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Chapter 13

The Porous Infrastructures of Somali Malls in Cape Town

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THE POROUS INFRASTRUCTURES OF SOMALI MALLS IN CAPE TOWN

Huda Tayob

This chapter takes as its subject a series of contingent mixed-use urban markets that have been established in Cape Town, South Africa, by migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from various parts of the African continent. Known colloquially as 'Somali malls,' these markets typically occupy once-vacant or underused office blocks, filling them with multiple small shops, services, and residences. Read through the lens of infrastructure, these spaces of flows tie Somali diasporic communities into transnational networks of sociality and exchange. Through novel forms of organization, procurement, display, and hospitality, proprietors optimize the spaces internally within buildings while at the same time constructing networks that exceed the building envelope, creating a flexible, multiscalar set of practices. Women comprise the large majority of traders in the Somali malls, carving out spaces not only for merchandising and earning a living, but also for the construction of migrant sociality in a new and unfamiliar world. This research approach is grounded in broader anthropological approaches and architectural fieldwork methods. The resultant multiscalar reading of informal migrant markets, not usually found in spatial archives, questions dominant readings of infrastructures in post-colonial contexts.

Since the mid-1990s in greater Cape Town, a series of contingent mixed-use urban markets has been established by migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from various parts of the African continent. Among these are a spatial typology widely known as Somali malls, named for their main proprietors, Somali refugees. In the peripheral northern Cape Town suburb of Bellville, these multi-story office conversions host various functions including residential accommodation, shops, and various services that primarily cater to east African new entrants. Over the past three decades, they have emerged as key spaces of infrastructure and flows in the exchange of goods among migrant communities, and a feature of Cape Town's urban landscape.

This chapter reads into the fine grain of the Somali mall in order to draw out broader urban and architectural entanglements across scales.[1] Rather than approach the markets as fixed objects in space and time, I examine them as unstable sites that both expand within and contract beyond their physical bounds. As E. Summerson Carr and Michael Lempert assert, scale is not given, but is made in the world.[2] In this sense, even as the scalar exertions of commerce map onto particular geolocations, they simultaneously fold into and exceed their bounded framing, suggesting a porosity across space and time. Working through the implications of these sites across borders is central to recognizing them as historically constituted, to follow Edward Said.[3] Reading these Somali malls across scales can reveal how migrant social and spatial practices escape neatly drawn boundaries. It is this porous, fungible nature of the markets in greater Cape Town that have made them a central feature of migrant life in post-apartheid South Africa.

In his discussion of the poetics and politics of infrastructures, Brian Larkin asserts that infrastructures are "unruly," in that they cannot be understood as objects alone. He argues that, "what distinguishes

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infrastructures from technologies is that they are objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems."[4] Following Larkin, I read the Somali Malls as infrastructural, in that they provide a nodal point for amplifying and enabling the flow of goods, services, and people. Furthermore, these Somali malls are not unique to Cape Town, but are also found in Nairobi, Dubai, and Minneapolis.[5] They should therefore be read within a wider system of similar spaces.

In the following sections I take a close look at the 'Somali mall' at three scalar registers: the urban neighborhood, the building, and the individual shop. I show that the porosity and flexibility of these registers reveal how migrant communities have constructed spaces of flows. By examining the Somali mall and its environs across varied scales and borders, the importance of these spaces as part of the commercial infrastructure for everyday migrant life stands out in sharp relief.

Bellville

Bellville is an area approximately twenty-five kilometers north of the city center, and currently within the metropolitan boundaries of the City of Cape Town. From the 1950s, newspaper articles describe the area as the urban cultural heartland of 'white' Afrikaans speakers in the region, an Afrikaner CBD in contrast to the city of Cape Town.[6] On September 7, 1979 the area of Bellville was granted city status, and by the 1980s newspapers suggested that "it was in Bellville […] that the Afrikaner has found his feet and become a co-builder of South Africa's future."[7] Following the end of apartheid, and the formation of the Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality in 2000, Bellville lost its city status, and became an area within the wider Cape Town region. This period coincided with 'white' flight from the area to nearby gated communities. Black South African residents as well as African migrants from Somalia, Ethiopia, and The Congo quickly moved into the area, drawn by good transport links, high levels of formal infrastructure, and inexpensive rentals.[8] The decline in investment and change from city status to suburb was instrumental in Bellville becoming a pan-African space, facilitating and enabling both mobility and a form of settlement for non-citizens.

