

Book Review: Nairobi in the Making: Landscapes of Time and Urban Belonging by Constance Smith

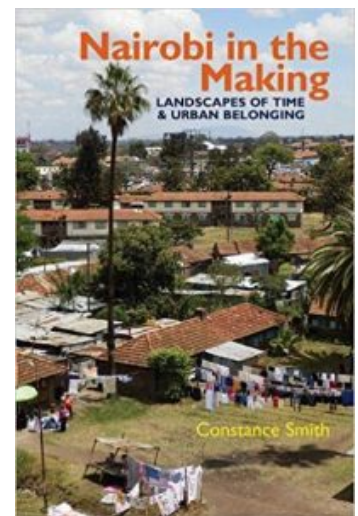
In Nairobi in the Making: Landscapes of Time and Urban Belonging, Constance Smith explores how the residents of Nairobi's Kaloleni estate interact with materials and structures from the city's past in order to establish themselves in its present and future. In demonstrating how urban landscapes are locations shaped by history and generated through lived experience, this impressive book should be essential reading for anyone looking to understand the complex realities of urban areas, writes Daniela Schofield.

Nairobi in the Making: Landscapes of Time and Urban Belonging. Constance Smith. James Currey. 2019.

African cities are repeatedly heralded as locations of opportunity, as [underdeveloped gateways to the global economy](#) and as repositories of [economic and commercial real estate potential](#). Yet, such visions often have a fantastical gleam of macroeconomic prosperity that overlooks the materiality of urban history, as well as the lived realities and ambitions of current residents. In [Nairobi in the Making: Landscapes of Time and Urban Belonging](#), Constance Smith examines how, through their everyday actions, the residents of the Kaloleni estate interact with materials and structures from Nairobi's past to establish themselves in its present and future.

Smith's exploration of belonging in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, is situated in Kaloleni, an estate in Eastlands built by British colonial authorities in the 1940s and slated for urban renewal under [Vision 2030](#), Kenya's development programme. Smith draws on an 'in place' ethnography (30) during which she lived in Kaloleni. *Nairobi in the Making* is richly informed by observations and interactions with Kaloleni's residents. Smith uses material as a conduit for exploring the inconsistency of everyday life, moving fluidly between Kaloleni's past as an intended model community based on British suburbs, its present where residents have 'rescripted these colonial intentions' (37) through everyday actions and its future through both the ambitions of its residents and Vision 2030.

Smith deftly weaves a deep knowledge of urban and anthropological scholarship, Kiswahili and Kenyan history with conversational accounts of discussions with Kaloleni residents that provide a tangibility to the abstract theoretical concepts presented. Smith's use of photos, as well as her skillful utilisation of linguistic imagery that does not overburden her prose, supports her demonstration that city-making in Nairobi, while political, is very much a generative process shaped by materials and people. This process is not finite, but a constant churning of accumulation, decay and repurposing over the long term where the formal and informal are 'deeply enmeshed but highly asymmetrical' (24).





The book is divided into two sections, each comprising three chapters. The first section consists of Chapter One, which explores life in Kaloleni and how placemaking is shaped by residents' perspectives. This introductory chapter importantly introduces the uncertainty of the estate under Vision 2030, which threatens its possible demolition. Chapter Two delves into the materiality of the estate, tracing the decay of its infrastructure and historic municipal mismanagement to examine the implications of material accumulation. Chapter Three focuses on the interface of residents' management of materials, their relationship to the estate's past and how ownership on the estate is accessed through performance, countering official histories.

The second section shifts to a larger scale consideration of urban belonging. Chapter Four examines generative processes at work in rural-urban connections and notions of urban success, Chapter Five considers security and exclusion in the city's architecture and Chapter Six looks at residents' efforts to secure an urban future in the 'shadow of Vision 2030' (30). All six chapters reinforce one another, and I welcomed Smith's invitation for readers to form their own linkages between these six areas beyond the scalar shift set out in the presented order of the chapters. Given this encouragement to seek linkages between the chapters, the division of the book into two distinct sections, while not ultimately disruptive, struck me as unnecessary.

Following Smith's invitation, I found linking Chapters Three and Six useful to think through the relationship between the lived experience of Kaloleni's residents and high-level policy and planning as well as to support Smith's proposal that urban space is 'felted' (29) rather than woven. Grouping these two chapters allows for a consideration of the ambiguities, synergies and dissonances of this relationship. Together, these chapters work to respond to the question that Smith sets out in the book's introduction:

Surrounded by collapsing urban infrastructures and amid fantastical promises of hypermodern, globalised futures, how do ordinary Nairobians try to ensure a place for themselves in the city's future?
(3).

