

Shed living: housing in the shadows in London

Emily Kelling

Technische Universität Berlin, Institut für Soziologie, emily.kelling@tu-berlin.de

This paper looks at informality in the context of London's housing affordability crisis. With a selective focus on the rental sector, it traces some of the practices commonly found to be in breach of the law that are emerging in this context. After outlining a number of these practices, the paper will then present a preliminary analysis of some of the factors that lead people to act in these ways. How are they constrained and where do they find opportunities – what are the power relations in place?

Of specific interest in this case is the peculiar spatiality that is produced by the ways in which housing law is broken in London's rental sector. In contrast to what is typically associated with the term of 'informal housing', the landscape of London is yet to be transformed by (the re-emergence of) sprawling, self-built, informal settlements. Instead, a common way of law breaking happens in the realm of private properties, for instance, in the form of substandard subdivisions or garden sheds illegally converted or constructed for rental use. Here, two questions will guide the discussion: (1) Why does informal housing in London take the form of garden sheds? How is it possible to explain this spatiality and why is it relevant? (2) In how far do the observed dynamics fit our conceptualisations of urban informality.

In analysing housing informalities in London, and in reflecting on the conditions that shape the development of informal norms, this paper calls for a clear differentiation between the four categories of formal, informal, legal, and illegal. Moreover, it emphasises the importance of observing how they overlap in different moments. The perspective adopted here is that informality should not be thought of as something characteristic to people or places but rather that informality is a normal feature of our everyday interactions. While some of the rules that we refer to in our actions are formalised, that others are not does not consign them to irrelevance. On the contrary, informal, or non-formalised, norms are constitutive, and as such immensely relevant, to any field that contains formalised norms. While informal norms may be in breach with formal rules too, they do not have to be.

Such a perspective pushes us to shift our focus onto the processes of social problematisation of informality. When do informal norms become named as such, when do they become a problem to people, and when do they become the subject of express conflicts? Under which conditions does it become a problem, for whom and what exactly do different groups perceive as the problem? The case of London suggests that it is not simply illegality that is the problem. The moments in which the prevalence of informal ways of doing things become a problem seems to be quite directly linked to the interests of specific groups and the interplay of these interests. While sometimes the prevalence of illegal practices is beneficial to a range of actors, leading to their collective toleration, in other moments these practices may be threatening to some – moments in which their illegality is of course a useful recourse. In these negotiations, the label informality takes on its own effect, allowing the framing of people and places in specific ways. Ultimately, the perspective developed in

this paper also calls for a reflection on the tendency within academia to label specific places and people as 'informal' by pointing out how this act in and of itself can become currency in the negotiation of power relations.

© by the author(s)

Paper presented at the RC21 International Conference on "The transgressive city: Comparative perspectives on governance and the possibilities of everyday life in the emerging global city" Mexico City, 21-23 July 2016. <http://rc21-mexico16.colmex.mx/index.php>