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EDITORIAL

Urban In/Formalities: How Arrival Infrastructures Shape Newcomers' Access To Resources

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Abstract

In recent years, scholars in migration, urban studies, and urban planning have increasingly focused on the diversity of arrival processes experienced by international newcomers and the variety of spatial settings they involve. Current research on arrival infrastructures focuses on both place-based opportunity structures and newcomers' agency in shaping arrival processes, illustrating the interconnectedness of formal and informal infrastructures. Arrival infrastructuring can be understood as a mediating process that connects individuals and their social, economic, and cultural capital to places and societal resources. The concept of "in/formality," which addresses the formal–informal nexus as a continuum rather than in binary terms, offers a valuable yet underexplored perspective to analyse arrival processes and actors involved, including the state, market, and old and new residents. Through the lens of in/formality, this thematic issue aims to explore the practices, negotiations, and interconnections among different (migrant and non-migrant) actors involved in arrival infrastructuring. The contributions highlight four recurring ways in which the interplay between informal and formal practices manifests: unusual alliances, brokering, boundary spanning, and structured workarounds.

Keywords

arrival infrastructures; in/formality; migration; urban spaces

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1. Introduction

In recent years, scholars in migration, urban studies and urban planning have increasingly focused on the diversity of arrival processes experienced by international newcomers and the variety of spatial settings they involve. Recognising arrival as a process rather than a fixed moment in migration trajectories, researchers have unpacked its temporal, territorial, and subjective complexities. Arrival is often discussed alongside "arrival infrastructures," defined as "those parts of the urban fabric within which newcomers become entangled upon arrival" (Meeus et al., 2019, p. 1). These infrastructures range from social support networks and coalitions to urban spaces and services that shape newcomers' everyday lives (Boost & Oosterlynck, 2019; Bovo, 2020). The infrastructural perspective highlights how resources such as co-ethnic networks, local restaurants, public libraries, cafes, public spaces, help desks, and housing services play critical roles for newcomers. Arrival infrastructuring can be understood as a mediating process that connects individuals and their social, economic, and cultural capital to places and societal resources. This lens emphasises the variety of policies, actors, and locations that facilitate, channel, or obstruct newcomers' arrival processes (Bovo, 2024; Fawaz, 2017; Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020; Hans, 2023; Meeus et al., 2019; Wessendorf & Gembus, 2024).

Current research on arrival infrastructures focuses on both place-based opportunity structures (Phillimore, 2020) and newcomers' agency in shaping arrival processes, illustrating the interconnectedness of formal and informal infrastructures. Analysing these processes through the lens of in/formality offers a valuable yet underexplored perspective on the fluid processes of arrival that involve various actors, including the state, market, and new and old residents. Moving beyond the simplistic formal–informal binary, this thematic issue aims to explore the practices, negotiations, and interconnections among different (migrant and non-migrant) actors involved in arrival infrastructuring. It seeks to illuminate the in/formal nature of arrival infrastructures across the "Global North" and "South" and reflect on the role of in/formality in infrastructuring work. In the subsequent sections, we will introduce the term in/formality and its use in the thematic issue, and we will outline four in/formality dimensions of the infrastructuring work described by the contributions.

2. The Lens of In/Formality for Arrival Processes

The debate on informality has its roots in the 1970s, when the notion of the informal economy began to be explored, initially framed in relation to marginality and underdevelopment in the so-called "Global South" (Biehl, 2022). Over the past decades, this debate has evolved, delving into the intricate connections between informality, urbanisation, migration, and urban planning. Classical theories have examined the origins and approaches to informality, ranging from structuralist perspectives to neoliberal, reformist, and critical governance frameworks (Mukhija & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). Notably, recent scholarship has begun to challenge the geographic and dichotomous definitions traditionally associated with informality. First, researchers have recognised that informality is not confined to a particular region, such as the Global South, but exists globally, including in the Global North. This challenges the myth of Northern formality (Alfaro d'Alençon et al., 2018; Jaffe & Koster, 2019; McFarlane & Waibel, 2012; Mukhija & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014) and calls for a contextualised understanding of informality (Chiodelli & Gentili, 2021; Chiodelli & Tzfadia, 2016). Second, various contributions have sought to move beyond binary definitions of formal versus informal. Instead, scholars have proposed more nuanced frameworks, such as the "formal–informal continuum" (Chen, 2005; Guha-Khasnobis et al., 2006) and, later, the "formal–informal spectrum" (Gomez et al., 2020). Roy and AlSayyad (2004) conceptualise urban informality not as a discrete sector apart from

formal systems, but as "a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another" (Roy, 2005, p. 148). In migration studies, Schapendonk and Ekenhorst (2020) introduce the idea of "in/formal circuits," further developed by Biehl (2022), who explores the dynamic interplay of "in/formalities and il/legalities" in the lived experiences and daily negotiations of migrant newcomers in Istanbul. Building on these reflections, this thematic issue adopts the term "in/formal" rather than "informal" to analyse arrival infrastructures and the processes of infrastructuring, encompassing those governed by state regulations as well as those that transcend such frameworks.