The most significant changes occurred in the former central business district (CBD), between the Bellville train station and Voortrekker Road, a key urban artery. Shifting radically from a 'white' heartland under apartheid to a largely 'Black' space in recent years, it challenges the still dominant view of Cape Town as an unchanging 'white' apartheid city.[9] However, the changes in Bellville were not only demographic, but also spatial, as migrant groups forged new patterns of inhabitation and transformed buildings and landscapes to suit their needs. It is in this context that the Somali mall emerged as a new node in the commercial and social infrastructure of Bellville (Figure 13.1).

The term "Somali mall" refers to multi-story markets in Bellville which have dominant Somali or east African populations; in 2015 there were approximately fourteen in the former CBD area. These mixed-use markets have been created from old multi-story office blocks or large individual commercial spaces. It is unclear where the term itself comes from, yet it is widely used in the area to refer to these mixed-use spaces. While primarily given over to commercial enterprises, they also house numerous social and religious services, including churches, mosques, nursery schools, community organizations, English language schools, travel and transportation agencies, money exchanges, restaurants, coffee shops and residential accommodation. The pattern and proliferation of these markets has coincided with the changing refugee policies and border permeability. As such, Somali malls are perhaps better understood as arcades, where the "passage is a city, a world in miniature."[10] In Bellville, it is rumored that within these few city blocks, the Somali population alone swells to 7,000 on a Sunday, as refugees gather. The increasing visibility of the malls, and their infrastructural role in the lives of migrants, points to their significance in post-apartheid urban space in spatial, economic, and cultural terms.

Figure 13.1 Advertisement for a Somali mall in Bellville, Cape Town, 2014.

Source: Photograph by Huda Tayob.

Nevertheless, not everyone in Cape Town looks upon the malls and their environs favorably. Newspapers describe the area as a site of "urban decay," and as "crime-ridden and rundown."[11] Articles emphasize the "dirt and waste" that accumulate in the busy streets and alleys, and lament that migrants are "invading" and "taking over," turning the area into a "slum."[12] It is only when xenophobic attacks occurred in surrounding areas that there was minimal recognition of Bellville as a "safe haven" for migrants.[13] Many refer to the area derisively as "little Somalia" or "little Mogadishu," a foreign space.[14] The negative perception of the area is racially charged through its association with 'Black' African character.

The dystopic view is shared by the City of Cape Town, which established the Voortrekker Road City Improvement District (VRCID) as a vehicle to "turn the area around."[15] Between 2012 and 2014, the VRCID identified 15 "problem buildings" where they hoped to evict current tenants. In November 2013, for example, officials evicted residents from the Anabora Shopping Centre, which had housed shops, a school, several restaurants, and residences. According to the VRCID manager, the mall was a space of irregular, informal and unacceptable occupation.[16] He did not recognize that for many refugees and asylum seekers, these malls provide access to space in a property market that is otherwise inaccessible and unwelcoming to non-citizens.[17]

Despite having experienced significant disinvestment after 'white' flight, Bellville maintains a high level of formal and physical infrastructure, with running water, electricity, phone lines, and good

Figure 13.2 Som Shopping Centre, Cape Town, 2014.

