

Book Review:

Urban informality: An introduction

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Urban informality: An introduction by Melanie Lombard and Philipp Horn, 2024, Bristol University Press.

In recent years, informality has become one of the most widely discussed topics across various fields and has therefore attracted significant scholarly attention. This interest has led to a growing body of research that continues to expand as scholars, policymakers and urban planners explore the complexities of informal economies, housing, and governance within rapidly changing urban landscapes. One recent contribution to the topic is *Urban Informality: An Introduction* by Melanie Lombard and Philipp Horn. The book provides a critical examination of informality in urban settings across the globe, exploring the various areas and subcategories that characterise urban informality. As the title implies, it lays the groundwork for future research on a phenomenon that is not only pervasive but also here to stay. The authors approach the topic from a global perspective, emphasising that informality is not limited to the Global South but is instead a global condition. Lombard and Horn challenge the simplistic association of informality with specific regions, illustrating that it impacts urban environments in both the Global South and North. By drawing on examples from diverse urban contexts, the authors explore how informality influences the way people live, work, and are governed, highlighting the complexity of informal practices. Building on previous works, such as Banks et al. (2020), which categorise urban informality into spatial, economic, and political dimensions, the authors redefine these categories as living, working, and governing informally. This reframing emphasises the agency of individuals engaged in informal practices and provides a clearer understanding of how informality shapes daily life in both the Global North and South.

The book is divided into eight chapters, each focusing on different dimensions of urban informality. The first chapter introduces the historical and theoretical debates surrounding informality, while Chapter 2 traces the evolution of the concept from early observations to more complex, contemporary understandings, critiquing binary divides like Global North versus South. By presenting informality not merely as a Southern issue but as a global one, the book adds nuance to ongoing debates, making it an essential resource for understanding the complexities of modern urbanization. Chapters 3 to 5 dive into the lived realities of informal life, work and governance. Chapter 3 emphasises informal housing and urban neighbourhoods, expanding the conversation to include both Southern and Northern contexts. Chapter 4 investigates the informal economy, tracing its role in global economic growth while exploring new trends such as the gig economy and platform-based labour. Chapter 5 focuses on informal governance, analysing how it operates in urban spaces, often in conjunction with formal political systems, particularly in rapidly urbanising and postcolonial contexts. Chapters 6 and 7 analyse responses to informality, distinguishing between top-down (state-led) and bottom-up (citizen-led) interventions, while Chapter 8 explores emerging trends and alternative conceptualisations, pushing readers to rethink how informality is framed in both theory and practice.

Throughout the chapters, the authors navigate informality by blending insights from social science and urban planning, offering a transdisciplinary lens that enriches the field of urban studies. This standout feature of the volume not only enhances the depth of understanding but also introduces innovative ways of exploring informality. In fact, methodologically, the book is unique in combining traditional academic analysis with diverse media-fiction, poetry, photography, and testimonies from informal workers. Moving beyond policy-oriented or strictly academic

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frameworks, the authors bridge academic and grassroots perspectives, broadening the scope of urban informality research and including different voices often excluded from policy discussions. For instance, the authors suggest novels like *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* by Katherine Boo, incorporating mixed perspectives and levels of complexity to augment the reader's understanding of informal living and governance, providing grounded, lived experiences of informal urban life.

Moreover, Lombard and Horn encourage readers to explore their own representations of informality, making this work a constant reflective guide for students, scholars and practitioners, such as urban planners and policymakers, as it highlights the ethical and methodological considerations of working with informal economies and settlements. The book's recommendations, such as avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches and ensuring participatory governance, make it especially useful for those working on policies related to housing, urban planning, and informal labour markets. The clear and accessible language makes complex concepts more approachable, offering a valuable entry point for those new to the subject while still providing depth for experienced readers. The authors' use of reflective exercises and critical questions throughout the text fosters active engagement, encouraging readers to think critically about how they understand and frame urban informality (e.g. through the re-defining of some key concepts, like 'urban informality' itself, or the contested term 'Global South'). This book also bridges geographical divides, illustrating how informality manifests in different contexts, but offering insights into how lessons from one part of the world can inform urban planning and policymaking in another. Moreover, the section titled "The role of education" in Chapter 7 (p. 152), which explores the absence of informality in urban planning curricula, is particularly insightful. The authors argue that despite the prevalence of informal economies in many cities, urban planning programmes often overlook this reality, leaving future planners ill-prepared to engage with it. This critical reflection ties into the book's broader aim: to encourage readers – especially future urban professionals – to think critically about their practice, since informality is a fundamental and contemporary topic.

However, while the book offers innovative insights into the complexities of informality, it could have benefited from a deeper engagement with the profound shifts caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the topic of the pandemic is mentioned in Chapters 4 and 8 (with Chapter 4 directing readers to further resources and Chapter 8 featuring a case study from Cali, Colombia), there is a notable absence of comparative analyses with other parts of the world. For instance, brief references to other regions or cities could have enriched the discussion on how informal living and working practices adapted during (and after) the crisis. Given the pandemic's profound effects on urban spaces and informal economies, the absence of this timely perspective represents a missed opportunity to provide a more current analysis of informal urban practices. That said, it is important to acknowledge the authors' transparency regarding the book's limitations. They openly recognise that covering the full scope of urban informality – across regions, sectors, and emerging trends – is impossible within a single volume. Instead, they frame the book as a starting point for further exploration, inviting readers to continue investigating aspects not fully explored within the text. The authors encourage future research in several pressing areas, such as the effects of the pandemic, the climate emergency and technological innovations that shape urban informality. Their forward-thinking outlook makes it clear that the conversation is far from over. They also emphasise the need to explore popular urban struggles and efforts to find ways out of a "permacrisis" – referring to "an extended period of instability and insecurity, especially one resulting from a series of catastrophic events" (p.190) – stressing the importance of understanding how these intersect with the future of informality. In this way, the book remains a crucial resource for both current and future debates. The global perspective it adopts with various examples from around the world, combined with alternative representations and the ongoing exercise of critical thinking offers a fresh and innovative approach, enhancing the book's informative value with innovative and creative approaches.

In conclusion, *Urban Informality: An Introduction* is essential reading for anyone interested in the complexities of informal urban economies, governance and living conditions. The interdisciplinary approach makes it relevant to scholars, urban planners, policymakers and NGOs alike. One of the book's key contributions is its emphasis on the inter-connectedness of informality with broader

structural causes, highlighting that this phenomenon cannot be isolated or generalised. While the book has limitations in covering all aspects of urban informality, it remains a valuable resource that encourages further research and action. In its critical, yet accessible exploration of informal urban economies, this book will remain a touchstone for urban studies now and in the future.

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