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**ARTICLE**

# Towards liminal balance: Unpacking the UK's urban canal space

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**Abstract**

This paper critically examines the liminal geographies of the United Kingdom's 7,000-mile canal and river network, embodying a thread of complex intersections and interactions between water and land. Drawing on a study involving stakeholder interviews, group discussion with canal users, and observational walks in Manchester and London, the paper explores the concepts of liminal flux, scalar intersections, and deliminalisation. We first outline how the UK's urban canals are characterised by liminal flux over time and space, reflecting their dynamic geographies. Revealing the presence of critical intersections between liminality and scale, we then focus on the ongoing and everyday spatial and territorial entanglements between different canal and towpath users. Finally, we consider the challenge of deliminalisation, and an associated shift from liminality and in-betweenness towards greater spatial fixity via neoliberal intervention and development. Our findings highlight the importance of preserving the unique characteristics of urban canals as liminal spaces, arguing that they provide recreational opportunities and contribute to urban wellbeing by providing opportunities for 'transitory dwelling places'. Maintaining a liminal balance within urban canal environments is therefore crucial and requires careful curation. In turn, this notion of curating liminal balance has implications for other potential waterfront developments that offer a similar positive potential for hydrocitizenship and its fluid ambiguities of in-betweenness. Moreover, it demonstrates the importance of a 'lighter touch' of redevelopment and governance in some parts of the urban environment to help preserve, or even enhance, citizen wellbeing.

**KEYWORDS**

canals, deliminalisation, liminal balance, liminality, urban redevelopment, waterways

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Across the UK there are over 7000 miles of navigable and non-navigable inland waterways (Inland Waterways Association, 2021). Many of the canals and rivers flow through towns and cities, past workplaces and homes, embodying a liminal thread of multiple and complex interactions across boundary entanglements between water and land (Kaaristo et al., 2020; Wallace & Wright, 2022). This paper critically examines these liminal geographies in the watery/terrestrial nexus of urban canal spaces.

Such an investigation is timely. Over half the UK's population live within five miles (8 km) of a waterway, making these 'blue corridors', and the towpaths that run alongside them, a key resource for commuting, recreation, and associated wellbeing (Canal and River Trust, 2017). Nearly 750 million visits are made annually to UK canals and rivers (Canal and River Trust, 2022a: 4), principally to undertake activities such as walking, running, cycling, angling, or (leisure) boating (Kaaristo et al., 2020). There is also a growing residential community of 'liveaboard' boaters on the UK's canal system (Bowles, 2019). This community is split between those who pay for permanent residential moorings and 'continuous cruisers', who are required to keep moving through the canal system and not moor up in one place for more than 14 days. Additionally, canal-side regeneration projects have grown in urban areas with the conversion of historic industrial buildings into residential and commercial developments (Coulson & Wright, 2013).

Despite the clear importance of UK canals as a site for citizen visitation and interaction, there has been limited examination of the contemporary geographies of the canal network. However, some recent work has started to pay attention to canal-based mobilities. Duggan (2022), for example, explores the importance of material objects such as guidebooks in directing canal mobilities. And, the work of Kaaristo et al. (2020) examines how different modes of movement (e.g., walking, cycling, boating) and their associated tempos are governed through creative interplays of freedom and control, as well as hierarchy and etiquette. Kaaristo et al. (2020) conclude by suggesting their study offers a 'watery blueprint' for mobility governance in other shared spaces. Other recent work has focused on the role of canals in 'heritagisation' (Wincott et al., 2020) and urban placemaking (Wallace & Wright, 2022). Both these contributions emphasise how canals can enrich urban environments and highlight their importance in fostering a deeper connection between communities and their past. This work also underscores the role of canals in shaping urban landscapes and identities, emphasising their potential to act as catalysts for the revitalisation of urban space. Collectively, all these recent studies not only underscore the significance of canals as spaces of mobility and interaction, but also shed light on their capacity to preserve heritage and contribute to the ongoing transformation of urban areas. As such, they provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamic and evolving geographies of the canal network in the UK.

Our paper offers research findings emerging from a qualitative study of the UK's urban-based canal network. This involves interviews with Canal and River Trust (CRT) employees, a group discussion with canal users, and observational walks by the authors alongside canals in Manchester and London. The key contribution is showing how a lens of liminality offers understandings of the human interactions and geographies on the waterfront of the UK's urban canals. We argue that maintaining *liminal balance* within these watery spaces is an important and undervalued vector for citizen wellbeing. We also contend that this balance requires curatorial nurture to avoid the potentially deleterious effects of what we term a *deliminalisation* of space under the forces of neoliberal urbanism (see also Oliver, 2023).

Our analysis falls into three key strands. First, we outline how the UK canal network is characterised by *liminal flux* over time and space. Second, the presence of critical intersections between liminality and scale are revealed, with a particular focus on the ongoing and everyday spatial and territorial entanglements between different canal and towpath users. Third, we consider the challenge of deliminalisation on the UK canal network, and in particular a shift from liminality towards greater (spatial) fixity, and the implications of such trends and developments for urban planning and city living in the late modern era.

## 2 | LIMINALITY AND LIMINAL SPACE

Liminality in its broadest sense denotes 'the experience of finding oneself at a boundary or in an in-between position, either spatially or temporally' (Thomassen, 2015, p. 40). This concept originally referred to a ritualistic space-time, involving rites of passage for transition in traditional societies (van Gennep, 2004 [1909]). Turner (1974) further developed liminality as an individual experience and situation – a state where the structuring rules of regular life no longer apply. When individuals or groups move from one level or style of organisation to another, 'there has to be an interfacial region or, to change the metaphor, an interval, however brief, of "margin" or "limen", when the past is momentarily negated,

suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun' (Turner, 1974, p. 75). The notion of liminality has since been used for analysing phenomena beyond ritualised performances, i.e., occurrences that might resemble rituals but differ from them by free will and optionality.

