

RC21 Session #71 Informal Rental Housing: Bridging North-South Divides

Session chair(s):

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Format type:

Regular Panel

Description:

Informal rental housing has emerged as a significant feature of contemporary urbanism across diverse geographical contexts, challenging conventional assumptions that informality is primarily a Global South phenomenon. From basement suites in Vancouver and London's "sheds with beds" to backyard shacks in Cape Town and overcrowded apartments in Mumbai, informal rental arrangements shape how millions of urban residents access housing amidst intensifying affordability crises. These arrangements exist in regulatory grey zones where legality is ambiguous, enforcement is selective, state complicity is common, and tenants navigate precarious conditions while markets and governments co-produce informality. The global proliferation of informal rental housing—spanning the entire income spectrum from survival housing for marginalized populations to middle-class homeowners supplementing precarious mortgages—demands comparative analysis that bridges persistent North-South divides in urban scholarship. While informal rental practices share common features across contexts—including their emergence as pragmatic responses to housing crises, their role in reproducing inequalities, and their ambiguous relationship with state regulation—they also reflect distinct political-economic configurations, histories, welfare regimes, and planning systems. Understanding these commonalities and differences requires moving beyond simplistic binaries to examine how informal rental housing operates simultaneously as survival strategy, accumulation mechanism, and governance challenge across diverse urban settings.

The aim of this session is to promote comparative dialogue on informal rental housing to advance scholarship that learns from and with theories across geographical contexts. We seek empirically grounded contributions that interrogate how informal rental markets emerge, function, and transform urban inequalities along intersecting axes of class, race, gender, migration status, and geography.

We invite papers that address the following questions:

How do informal rental arrangements expose the limits and contradictions of formal housing systems in both North and South?

What are the political-economic drivers underlying the growth, transformation, typologies and conditions of informal rental housing in different contexts?

How do states, markets, and communities differentially produce and govern informal rental housing across contexts?

What factors affect the price, quality and living conditions of informal rental housing within and across urban contexts?

How do inequalities of race, class, gender, and citizenship shape who relies on informal

rental housing and on what terms?

What methodological innovations can reveal the hidden and intersecting dynamics (e.g. race, class, gender, migration) of informal rental markets?

And how might comparative perspectives on informal rental housing contribute to broader theoretical debates on urban informality, housing justice, and the right to the city?

Selected References:

Baqai, A. N., & Ward, P. M. (2020). Renting and Sharing in Low-Income Informal Settlements: Lacunae in Research and Policy Challenges. *Current Urban Studies*, 8(3), 456–483. <https://doi.org/10.4236/cus.2020.83026>

Devlin, R. T. (2018). Asking 'Third World questions' of First World informality: Using Southern theory to parse needs from desires in an analysis of informal urbanism of the global North. *Planning Theory*, 17(4), 568–587.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095217737347>

Scheba, A., & Turok, I. (2020). Informal rental housing in the South: Dynamic but neglected. *Environment & Urbanization*, 32(1), 109–132.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247819895958>