Letter Home 3: The month of all Challenges

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenges and controversy.” -Martin Luther King, Jr.

Now that we had successfully completed all the initial phases of the project, starting from the local collaborations, to conducting interviews in Kaloum, our task now was to finally build the prototype of the one-room dwelling unit in two weeks. Building a home from the ground up in two weeks might sound crazy for most, but we were ready to take on this amazing challenge.

We officially began the construction of the Kaloum Bankhi prototype on July 26th.

Although our initial plan was to start the construction on August 1st, we ended up deciding to start the construction a couple days earlier to allow some extra time in case we were not able to work on certain days due to excessive rain conditions or weekend off days. This choice was great, because we, in fact, ended up needing those extra days to allow for the concrete foundation to dry as well as cover the two to three days when we couldn’t work due to heavy rains.

Our intention to complete the construction in two weeks was for long seen as impossible by most of our own team members as well as the contractors we were working with to build the prototype. I often got reactions like: “You know, for sure, that we will not be done in two weeks, right?” “We can start, but, for sure, we will need some extra days in the end, you know—that right?” I often responded by saying: “Let’s just start working on it now! I, personally, think we can complete this in ten days. You will see that it’s going to be really fast”. Although not convinced most of the time by what I was saying, the team followed me anyway, they wanted to see how far we could actually go with just that positivity. Positivity is something not often present in our culture. After living a life full of disappointment in the most part, you develop the quality of believing that everything is impossible, out of your reach, especially when it comes to something you had never seen being done in the past. We had challenged ourselves, challenged our limits, challenged our capabilities, and for us, there was only one way out: make it happen. At least for once, we could complete something that is out of our reach, or that we at least believed was out of our reach.

The construction process was a great learning experience for everyone that participated in it. Most people went from not believing in the project idea/concept to finally loving it and even wanting to live in something similar. At first, most community members were skeptical of the idea of building a home out of wood and corrugated metal. They believed that a wooden structure will not stand the heavy rain in Conakry, but also, they were heavily concerned by the safety level provided by the structure. “Can a thief easily break into this house?” “Do you think this house will resist a strong wind?”. These were typical questions I would often get asked. During the couple days of construction, I often used some local examples (wooden structures found in part of Conakry that were built in the colonial period) as well as Californian examples to explain the resistance of the wooden structures to different natural inclemency. People just wanted to feel safe in their homes. However, as we advanced with the construction, we could then use the building itself as an example to explain the strength of such a structure.
The construction was completed by August 15th, the date we had initially planned for the inauguration of the prototype. However, because of misunderstanding with some of our collaborators, we had to extend the inauguration to August 20th. The prototype was inaugurated on Monday, August 20th, 2018 and was later featured on national television and a local radio station. Here is the link to the video of the news report on national television in case you are interested in checking it out (Heads up! It is in French).

https://www.facebook.com/komabs16/videos/1841300509282624/

The project was a great success mainly because of the involvement of the community, and the excitement—and motivation of the local contractors and university students that were really instrumental to the construction as well as the overall experience. Personally, I developed significant people management skills as well as new building techniques unique to Guinea by working with everyone involved in the project.

Now, it is time for a break after all the hard work we have been doing since June when we first began working on the project. Now it’s time to relax and let the prototype familiarize itself to its new environment and enjoy Conakry’s August and September heavy rains. I will use this as an opportunity to travel back to the United States to visit family but also search for opportunities to expand the project and share our experience with a new/different public.

Stay tuned!

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