McConnell (2017, p. 142) notes that '[g]iven the spatial dynamics of liminality ... it is perhaps surprising that the concept has not received more analytical attention within the discipline of geography'. Exceptions include Maddrell and della Dora (2013), Sletto and Palmer (2017), McConnell (2017), Edensor and Smith (2020), Truelove (2021), Trimbach (2021), and Banfield (2022). Sletto and Palmer (2017), for instance, discuss how urban open spaces can serve as liminal thresholds between the public and the private. They show that in the context of urban spaces, liminality refers to the fluidity and dynamicity of spatial relationships and the ways in which individuals and communities negotiate and construct meaning in different places. While the contemporary usage of liminality is fluid in its various forms across different disciplines, a certain ambivalence in space and time feature as important qualities for the concept. Andrews and Roberts (2012) have identified an inherent connection between space and time in the state of liminality, where the idea of threshold signifies spatiality, and the sequentiality of events denotes temporality. According to them, without this clear spatio-temporal framework, liminality would just become a convenient go-to term when trying to explain something unexplainable, fuzzy, or marginal.

The liminal place allows for an 'unfettered, expressive, vital play, providing a greater sense of challenge and of being outside a system of functional and segmented spaces in which particular activities are delineated' (Edensor & Smith, 2020, p. 576). Understanding places as liminal can therefore promote an interpretation of locality not as an enclosed spatial entity, but instead an area that is porous to a series of interconnected improvisations (Lancione & Simone, 2021). This is certainly the case with canal spaces, which are constantly redefined by mutually understood and interlinked tempos and mobilities (Kaaristo et al., 2020). However, the present paper is not a case of simply applying liminality to yet another type of space—rather, we concur with Banfield (2022), who argues that we should explore how liminality is itself spatialised along and beyond binaries, and that we should, in essence, re-spatialise liminality. Following Banfield (2022), canals can be seen as places of mixed mobile and staggered spatialities of liminality. A canal boat, for example, is a dynamic entity of mobile spatialities, where boaters can be continuously in transit and therefore in-between different destinations. Equally, the canal itself is also a place of staggered spatialities, where liminality is experienced at different times, intensities, and scales, with different actors (e.g., boaters, cyclists, walkers) having different degrees of access, mobility, and belonging.

Liminal places are dynamic, co-constructed, and co-ordered by various human and non-human networked processes, actors, and actants. This renders them fragmented, difficult to classify, and characterised by otherness (Edensor & Smith, 2020; Smith, 1999). Aligning with this perspective, Roberts (2018, p. xii) suggests that 'to look upon everyday landscapes in terms of liminality and transitional phenomena is not to imbue them with fixed affordances or properties but rather to make explicit the phenomenological intensity of the spatially immersive world that informs who and what we are as embodied subjects, both adrift and tethered in equal measure'. Indeed, liminal landscapes are imbued with varied meanings as they 'evoke an inherent in-between-ness, sense of escape, and feeling of freedom or transformation' (Trimbach, 2021, p. 17). This emphasises the ludic potentialities of liminality and the fact that liminal space is somewhere people can head for 'in search of a break from the normal' (Thomassen, 2015, p. 21). In a workplace context, Shortt (2015) has similarly examined how liminal and in-between spaces, such as stairwells, toilets, and cupboards, can be used by employees as sites of respite away from the corporate gaze and the performances and expectations that might be required when facing clients. These liminal spaces are therefore (re)constructed by workers as meaningful in their everyday lives, such that they take on the role of what Shortt (2015) refers to as 'transitory dwelling places', at least for those individuals who make use of them. The recreational draw of many urban canal networks might also be seen as demonstrating this transition from liminal to transitory dwelling space through the lived experience of individual canal users.

### 3 | A SCALAR APPROACH TO URBAN INLAND WATERFRONTS

Since the 1970s, there has been an intense redevelopment, redesign, and reimagining of many urban spaces in the Global North, especially in those former areas of primary and/or heavy industry (Bennison et al., 2007; Degen, 2008; DeSilvey & Edensor, 2012) that have been characterised by significant economic and social change. One of the outcomes of this process is the repurposing of waterside areas, especially those with urban industrial heritage such as docklands and canals. The blueprint for such developments follows early efforts such as the regeneration of San Francisco's waterfront in the United States in the 1970s (Brownill, 2013). This approach was later termed the 'Central Waterfronts model' (Jones, 2007), and became a global phenomenon that was applied to the revitalisation of numerous waterfront areas, both

maritime and inland from the last quarter of the twentieth century onwards. These waterfronts became sites of rapid change as their historic industrial infrastructure was redeveloped into mixed residential, public, recreational, and commercial spaces – utilising the ‘natural and nostalgic pull of water to attract people’ (Buckman, 2016, p. 785) and making use of some elements of local history and heritage while downplaying others. This process of transforming abandoned waterfront areas into upscale districts has been termed ‘blue gentrification’ (Cucca, 2020, p. 194) and already by the early 1990s there was ‘hardly any ... city on the water that [did] not have its converted warehouse district with cute eateries and clever things to buy’ (Kostof, 1992, pp. 45–46). In the UK, canal-based examples of such developments include Brindleyplace in Birmingham (Coulson & Wright, 2013) and Castlefield in Manchester (Degen, 2008).