Source: Photograph by Huda Tayob.

connection to existing road and rail networks. The improvisatory nature of the Somali malls and the ad hoc additions and sub-divisions builds on these existing infrastructure affordances to establish new spaces of flows suitable to the incoming populations (Figure 13.2). In buildings that were previously solely commercial, the Somali malls offer instead a porous range of private, public, and familial spaces. While AbdouMaliq Simone's work emphasizes these immaterial connections between bodies, this chapter suggests that these networks extend into the manipulation of the architectonic fabric itself, and are hosted in distinct material and spatial sites.[18] As Benjamin and Lacis said of Naples, "building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways."[19] While such occupation is contingent, and at times precarious, the inhabitants of Bellville have nevertheless invested substantial material and cultural capital into the activations of these spaces for everyday social and commercial life.

Som City

Som City was one of the first Somali malls established in Bellville (Figure 13.3). From the outside, the building has the appearance of a neat, if slightly worn, office block. A small sign with the Somali flag displays the mall's name. Below the sign, double glass doors open onto a small foyer with peeling, faded, yellow walls. Straight ahead is a defunct lift, and to the right, the main staircase for the building. In the foyer are small advertisements for "Jubba Internet Café" and "Som City." The first flight of stairs leads to a small landing with various notices displayed. To the left of the landing is "Mubarak Restaurant" which serves East African dishes, along with snacks, tea, and coffee. To the right of the landing is a corridor that runs the length of the building with small shops on either side; these shops are between one and six square meters and most are run by women. They sell food items, women's clothing, and miscellaneous household goods, piled high on shelves, hung on the walls and in front of windows; I was told

Figure 13.3 Som City, Cape Town, 2014.

Source: Photograph by Huda Tayob.

that it is the best place to buy clothing for festive occasions. There is also a laundry, phone service, and internet café on this floor. The floors above house one of several lodges in Bellville, which are living quarters consisting of small, shared sleeping spaces.

Until 2004, the Som City building was a regular office block. Ahmed, the current manager, described travelling over land to South Africa, fleeing violence in Mogadishu.[20] When he first arrived in Cape Town in 2000, he worked as a street trader in various parts of the city, saving where possible. When 20 Kruskal Avenue became available for rent, Ahmed and two friends saw the opportunity to turn it into a Somali mall. The Oriental Plaza, the first Somali mall across the street, was a prosperous precedent,

along with the Somali malls Ahmed had seen in Eastleigh, Nairobi, on his way to South Africa. In Eastleigh, Ahmed had personal experience of the potential of Somali Malls to provide affordable residential accommodation and services for new entrants and itinerant traders. When they gained occupation of 20 Kruskal Avenue, they subdivided spaces to create small affordable trading spaces on the lower two floors, and a residential lodge above. Ahmed lived in the lodge himself for the first two years that Som City was open.

The naming of this Somali Mall "Som City" underscores Ahmed's canny spatial conceptualization of the interior as an arcade—and alternative world brought into Bellville. Beyond Benjamin's reading of the arcade as a city, this is an arcade that calls itself a city, named after a country. "Mubarak Restaurant," Moqdishu Trading, and Jubba internet café, among others, tell their own spatial stories of arcades elsewhere, and of the porous relationships between Somali malls in Cape Town and those in Nairobi, Minneapolis and Dubai. Therefore, while Som City and various other pan-African markets in the area are linked to existing social and physical networks within the city of Cape Town, they extend beyond their particular material and spatial envelopes. In both conceptualization and operation, they exceed the bounded framing of the nation state, and instead rely on personal negotiations and kinship networks that link into transnational networks, movements, and practices. The multi-scalar nature of these spaces as highly localized and intimately connected elsewhere becomes particularly evident when looking at the scale of individual shops and the goods within them.

Moqdishu Trading

Moqdishu Trading is a single store within Som City, which is run by Sara, a female trader. Within the arcade-like space, this is one of the many similar shops that is characterized by the dense accumulation of goods (Figure 13.4). Most of the stores sell similar "Somali goods" which include items such as Banadir One Coffee, spices for Somali tea, masallahs (straw mats), perfumes, attar (natural oil

Figure 13.4 Interior of a shop in Som City, Cape Town, 2014.

