

Kenya has had little option but play a prominent part in the complicated challenge of hosting refugees. Since the spectacular collapse of Somalia and the Siad Barre government, Kenya has, over the years, informed by policy towards its neighbors and statutes of the UNHCR, taken responsibility for creating refugee camps in Northern Kenya, motivated by the idea that when things “normalize” in Somalia, the business of repatriation is not too much of a challenge. (It’s important to note that there are ethnic Somali of Kenyan nationality which magnifies the problem).

The vast majority of Nairobi’s urban refugees live in Eastleigh, a densely populated area of Nairobi where the informal economy competes robustly with the formal economy. Today Eastleigh is popularly known as “little Mogadishu and is dominated by the ethnic Somali among other African refugees and immigrants. Their status has caused them to be perceived as the source of a wide variety of social and economic problems to, particularly, Nairobi. They have, sometimes, gained notoriety in the Kenyan media and the minds of the population because of behavior, inconsistent with acceptable shared values in an urban environment.

Despite the xenophobic treatment from the local population of the city, the Somali refugees have found a niche as aggressive traders. They have turned old residential tenements into shopping malls. The Somali tap into transnational networks which provide them with a system to build upon. It is this momentum they have generated that can weave a positive and inclusive “commercial tapestry” and inspire an interesting architecture that reflects new attitudes and accommodates new possibilities within a reworked physical environment.