The above demonstrates the value of understanding urban waterfronts as sites where a multi-scalar reconfiguration of spatiality is currently ongoing. Tensions can inevitably arise here, brought about by the intersection of global trends of waterfront regeneration and their local implementation. Transformed landscapes, even if peripheral, can manifest multiple tensions when various stakeholders have been involved in (or excluded from) their creation and these landscapes often represent liminal spaces where humans and nature confront each other (Wang et al., 2021). As Brenner (2000, p. 362) indicates, this has resulted in us entering an era ‘in which entrenched geographical scales and scalar hierarchies are being profoundly rearticulated, reshuffled and redefined throughout the world economy’. Such tensions are certainly evident for the UK’s urban canal-side developments. These typically have the capacity to be very attractive, which is why their local history with its corresponding photogenic material elements can be heavily incorporated into the design of any associated placemaking and place marketing activities (Wincott et al., 2020). There is potential intersection here with the more liminal aspects of canal spaces. The sales brochures for newly developed canal-side flats often feature renderings of beautiful, brightly painted traditional narrowboats (see for example Jones, 2022), thereby embracing the liminal lives of liveaboard canal boaters, who might be moored up nearby. Yet, after these developments have been completed, boating infrastructure (such as mooring rings or basin access) is often curtailed or absent, making it more difficult for boaters to stop or stay in these areas. Sometimes the new housing developments can even block access to the waterfront by installing residents-only gates. This can result in pseudo-public canal spaces, outcomes which we link in this paper to deliminalisation processes under neoliberal development. And, even without access blocked or limited, canal towpaths often present challenges due to their intricate ownership structures, involving a mix of public and private interests such as navigation authorities, local councils, private land owners, and others.

From a critical perspective, the above represents an inherent scalar-liminal paradox in urban canal (re)development. On the one hand, a global trend in waterfront regeneration involving ‘scalar hierarchies and power relations [that] rely much on path dependency’ (Koelemaij, 2021, p. 443) underpins many canal-side living projects. To be successful, these developments will often draw heavily on the marketing collateral of a canal’s very localised histories and connectivities to highlight the liminal, liberating, and ludic potentialities of living next to water. On the other hand, as will be seen in the analysis section of this paper, once canal-side developments are established and occupied, a canal’s local histories and associated geographies can be threatened or even erased with a concomitant deliminalisation of canal space. This accords with wider critiques of urban gentrification projects, recognising that they are primarily driven by the flows of corporate finance (Davidson, 2007). In summary, the post-industrial revitalisation and regeneration of urban waterfronts can engender intersections of different scalar flows of activity. This can also be a source of tension, especially where engaged organisations and actors are operating at different levels of scalar understanding and perception.

## 4 | EXPLORING THE IN-BETWEENNESS: FIELD SITES AND RESEARCH METHODS

The findings of this paper emerge from a qualitative examination of England’s urban-based canal network. Data were collected from multiple secondary and primary sources, and across various canal locations in Manchester and London. In terms of secondary data, we amassed a wealth of information regarding urban canal spaces from key online sources. Critical to this were the Canal and River Trust and Inland Waterways Association (IWA) websites. We also followed press stories and online fora about the urban canal network at both a local (i.e., Manchester and London) and national level between 2017 and 2022. These secondary data sources provided important directional insight for setting the initial context for the study during this exploratory stage, and helped us to focus the primary research in terms of the lines of enquiry to be pursued.

Turning to primary data collection, we started our fieldwork in London. The process began with a group interview with two high-ranking representatives from the CRT, covering a range of issues, including the challenges the CRT faces

in terms of managing urban canal space. We continued by conducting a ‘go-along interview’ (Kusenbach, 2003) with these participants to gain an even better understanding of their views of the urban canal network. This involved walking along the Regent’s Canal, from the London Canal Museum to Hampstead Road Lock 1 in Camden. Using this approach, we were able to observe and gather evidence of everyday social interactions in an urban canal setting. In particular, the process allowed for a direct observation how these CRT employees engaged with the canal space and its various users. It also enabled discussion of topics that otherwise would have gone unnoticed by us—such as a ‘graffiti war’ underneath the Camden Road bridge (see Section 5.2). The nuances of physical movement and spontaneous reactions by ourselves and participants to the canal space and the people using it added an authenticity to the data collection process that was different from a recorded sit-down group interview. These benefits aside, a challenge of the go-along interview approach is in its fast-flowing spontaneity, which makes it difficult to record every observation or conversation in the moment and in detail. Accordingly, capturing data relied on photographs and memory recall in post-walk fieldnotes. However, the dynamism of the go-along interview method mirrors the mobile and staggered spatialities of the canal network discussed above, making it a fitting, even if sometimes challenging, approach.

To explore the canals in Manchester, the authors walked a portion of the Rochdale Canal from Castlefield Basin to Piccadilly Basin in the city centre. Additionally, they traversed along the Bridgewater Canal from Castlefield Basin to Worsley in a north-westward direction. This gave contrasting insights into different parts of the urban canal network, from high-rise to low-rise urban environments, and from canal settings located at the heart of a busy city centre to those encountered in quieter suburbs. A final aspect of the primary data collection involved a two-hour group discussion on canal usage with ten participants, who were purposively recruited via connections established during the fieldwork, as well as from social media and personal contacts (see Table 1). This group interview and the interviews with CRT representatives were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Observations made in our walks along canals in London and Manchester were recorded through fieldnotes and photography.

The analysis started by regarding the collected data, including secondary sources, interview transcripts, field notes, and photographs, as textual material. The researchers then used thematic analysis to identify key themes. And, as new data were collected, these themes were increasingly refined. To ensure quality in data analysis, each researcher independently coded the data, and then the researchers met to collectively review their interpretations and make any necessary adjustments (Belotto, 2018). This final step was an iterative process that resulted in the themes that are discussed in the analysis section below.

