality, module convenors Horn and Lombard promote transferability of teaching and resources on the module through publishing 'Urban Informality: An Introduction' (2024, Bristol University Press) - a textbook serving wider higher education, particularly planning schools

interested in addressing informality in their curriculum.

Our book already serves as key reading on planning courses delivered by other UK and international institutions, including the University of Manchester, University of Cambridge, and Institute of Housing Studies in Rotterdam.

While this indicates that the transferability of our teaching insights, we recognise that some barriers need addressing. For example, currently our textbook is only available in English and not accessible to students in non-Anglophone settings. To address this barrier, we are exploring options to translate our book into Spanish with FLACSO, thereby enabling the transfer of teaching contents to the Latin American context where informality is a critical planning challenge.

Acknowledgement

This module has benefitted over the course of its development from input by key colleagues and collaborators, and also the energy and input of its students.

Key references

Lombard, M. and Horn, P. (2024) *Urban Informality: An Introduction*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Banks, N., Lombard, M. and Mitlin, D., (2020). Urban informality as a site of critical analysis. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 56(2), pp.223-238.

Chen, M. and Carre, F. (2020) *The Informal Economy Revisited: Examining the Past, Envisioning the Future*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Goodfellow T (2016) *Urban Informality and the State: A Relationship of Perpetual Negotiation* In Grugel J & Hammett D (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of International Development*. London: Palgrave, pp. 207-225.

Ledeneva, A. (2018) *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality (Volume 1 & 2)*. London: UCL Press.

Marx, C., Elorduy, N. and Sinha, N. (eds) (2024) *Urban Informality and the Built Environment*. UCL Press: London, UK.

Marx, C. and Kelling, E., (2019) Knowing urban informalities. *Urban Studies*, 56(3), pp.494-509.

Roy, A. and AlSayyad, N. (2004) *Urban informality: Transnational perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America and South Asia*. New York: Lexington Books.

UN-Habitat (2003) *The Challenge of Slums. Global Report on Human Settlements*. Nairobi: UN-Habitat.