Chapter Three examines how Kaloleni's residents enact urban belonging through the management of material. Smith recounts how one resident's physical interaction with the structure of his house during an interview allowed him to overcome an initial reticence to convey detailed stories from his past as he 'traced his fingers across a surface' (86). Through this and other accounts, Smith shows how the performance of maintaining, extending and managing physical structures in Kaloleni, as well as a 'forensic' (99) recordkeeping of documentation by the Kaloleni Residents' Association, generates an ownership of the estate. Smith argues this generative process results in the development of 'minor histories' which assert 'alternative claims' (96) to 'formal narratives' and counter official histories (96). In undertaking incremental alterations, in the absence of state services, residents are not only engaging with the city's past, but 'forging it anew' (81), establishing their ownership through a 'performative sense of property' (107) and securing their place in the city through their labour.

As a result, Kaloleni's residents see themselves as stakeholders in the future of Nairobi, a status often not formally recognised. To engage with Vision 2030, residents sometimes strategically deploy formal language and planning approaches. Chapter Six considers why residents would want to engage with a planning vision that holds an 'aspirational uniformity' (162) for Nairobi. Vision 2030 does not take into consideration historical specificities or distinguishing features of the city, seeking to mould it after other global cities and risking 'further marginalisation of Kaloleni's significance' (81) and its possible demolition. The uncertainty of Vision 2030 thus results in understandable anxiety for residents, but is also met with acceptance and even approval.

To understand this, the 'minor histories' presented in Chapter Three prove useful. The labour of Kaloleni residents, channelled into modifying the estate across decades, results not only in a sense of ownership, but also an expectation of inclusion in and benefit from any renewal efforts. Residents' expectations of Vision 2030 contrast with the high-level planning ideals, demonstrating that the relationship between everyday reality and high-level planning is not a simplistic binary, but complex, with a 'messiness' that Smith argues 'is based on particular disjunctive temporal experiences in which present and future become entangled' (167).

In thinking through the entanglement of urban histories and futures, the significance of material accumulation and decay, Smith argues urban belonging is something that is 'crafted' (32). She demonstrates that the city is sculpted not only by present actions, but also the 'powerful afterlives' (183) of its past, which link to expectations and anxieties for the future. As mentioned above, Smith uses an analogy of felting to describe the combination and layering of urban afterlives with the present and into the future.

Smith proposes felting as a more apt analogy for the city's constitution than an urban fabric. An urban fabric implies the weaving of parallel fibres resulting in a 'systematic [...] grid-like relationship' (29): an image that fails to accurately represent Nairobi's improvisational contingencies. Felt is a textile with fibres that do not adhere to a structured linear pattern, but which are coarse, composite pieces matted together and bound by friction into a new form. Smith proposes that "'felted' urban space' (29) captures the reality of Kaloleni as reconstituted using remnants of its past. In articulating felting as a concept, Smith succeeds in her aim to explore how ordinary Nairobians try to establish their place in the city today and into the future.

While *Nairobi in the Making* is both an enjoyable and impressive text, I would have liked to have read more about how difference, particularly in terms of gender and age, shapes residents' encounters with the material landscape. Far from treating residents homogeneously, Smith carefully details the circumstances of individuals and their experiences support her points throughout the book. Smith does briefly touch on gender and urban masculinity (see Chapter Four), but the space given to exploring this is limited. It would have been interesting to examine how urban belonging is enabled or constrained by gender and age, and whether performative ownership offers opportunity for transformational change to traditional gender roles.

With an [estimated](#) 60 per cent of the world's population living in urban areas by 2030, the futures of urban areas will be increasingly important. In *Nairobi in the Making*, Smith demonstrates how urban landscapes can be understood as locations shaped by history and generated by lived experiences. This will be vital to present understanding, but also to the increasingly urban composition of the world we are moving into. Although an academic text, this book will be informative for a wider audience including planners, consultants and policymakers. It should serve as essential reading for those undertaking planning in cities, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and as a primer for understanding the complex realities that shape urban areas.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image Credit: Nairobi skyline, Kenya ([Nina R CC BY 2.0](#)).