## 5 | ANALYSIS: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND PARADOXES OF LIMINALITY

### 5.1 | Liminal flux: Space and time

If one understanding of liminal space is the occupation of areas of in-betweenness, then the UK’s urban canals fit this description. Water’s simple physical properties mean that canals invariably occupy a liminal position in urban

TABLE 1 Group discussion participants.

Participant gender (M/F) and age	Canal usage
F30	Employee of a restaurant boat
F35	Walker, birdwatcher
F39	Walker (with children), cyclist (leisure)
F48	Cyclist (commuting), walker, volunteer
F61	Liveboard boater, canoeist, walker
M38	Cyclist, runner, walker
M39	Walker, runner, angler, cyclist
M44	Boater, cyclist, walker, volunteer (restoration and maintenance)
M49	Liveboard boater, cyclist, walker
M54	Dogwalker

contexts – sunk below, or at the edges of, the human gaze within the cityscape – flowing through cuttings and poorly-lit tunnels, or alternatively high above the street in aqueducts.

Urban canals demonstrate a high level of spatial and temporal flux in their liminality. On their initial construction in the eighteenth century, canals symbolised the taming of nature and the energy of industrial change. Architectural features such as bridges and aqueducts were highly visible and celebrated. Yet, by the Victorian period urban canals had emerged as a more liminal environment, forming a watery underbelly of privately owned industrial space, partially hidden compared to those more publicly lauded and newly built infrastructures that symbolised contemporaneous progress and civic pride—e.g., town halls, and corn and wool exchanges. This liminality of the canal network was also reflected in human terms with the ‘boatpeople’ who worked and lived on narrowboats and barges. These individuals, by their very nature of being always on the move, and therefore neither urban nor rural, were often portrayed as outsiders by mainstream society of the time (Matthews, 2023). This reinforces Smith's (1999) contention of how liminal places can be sustained by narratives that disrupt traditional categories of thought and morality.

Moving to the mid-twentieth century, many canals, superseded by railways and road improvements, had fallen into a state of dereliction and disrepair, resulting in a changing dimension to their spatial and material liminality (see Figure 1). With the nationalisation of most UK canals in 1948, their function as routeways for trade diminished further, and the decaying fabric of the canal network resulted in large tracts of redundant urban space. The 1960s and 1970s saw the depiction of urban canals in the media as dangerous and led to calls for the filling in of these largely abandoned, ‘most unattractive’ (The Times, 1966, p. 14) waterways. This concurs with understandings of liminal spaces as those that are sometimes marginalised or on the edge. Yet, the abandonment and dereliction of canals during this period also represented a degradation of their liminal qualities of in-betweenness, especially as these decaying spaces became increasingly peripheral to urban living, and characterised by minimal human activity. This emphasises how notions of liminality are necessarily underpinned by human agency and experience, and that without such agency liminal space loses its necessary context and meaning. In summary, the 1960s and 1970s was a time when many UK canals were poorly managed and, as a result, sometimes unsafe.

Since the 1970s, a renaissance of the UK canal network has taken place, which has further transformed urban canal spaces (Figure 1). This signifies a shift or flux in liminality. With canal restoration and a reduction in their pollution, initially through concerted volunteer-led campaigns (Trapp-Fallon, 2007) and then from the 1980s onwards an increasingly regulated focus on water quality, canals in UK cities now provide the ‘canvas’ for a refreshed configuration of liminal intersections—they have become transitional zones between the urban and rural, the ‘natural’ and ‘constructed’, and a routeway through which these differing environments can interact. Within modern UK towns and cities, canals can be a haven for wildlife, thereby bringing elements and ideas of the countryside into the urban environment, with the prices of canal-side properties reflecting this value uplift (Gibbons et al., 2021). Conversely, at the height of the Industrial Revolution, canals were the conduit through which the celebrated progress (and associated pollution) of urban industry radiated out into rural Britain.



FIGURE 1 Ashton Canal lock 11 in the 1960s and in 2020s.

Source: on the left © Waterway Images/Harry Arnold MBE; on the right: © Chris Chambers.

The concept of liminal space also offers a perspective for thinking about the role of the non-human within canal-based environments. Liminal canal spaces can intensify the presence and activity of the non-human in the form of wild-life. However, boaters exceeding speed limits can have negative repercussions on nesting bird populations, highlighting the delicate balance between human activities and ecological harmony. Similarly, the resource allocation decisions made by navigation authorities provide deeper insights into how these liminal spaces become arenas for interactions, negotiations, and sometimes tensions between the human and non-human realms. This underscores how liminality at the rural/urban and human/non-human intersection can shift in terms of its location and direction of flow over time, particularly in linear spaces like canals. Such liminal flux aligns with historic expansions and contractions of urban development and industry, as well as changing public and political views about the value of the natural environment and greenspace to human existence.

The liminal nature of urban canal space in the modern era is also demonstrated in other ways. Certainly, their gradual greening over recent years through multiple rounds of clean-up and conservation efforts has rendered them as a new form of liminal recreational space—a haven that is wrapped up in media narratives of ‘hidden gems’ or ‘hidden treasures’ that insert ideas of the rural idyll into an urban context. As one discussion group participant notes:

Part of the reason a lot of us enjoy [the canal] is because it does feel like the countryside or remote, or just not the city centre... it is a quiet place.