Source: Photograph by Huda Tayob.

perfumes), hair oils, henna, abayas, sandals, hijab, clothes for weddings, imported cosmetics, flax seed oil, sesame oil and spaghetti. Most also stock Anchor Milk powder, Hilwa chicken stock, and Foster Clark's juice mixes. These goods are often sold alongside toothpastes, shampoos, and bags of rice. As Caroline Skinner has noted, informal trade is a key occupation for new entrants to South Africa as their irregular status means few are able to access the formal job market.[21]

Sara's shop is one of many in a country where the majority of informal trade is undertaken by women.[22] These shops are further gendered in that they host domestic practices which include caring for families, overseeing after-school homework by their children, organizing meals, and extending hospitality to family and friends. The parceling of spaces into smaller increments, from Bellville to Som City to an individual shop accords with a gendered gradation in scale from the urban to the domestic. Yet, the goods themselves reveal the imbrication of these arcades with spaces and people located elsewhere, and at a transnational scale.[23]

My first introduction to Som City was with Fatima, a trader who runs a shop next door to Som City. She took me on a tour of the Somali malls in the area. This introduction to the Somali malls coincided with an introduction to several of her friends and family members, many of whom had their own small shops, and all of whom offered us a place to sit and a cup of tea. Our visits extended beyond an introduction, to a discussion of daily life in Bellville, conversations about schools, and updates on the latest marriages, births and deaths, or violence in surrounding areas of Cape Town. Always included was the latest news on new arrivals in the city along with recent departures. As a result of both the goods sold and the uses of space, these small shops are key social spaces for Somali women in Cape Town.

Long operating hours means that the women who run these stores spend most of their day in Bellville and in their shops, from around nine in the morning to nine at night. The day is punctuated with visits from family and friends who stop to eat lunch together, or drink tea throughout the day. All of the small shops have extra chairs, and visits can last from ten minutes to several hours. Within the shops, women arrange elaborate and dense displays to show case their wares and to create a sense of familiarity for a very particular clientele—Somali people who have been forcibly displaced and are attempting to reconstruct a sense of home. The provision of a product such as "Banadir One Coffee" involves more than just the buying and consumption of the coffee; it also sparks conversations and story-telling in a familiar language, and imbibing a familiar taste from home.

As an assemblage of materials and practices, the shop is the end point of an extended infrastructural system—a space optimized around the flow of goods from varied locations beyond the city, into the confines of a mercantile operation, and finally into the homes of Somali migrants. According to Som City manager Ahmed, a great many of the goods sold in the shops are sourced out of Dubai, procured in several ways. First, a group of women might send a list of goods they wanted, either by fax or email, to a relative in Dubai. She would buy the things, and ship them as personal packages on payment. This was easy to do, yet depended on a well-known and trustworthy intermediary. Ahmed noted, "If you ask any Somalian if they got relatives in Dubai, they will tell you yes, they have relatives there. Some of them stay there, they have businesses, they have property there."[24] Indeed, Dubai since the 1980s, prior to the outbreak of civil war 1991.[25] In this way, family networks are crucial to the operation of many small shops in Somali malls.

A second, more cost-effective procurement method is for women to travel to Dubai in order to purchase goods directly. For example, Sara travels to Dubai around three times per year. She takes a commercial flight, stays with relatives, shops for the goods there, and depending on the quantity either brings the goods in her luggage, sends them back to South Africa by air cargo, or in a shipping container. She also sources goods from Kenya and Saudi Arabia.[26] In other cases, a group of women will pool their money to send one of them to Dubai to collect the goods for everyone. This is usually cheaper than the first option, as the buyer could shop around for the best prices. However, this method depends on one of the women having the "right papers." Most Somali refugees in Cape Town do not have a passport, and therefore could not leave the country through official means.[27]

A third procurement method involves one woman with a passport acting as a cross-border trader. Fatima confirmed that this was how most goods were sourced in Bellville. She added that due to the small scale of her shop, it was this third way that she preferred, as it did not involve putting up large sums of money in advance, or securing necessary travel documents.[28] Like most Somali migrant traders, she sources most of her goods from Dubai or directly from family in Kenya, and none from within the South African borders. Narrowing down the scale of focus from the building to the shop to the particular items reveals the porosity inherent in the spatial organization of these commercial flows. However, while the parceling of space into small individual shops suggests a reduction in scale, the sourcing of goods talks to trans-national relationships.