As discussed in the subsequent section, the contributors to this thematic issue provide a nuanced exploration of in/formality within arrival infrastructures across diverse geographical contexts and across different domains such as housing, social advice, local economies or education. From Central Europe to the Mediterranean and South Africa, informality emerges as a dominant paradigm, often surpassing formalised frameworks. In all these cases, informalities function as a logic and system of norms (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004) that underpin arrival infrastructuring practices. The contributions illustrate that arrival infrastructures exist along a continuum of formal and informal processes, challenging and moving beyond a binary conceptualisation. This continuum spans from informal infrastructures, such as squats and Burundian migrants' barbershops, to formal, state-regulated entities such as public health clinics and schools.

Crucially, all examples reveal the intricate interplay between in/formal processes and systems. Informal infrastructures frequently interact with formal actors, while informal practices often occur within formalised settings. This dynamic is particularly evident in housing infrastructures and state-provided services, such as schools, faith-based organisations, and help desks, where social workers and volunteers navigate and blend formal and informal approaches, continuously crossing and reshaping the boundaries between the two.

3. Four Emerging Dimensions of In/Formality in Arrival Infrastructuring Work

The contributions in the thematic issue display the various entanglements of in/formal infrastructuring work and arrival infrastructures, and the way they shape access to resources. A cross-cutting reading of all contributions highlights four recurring ways in which the interplay between informal and formal practices manifests: *unusual alliances*, *brokering*, *boundary spanning*, and *structured workarounds*. Whilst these themes appear in almost all of the contributions, we use this section to highlight the diversity of facets of in/formality within and across the themes and to introduce the articles of the thematic issue.

Nagi et al. (2024) explore local responses to the shortcomings of the formal reception system in Brussels and highlight emerging *unusual or "weird" alliances*. Here, the intersection of immigration regimes and neoliberal housing systems creates gaps in housing supply that neither the reception nor housing systems adequately address. In this vacuum, non-conventional constellations of migrant and non-migrant actors form alliances using diverse tools—from occupations to ad-hoc collaborations with state and non-state actors—to meet housing needs, effectively creating a governance from below. In Southern Italy, Bovo and Bully (2024) describe the "local and adaptive" (Briata, 2014, p. 8) efforts of state and non-state actors in infrastructuring arrivals. They discuss various infrastructures, including a private dormitory, a public health clinic, and a help desk operated by a local association. In this context, the provision of arrival infrastructures relies on the agency and collaboration of both formal and informal actors, rooted in historical coalitions against the Mafia and more recent opposition to restrictive national border policies. Unconventional alliances are also

prevalent in shrinking contexts, as illustrated by Oso and Santaballa (2024) in Spain, and Schemschat (2024) in the US, France, and Germany. In Spanish rural towns, a variety of practices by formal and informal actors facilitate newcomers' access to resources, and infrastructuring efforts are undertaken by an array of actors with diverse backgrounds who do not normally work together, including individuals working in public administration and civil society, alongside migrants. In the US, France, and Germany, arrival processes are often in/formally negotiated with supra-local actors who are not usually involved in the provision of support, yet play a crucial role in local access to resources. Alliances develop among actors typically operating at different scales or within distinct policy domains. These alliances contribute to bridging provision gaps and addressing the diverse needs of newcomers. These contributions show that infrastructuring work is often developed by in/formal and unusual alliances between formal (e.g., public servants) and informal actors (e.g., occupations).

A second recurring theme is that of *"arrival brokers"* (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020), who often operate in/formally. Brokers occupy an in-between position, bridging "structural holes" (Burt, 1992), connecting people and thereby playing a key role in infrastructuring processes. In Rotterdam, van der Veer (2024) explores the role of activists as brokers between small-scale grassroots initiatives and the city administration. Positioned at the intersection of informal and formal infrastructures, these activists resist neoliberal reforms in welfare and integration governance while politicising refugee-led initiatives. Their in/formal positioning enables them to challenge the neoliberal and depoliticised provision of arrival infrastructures through competitive tendering. In Dortmund, Germany, Neßler (2024) shows how commercial brokering has developed into a practice that operates alongside and beyond the support offered by formal institutions, often filling gaps left by these structures. She shows how commercial brokering arises despite the strong presence of formal municipal or state-funded civil society support structures. Commercial brokers' intermediary position between the market and the state allows them to operate in both formal and informal ways, which enhances their appeal. In the UK, Zschomler and Berg (2024) discuss the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, a government-funded private hosting initiative, and describe private hosts as arrival brokers. By acting as "home-level bureaucrats" (Burrell, 2024), hosts often mediate between bureaucracies and their Ukrainian guests. Across these articles, brokers emerge as vital players for both newcomers and state structures, able to challenge and complement the formal system through their intermediary roles.