(F48)

The same individual, however, also notes that the urban canal network has ‘places where groups of people will gather to take drugs and spend the night’ (F48). This emphasises how liminal spaces can attract a wealth of different users, social classes, and mobilities, including seemingly liminal citizens, such as drug-users and the homeless, who are out-of-view and marginalised from mainstream urban society (Truelove, 2021). Indeed, several participants identified various locations on Manchester’s urban canal network where the very in-betweenness or marginal nature of this space provided a refuge for homeless people. These included scraps of canal-side land cut off from wider urban surroundings through their location. For example:

There are triangulated bits of land, quite large areas, totally dense with trees and bushes ... there are people living in those, and the canal is the only access to it.

(M54)

Another participant recalled how:

For a long time on the Rochdale [Canal] in Manchester just up from Dukes 92 [pub] on the offside where the grass comes down from Deansgate Locks, and the rock wall has a kind of undercut, homeless have lived there for a long time.

(M49)

The above examples also echo Shortt’s (2015) work by demonstrating how the liminal spaces of the canal network can be (re)constructed by individual actors as ‘transitory dwelling places’ through quotidian and habitual use.

These urban canal-based liminalities are not just spatially realised, they also demonstrate temporal—and specifically diurnal—rhythms of movement. Thus, leisure boaters tend to move during the hours of daylight, as night navigation is not allowed for hired vessels; joggers and dog walkers often take morning or evening exercise on towpaths; cycling commuters are present during the rush hour; and gangs of youths and drug users are more likely to emerge as darkness falls. Discussion group participants were keen to emphasise that these liminalities arose from the fact that canals were spaces of greater freedom within the wider context of modern life, more distant or removed from state intervention and rules:

M38: You’re [in] purgatory [on the canals]; you’re in between states.

M49: It’s certainly a non-state space. The state isn’t that involved, especially now that the CRT run the canals, the state is even further away from the canals than it was before, when it was a sort of quango under British Waterways.



An added complexity regarding the liminal nature of canal space relates to the perspective of those experiencing it. Certainly, for liveaboard boaters, previous work has identified the centrality of canal-based dwelling and boat-based routines to everyday life (Malkogeorgou, 2019) in the 'linear village'—a term often used by boat dwellers to refer to the canal:

The canal has always been a linear village and so if you're based in one place at [name of a marina], it's pretty much the same people who come by and there are connections with people who have businesses all along the canal or just you know because they have the same type of traditional boats or whatever, and it is, it's a family. (F61)

For these individuals who are living in canal space, liminality might be defined by those places just beyond it, such as an urban neighbourhood that is near enough to the canal to be partly defined by it while not actually being part of the canal system itself. With the development of late-modern urban living, especially in the Global North, these neighbourhoods with locations close to water might also represent attractive sites for development and, therefore, a potential threat to any understanding of canal liminality. We explore this idea below in discussions regarding delimitation. First, however, we will turn our attention to the scalar aspects of canal-based liminality.

## 5.2 | Intersections of liminality and scale

The canal network provides an environment in which liminality and scale are in ongoing and closely linked interaction, much of which is tied together by the mode of associated mobilities (Kaaristo et al., 2020). Thus, canal-based human activities occurring within localised domains of spatiality are typically on foot, whereas those spanning larger areas are more likely to involve non-pedestrian forms of mobility such as boats and bikes. To illustrate, the dog walker on the canal towpath is often within a short walking distance of their home, the commuting cyclist may be operating within a familiar corridor of movement between home and work of several miles in length, and the boater could be weeks of travel away from their home mooring. Such examples, along with those provided below, accord with Banfield's (2022) notion of how liminalities can be spatialised in a staggered manner, operating at different temporalities, intensities, and scales for different actors.

The pace of mobilities is also important in intersections of liminality and scale. For example, boaters with permanent moorings often view their world through a scalar lens focused on the area immediately surrounding their vessel. This was witnessed in our walks along canals, where some boat owners moored up for significant periods of time had allowed their living space to spill out onto the towpath, involving potted plants and other objects that might normally be associated with a residential garden. This represents an encroachment of domesticated order into the liminality of canal space—and a form territorialisation (Cheetham et al., 2018) which through its very enactment takes some of that liminality away. It is a practice that is discouraged by the CRT in their code of conduct around mooring, which reminds boaters not to 'obstruct the towpath or use our [CRT's] land for storing items from your Boat' (Canal and River Trust, n.d, p. 5). Nevertheless, in our walk along the Regent's Canal it was evident that there was little effort to strictly enforce restrictions on towpath clutter from canal boats, provided walkers and cyclists could still pass through. This reflects Kaaristo et al.'s (2020, p. 852) findings regarding the CRT's 'easy-going strategy' towards the governance of canal mobilities.

In contrast to the above, the continuous cruiser or holiday boater, moving along the canal at a maximum pace of 4mph, may have their scalar sights set much wider. This might involve thinking about progress made along different sections of canal network thus far, and that to be made in the future, thereby viewing the canal network, or at least regional sections of it, as a series of interlinked scalar systems:

The reason I moved onto a boat was partly because I wanted to move and see more of England ... if you ask me one year, I'll say, "Well, I've been on the Leeds and Liverpool and the Bridgewater [Canals]," and another year it might be the Oxford and the Shropshire Union [Canals] and so on. (M49)

For some boaters, the canal network extends even further, as they could take their boats on lorries to Scottish waterways that are not connected to the England and Wales network, or even across the Channel to the waterways of mainland Europe.

The angler's scale of operation is different again. In an activity characterised by a relative absence of movement, or even stasis, often for hours at a time, their domain is inevitably focused on the small area of water where their rod is set:

Certainly when I'm with the kids and if we're fishing ... there is something; maybe it's that being slightly outside again, that area that's slightly outside the speed of the rest of the world, that's quite important I think to me.