However they procure their wares, the networks themselves often remain opaque to outsiders.[29] As Carla Freeman notes, the engagements of women traders across borders belie the "slippery equation between local and woman/gender that has effectively eclipsed the latter from the macromodels of globalization."[30] Moreover, standard architectural narratives that focus only on buildings obscure the critical role that female migrants play in using architectural space to facilitate the transnational flows of goods and to build felicitous communities in exile. Therefore, while the signage and names suggested a spatial history fixed in particular spaces in Somalia and Mogadishu, these networks pointed to a more fluid, opaque, and unstable set of connections with architecture and urban space.

Porous Infrastructures

Ahmed's understanding of Som City as connected to sites in Nairobi and Minneapolis mirrored Sara and Fatima's experience of sourcing and procuring goods for their stores from wider networks of similar markets and associated cross-border traders. The logistical configurations for trade, sourcing, procuring, and facilitating the movement of goods at a transnational scale points to the infrastructural nature of these Somali malls. The research explicitly locates the Somali malls in Cape Town as part of a wider infrastructural network beyond South Africa. They have a history that is linked to formal infrastructures, refugee policies, colonial planning, and state dispossession, and they are tied into the ongoing racialization of migration. The opaque nature of these infrastructures is however highlighted by their invisibility to the city and state. Despite the centrality of Somali malls to migrant groups, they are under constant threat of evictions from the city and public–private partnerships under the guise of regeneration and city-improvement guidelines. This has the dual impact of both adding to the unstable precarity of these sites and adding a layer of opacity to the services and resources the Somali malls provide. These sites therefore operate at the unstable locus of precarity and possibility.

In this chapter, recognizing both the physical and intangible networks of support and cross-border trade as infrastructure enables a view of the centrality of these spaces to migrant groups' livelihoods, and simultaneously points to their longer history as architectures tied into global informal trade. Adopting a critical infrastructural lens opens a wider and more systemic view of the spatiality that operates across scales and across national borders. In contrast to the emphasis often placed on the improvisatory nature of infrastructures for informal trade in the global south, a multi-scalar view of Somali malls points to the very real existence of physical built forms, and to the concrete spatial and material affordances of what often gets glossed over as ad hoc or improvisatory. While such spaces are often contingent and precarious, inhabitants nevertheless invest labor, capital, and cultural meaning in them to serve the diasporic community. I build on AbdouMaliq Simone's concept of *people as infrastructure*, yet suggest that in addition to thinking through the immaterial networks of improvisation which Simone emphasizes, these Somali malls reveal spatial and material negotiations ramified through built form. Rather than focusing on the absence of infrastructures, we see dislocated people assembling new spatial nodes as a way of overcoming formal exclusion.

None of this is to suggest that globalization is a smooth even field of unlimited, unregulated flows. Instead, the precarity of these Somali malls as infrastructures points to the deep inequalities in global trade, while simultaneously drawing out how marginalized groups negotiate these networks.[31] The transnational interdependency of Somali malls reveals the concerted effort among diasporic communities to establish alternatives to exclusionary circuits of capital. Reading these spaces as porous infrastructure allows us to hold their multiple scales and associated places together at the same time, across vast geographies. By reconfiguring the architectural space of the common office block, Somali migrants create new nodes in the transnational circulation of people, goods, and cultural forms and meanings.

Notes

1 This chapter is reworked from a previously published article: Huda Tayob, "Architecture-by-Migrants: The Porous Infrastructures of Bellville," *Anthropology Southern Africa* 42, no. 1 (2019): 46–58.
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