A third dimension of in/formality involves *"boundary spanning"* (Schiller, 2022) by infrastructuring actors. "Boundary-spanners" are officials who operate at the boundaries of their own organisation and create bridges and linkages between citizens and municipal entities (Schiller, 2022; see also Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2014; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010; Williams, 2002). Hanhörster and Tippel (2024) highlight the work of primary school teachers in an arrival neighbourhood in Dortmund, illustrating how their informal and formal practices shape newcomers' trajectories. They often extend their roles beyond formal job descriptions and expand their range of activities. By "circumventing the law" and going the "extra mile," they address unmet everyday needs and build trust with newcomer families. In Rotterdam, Vasileiadi and Swerts (2024) examine how formal faith-based organisations support newcomers and describe the work of volunteers and employees who engage in in/formal practices, often reacting to restrictive national policies regarding access to support. In this context, employees sometimes use their discretionary power and stretch the eligibility criteria for accessing their services, thus engaging in informal infrastructuring work. These contributions reveal that, even amid limited resources, infrastructuring actors frequently expand their roles beyond formal tasks, effectively spanning institutional and organisational boundaries.

Organised workarounds, developed to navigate the challenges of arrival processes and hostile policy environments, emerge as a fourth dimension of in/formality. In Durban, South Africa, a city characterised by dense urbanisation and spatial inequality, Mbatha and Koskimaki (2024) describe how Burundian migrants' barbershops function as informal social spaces. Indeed, these spaces provide access to "connectors" who help with access to labour, social and material resources, local knowledge, and networks. Burundian barbershops often operate informally as arrival infrastructures, and this allows them to adapt to the complex, ever-changing lives of newcomers and the recurring threats of violence against immigrants. Guérin (2024), focusing on Paris, describes how religious spaces within *foyers*—housing facilities built in the 1950s for migrant workers from former French colonies—have shifted from being informally tolerated to formally prohibited. She describes how residents of foyers creatively redefine interior spaces for worship, transforming them to informal prayer rooms. This exemplifies how individuals work around formal restrictions in increasingly hostile political climates. Finally, Aaron (2024) addresses housing platforms in Berlin where more privileged migrants navigate the legal process of becoming formal residents. She shows how, within Berlin's secondary housing market, digital platforms serve as arrival infrastructures that allow newcomers to navigate and negotiate regimes of residency.

The lens of in/formality helps to unpack the complexity of arrival processes and arrival infrastructuring work. While these processes vary depending on the context of arrival, the contributions to this thematic issue also show similarities in the way in/formal arrival infrastructuring work develops within and across the four dimensions of unusual alliances, brokering, boundary spanning, and structured workarounds. All contributions demonstrate that what is considered in/formal is inherently shaped by political discourses and power structures, constantly subject to negotiation. Furthermore, informal processes invariably unfold within the broader framework of state interventions and regulatory mechanisms (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004). This dynamic is evident in the historical development of specific arrival infrastructures, such as religious spaces in Parisian foyers and their legal regulation, as well as in the work of commercial brokers in Dortmund who can be perceived as informal (and often illegal), even when they possess formal licenses. The perspective of in/formality also allows us to understand how newcomers co-construct arrival infrastructures: they are not only participating in in/formal activities, but also shaping the landscape of arrival infrastructures through their practices. Newcomers may prefer informal infrastructures over municipal options because of their flexibility and accessibility, as in the case of dormitories in Palermo. Furthermore, new and oldcomers do not only use but also co-produce in/formal infrastructures, as exemplified with the unusual alliances in Brussels and the Burundian barbershops in Durban. All these examples highlight the inherent ambivalence of in/formal arrival infrastructuring and the need to recognise in/formal infrastructures' productivity for newcomers, while also considering the power dynamics among actors and the gaps and restrictions imposed by more formal infrastructures. We aspire for this thematic issue to chart new directions for research in the study of in/formal arrival infrastructuring, while also shaping and inspiring the work of local and national policymakers by broadening our understanding of the crucial question of how migrants can be both supported and empowered in their arrival.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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