(M39)

Here, the angler's highly localised and focalised world of interaction and territorialisation is usually only broken intermittently by a boat cruising by, or the draught of a passing towpath jogger or cyclist, signalling a point at which two scalar worlds underpinned by different mobilities momentarily intersect, resulting in the 'creation of multiple overlapping territories' (Cheetham et al., 2018, p. 474). Such intersections can provide points of social tension and conflict across the canal network, notably when those actors operating at a faster pace (e.g., cyclists, runners) encounter those moving more slowly (e.g., walkers, boaters):

F35: I normally used to walk back from Media City and he [a particular cyclist] would basically barge us out of the way pretty much every day.

M49: He just doesn't give way and you step out of the way because you know he's going to plough straight through.

F48: Is he on the left or is he on the right, or does he go wherever he wants?

F35: He goes whichever way he fancies, so you're kind of like second-guessing him and just hoping for the best.

Canal-based liminalities also provide a space for cultural and artistic expression on the margins of mainstream society in the form of street art and graffiti—itsself demonstrating the potential complexity of scalar intersections on the canal network. To illustrate, in our walk along Regent's Canal, a CRT representative was keen to point out the legacy of a longstanding 'graffiti war' on a wall beneath Camden Road bridge, inaccessible to pedestrians but easily viewed from the towpath on the opposite bank. Here, between 2009 and 2011, graffiti writer Robbo and street artist Banksy traded competing inscriptions, which started when Banksy partially painted over Robbo's writing that had been in place since the 1980s (Ross, 2016). This revealed a complex and fascinating intersection of scalar worlds in liminal space. Robbo, based in the nearby Kings Cross area, had a reputation across London among those who understood and appreciated graffiti. Banksy, from Bristol (apparently), already held an international artistic presence by this time.

These two artists became entangled in a mutually beneficial and scalar interdependency. Robbo was able to further elevate his locally embedded reputation by engaging in a performative spat with an internationally lauded street artist over a seemingly unremarkable scrap of canal space within his neighbourhood—local and global scalar interactions being played out with paint on a small wall under a dingy London canal bridge. Banksy, meanwhile, arguably strengthened his global and anonymised cultural capital, at least in the mainstream art world, by drawing on the innate authenticity arising from his involvement in this localised urban graffiti duel. At various points, British Waterways (the national-level authority that preceded the CRT), and sometimes possibly Banksy himself or his fans, erased the graffiti by overpainting it with black in a seeming attempt to sporadically regulate liminal space, only for the two artists to subsequently reinstate their tit-for-tat daubing. The 'war' ended when Robbo fell into an eventually fatal coma in 2011. An unattributed final inscription memorialising Robbo's artistic legacy has since been left without further overlay by Banksy or erasure by the CRT (Figure 2).

Notably, the CRT now appears to have a more relaxed approach to graffiti, with the CRT representative on our walk along Regents Canal keen to highlight some of the graffitied inscriptions on bridges and walls, presenting them like artefacts of curated art and embracing the liminal world they signal. This reflects changing societal attitudes to graffiti and street art, such that '[w]hat was once absolutely illicit has now become set in a curiously liminal position, a position in which council authorities have become arbiters of taste' (Schacter, 2019, p. 413). Consequently, local authority or CRT-commissioned murals are now a feature of some urban canal bridge archways across the network.



**FIGURE 2** Tribute to Robbo underneath a bridge on the Regent's Canal in 2017.  
 Source: Authors' own image.

### 5.3 | Deliminalisation

Notwithstanding the above discussion, a source of growing and ongoing tension between canalscape co-producers/consumers (e.g., boaters, walkers, runners, canal-side residents) and canal space agents and brokers (e.g., the CRT, property agents, developers, planners, etc.) arises over what might best be termed 'deliminalisation'. This is inspired by the notion of 'deterritorialisation', as advocated by Tomlinson (1999), referring to the cultural, economic, and political processes of globalisation that ensure geographical place or territory is not the only determining factor of socio-cultural experience. Put otherwise, Tomlinson (1999) acknowledges that places are influenced by events and processes in place, yet are themselves part of broader forces occurring across varying scales of distance beyond place.

We contend that deliminalisation aligns with those same broader forces as they are manifest in urban neo-liberal planning regimes of the late modern era, typically involving a top-down and 'one-size fits all' form of place governance and placemaking, coupled with notions of the city as a 'marketplace' (Platt & Medway, 2022). Such forces have resulted in a growing number of homogeneous development practices for many waterfront sites across the world, as discussed above. Despite political and planning narratives in which these developments are held up as examples of successful placemaking, counter arguments suggest they can encourage gentrification practices that can disembed and marginalise certain communities at the expense of others (see, for example, Wincott et al., 2020). In examining the UK's urban canal network, we would go further, suggesting that waterfront developments can denude the liminality of canal space by promoting its spatial absorption into the mainstream urban landscape and experience through physical interventions such as lighting, resurfacing, signage, mooring management, and the conversion (or replacement) of historic warehouses related to the canal trade into new upmarket urban housing. This process of deliminalisation, at least in terms of its outcomes, has some connections with canal abandonment and dereliction – a blight which, as noted above, has historically threatened many urban canal spaces. In short, both deliminalisation and dereliction could be seen as opposing forces that degrade the liminal and in-between qualities of canal space – the former by over-integration into the urban mainstream through development and the latter by allowing slippage into peripheral irrelevance. A key difference, however, is that the degradation of liminality through deliminalisation is a result of active intervention(s), whereas dereliction is caused by passive neglect.

The processes of deliminalisation are often reflected in accompanying language and narratives, notably with the application of new toponyms to redeveloped and repurposed areas of canal space. One example of this 'toponymic commodification' (Medway & Warnaby, 2014) is a reinstatement of the historic place name New Islington, in conjunction with a modern waterfront marina development at the confluence of the Rochdale and Ashton Canals in Manchester's city centre (Figure 3). This area was known as the Cardroom Estate during the 1960s, a name presumably deemed too unattractive with its social housing connotations, especially for an audience of urban professionals and creative classes who are the main sales targets for these canal-side developments. Emphasising those homogenising forces that are enacted through the deliminalisation of urban canal space, the ongoing works related to this waterfront development project



**FIGURE 3** Canal waterfront development at New Islington, Manchester.  
Source: Authors' own image.

resulted in a threatened eviction of around 30 canal boats and their dwellers from the area in 2017 by Manchester City Council—a decision seen by one boat dweller as driven by the imperative to:

hand over the marina to a developer who will then turn it into some sort of gated community, and perhaps charge a lot more to live here, and possibly get rid of the existing residents. I suspect that the council is looking to get maybe a different class of boaters in (Star, 2017).

Developments like those at New Islington herald a new breed of canal consumers, attracted by the residential repurposing of these waterfront locations, but ironically often in conflict with some boats and boaters that are inherent to the canal system's historic origins and purpose, and that make it an attractive location in the first place (Wincott et al., 2020).

It's obviously an attraction because you see architects' drawings for all of these fancy developments [and] they always have boats just nestled up outside ... until they've been built and then they put a little cord across the piece of water. If you go down to Castlefield now, you'll see there's all bits of water that you cannot get into with a boat because they don't want some pikey like me with a chimney coughing up crap into the air outside this extremely expensive apartment, and that's the reality of it...

(M49)

While Manchester City Council later apologised for its handling of the New Islington Marina case (Williams, 2017), it demonstrates the passions surrounding the delimitation of canal space. A subsequent phase of regeneration in New Islington promised more waterfront apartment blocks with a residents-only gated garden square, and over 30 townhouses, none of which meet UK government definitions of affordable housing (Griffiths, 2020).

Another site of contestation in the delimitation of Manchester's canalscape is Piccadilly Undercroft, an area of the Rochdale Canal in the city centre, often used for gay cruising, as well as occasional drug taking and dealing (RSPA, 2018). As identified above, this fits with the idea of some canal areas, such as bridges, being spaces that embrace liminality. Walking through the Undercroft during fieldwork, the material signifiers of public sex and drug taking were evident in graffiti messages and the discarded litter of condoms and needles, which together with the gloomy light created a sense of liminal atmosphere. This echoes work examining how material and sensory interventions within spaces (and absences in the case of things like lighting) can influence atmospheres, emotions, and human affect (Edensor & Smith, 2020; Steadman et al., 2021). In this instance, the apparent sense of freedom engendered by the liminal atmosphere of the Undercroft among some canal users is experienced by others as wholly intimidating:

[The Undercroft is] a big toilet. It's just not a very nice place to go really. A piece of advice I was given when I was boating through it was keep a firm grip of your windlass [a portable metal handle for operating the

locks] because you never know when you're going to need it. And I don't think they were referring to operating the locks ... I think the last occasion I went through it someone was shooting up in there, it's just not pleasant. Since then, it has been gated from what I can gather. I don't know if that's made any difference.

(M44)

Deliminalisation arguably began when the Undercroft was fitted with lights and CCTV cameras before the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester. Then, from 2017, gates were installed to prevent public access from 10 PM to 7 AM, leaving the canal accessible only via boat during that time as the site became subject to a Public Spaces Protection Order (Canal and River Trust, 2022b). Signs have also gone up to try and control those practices and behaviours that might take place within the Undercroft (Figure 4) in an attempt to bring some order and governance to perceived disorder. The CRT is arguably encouraging further deliminalisation of this space through a consultation about 'how to realise its full potential' (Canal and River Trust, 2022b) – this includes the organisation of a temporary light installation and display within the Undercroft in 2023 (Molloy, 2023). However, restricting access or repurposing the space has meant that the activities that take place there have gradually been displaced elsewhere. This emphasises how deliminalisation efforts in one area may be countered through citizens' greater engagement with the liminal potentials of other spaces. Currently, an important location in this regard is an unilluminated canal bridge near the Undercroft, too low for any surveillance cameras to be fitted there.

Similar to the above, organisations such as the Manchester Water Safety Partnership have signalled the need for various measures to improve public safety on the canal. Suggested changes include improved lighting, fencing at junctions, and education on water safety and routes, especially at night (RSPA, 2018). These interventions emphasise an inherent tension on urban canal networks resulting from initiatives that would typically come under the banner of public safety and 'crime prevention through environmental design' (CPTED), but which some canal users regard as signals of the incipient creep of deliminalisation and an imposition of top-down order and inconvenience for others:

For an active canal full of water, I am dead against barriers and railings and stuff like that. It is a harder experience for the boaters. You've basically got to step around the barrier somehow in order to operate the lock ... I mean, you've got like a hundred-year-old stonework and brickwork around the canal and you don't want a modern handrail on it, because it's not in keeping with the original infrastructure. It just spoils the atmosphere, spoils the vision, gives it a whole different vibe.

(M44)



**FIGURE 4** Notice in the Piccadilly Undercroft.  
 Source: Authors' own image.

The above discussion demonstrates the societal and cultural tensions arising from the delimitation of UK urban canal space, and the complexity of viewpoints that can emerge around this. This, in turn, exposes the importance of working with communities of stakeholders in decision-making processes relating to the liminal qualities of urban canals.

## 6 | CONCLUSION: CANALS SPACES AND LIMINAL BALANCE IN THE MODERN CITY

Our discussion has revealed how canals within the UK, certainly since Victorian times, have demonstrated aspects of liminality in terms of the way they occupy space and are used. This liminality has shown flux and change over time. From its initial, prominent, and celebrated construction, the UK canal network soon melted into the urban background as part of the everyday supply network of the Industrial Revolution. Eclipsed by the development and excitement of the railways, canals and those who worked upon them had already assumed a liminal positioning in late Victorian society. With the onset of the twentieth century, and further developments in transportation technologies, canals further shifted into spaces at the margins of human activity through lack of use. Consequently, by the early 1970s many canal networks had reached a liminal nadir, characterised in urban areas by varying degrees of decay and inaccessibility to citizens. Since this time, however, there has been a renaissance of urban canals, accelerated by recent media narratives that promote canals' significance for society. This has transformed many urban waterways from sites of dangerous dereliction to recreational mobility routeways and wildlife havens—though still usually out of the line of sight of the everyday cityscape. Accordingly, urban canals as 'spaces of otherness' (Roberts, 2018, p. 40) continue to embody liminality, yet this is less likely to be manifest in the form of their previous industrial role and subsequent abandonment. Instead, it reflects the fact that urban canals have a new-found importance as sites of in-betweenness that bridge complex and scalar intersections between different spatialities, practices, identities, and mobilities, while at the same time remaining partly removed from the city life of surrounding streets and neighbourhoods.

We have indicated that such characteristics and qualities are in part due to the relatively unregulated nature of urban canal space, and that there is a delicate liminal balance to maintain here. This is about embracing the apparent and perceived liminal freedoms that urban canals can offer, with their lack of CCTV surveillance and minimal imposition of rules and regulations, but also not allowing this to extend to the level where canal users might feel unsafe or in danger within canal space. Liminal balance, therefore, denotes a certain socio-material moment on the continuum between liminal and non-liminal. As Edensor and Smith (2020, p. 581) contend, 'a marginal, unpoliced, unfinished, richly textured and indeterminate site [can offer] the potential to inspire alternative understandings of place, memory and political activity'.

While it is evident that citizens can derive value from the liminality of urban canals, it is likely this was further heightened by COVID-19. Lockdown travel bans encouraged people to explore and engage with their local areas more. As a result, many of those individuals and groups trapped spatially and virtually into the often-rigid routines of urban living—working days, online meetings, retail and service opening hours, transport timetables, etc.—have discovered a new 'in-between' retreat from this in nearby canal space. This aligns with Shortt's (2015) work on how liminal and in-between spaces in a workplace context can become 'transitory dwelling places' that are used as sites of respite away from the demands of corporate expectation. We contend that urban canals also act as transitory dwelling places within the urban maelstrom and as important sites for greater citizen wellbeing and even a sense of 'hydrocitizenship' (McEwen et al., 2020), an awareness of the importance of water to societies and a sense of responsibility towards water resources. This latter concept presents urban canals as places where the everyday routines and structures of urban living are more easily forgotten within an environment of ambiguous watery geographies—here, elements of the natural and built environment are fluidly combined, and human behaviour is neither strictly regulated nor entirely unregulated. Reflecting this potential, wellbeing is currently an important target for the CRT, not least because it is something urban canals are well placed to offer (Canal and River Trust, 2017).

It is also important to recognise that canal spatialities are different from other urban recreational havens such as parks, which are arguably less removed from visible everyday urban living (i.e., parks rarely sit below or above street level as canals regularly do) and are often more tightly managed, with the activities within parks being closely regulated (e.g., with the presence of urban park rangers or wardens; instructions and notices about ball games, barbecues, dogs, and cyclists in designated areas; and with some parks being closed at night). At the same time, the incessant creep of neoliberalism in urban planning and economic development puts canals as liminal entities under threat, and in this regard there is scope for future studies to better understand the role of community, corporate, and political actors (e.g., neighbourhood associations, property developers, planners, or local government) in any reconfiguration and associated delimitation of urban canal spaces.

Examples of such powerful processes include: the construction of new gentrified urban waterfront housing that incorporates the freedom of canal space into semi-private and usually highly surveilled residential projects; interventions such as graffiti removal, which could be perceived as the erasure of legitimate expressions of community-based culture; and lighting and restricted access schemes which, while supposedly improving public safety, can also marginalise legitimate identity positions and sub-cultural behaviours that flourish in the liminality of canal space and the anonymity it can provide. In response, if canal liminality has value, then it is worth protecting from those forces that might diminish it.

To conclude, our paper reveals how urban canals can operate as delicately balanced and ribbon-like liminal ecosystems that run, quite literally, through and in between the modern city. In so doing, they are watery spaces that offer highly accessible, recreational, cultural, and potential wellbeing benefits to a hugely diverse population of citizens (Canal and River Trust, 2017). However, this liminality, though longstanding, is in constant flux and needs careful nurturing and curation to ensure it is neither left to decay through the passive neglect of dereliction or eroded through the active intervention(s) of delimitation. Such curation will ensure that the liminal balance of urban canal networks, with their inherent spatial ambivalence and ambiguity, is maintained for future generations. In turn, the notion of curating liminal balance has implications for other potential waterfront developments that offer the same positive potential for hydrocitizenship and its fluid in-betweenness. Our paper, therefore, offers a contribution to ongoing debates around the redevelopment of service-based economies and geographies in Global North cities. More specifically, we suggest the need for a more nuanced understanding of the forces of gentrification and displacement in relation to watery or blue (as opposed to green) urban spaces. This includes an appreciation of the need for a 'lighter touch' approach to redevelopment and governance within these areas in order to preserve liminal balance and maintain, or even enhance, associated citizen wellbeing.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Authors elect to not share data.

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