Letter Home 2: Catching up, working, all at once.

“The secret of success is to be ready when your opportunity comes.” -Benjamin Disraeli.

Quiet morning at the BleuZone of Kaloum, Conakry's biggest recreational space built about three years ago while I was in the United States. This rather unique space in Conakry includes a library, a media space, three basketball courts, one soccer field and sufficient spaces available for diverse activities. Oh! I was going to forget the Cinema, the only movie theatre in Conakry. Now you can imagine how coveted this space is. This space was designed with the intent of diminishing the youth unemployment rate in Conakry. The hope is that youths could use the space to innovate and come up with unique ideas that would be both beneficial for them as well as their community. The nice and quiet space is perfect for meetings and work. Since last month, we started using this space to work on the Kaloum Bankhi project.

This morning I was really impressed when I saw a maintenance group cleaning the space, cutting the unwanted trees and grasses. The maintenance of buildings is often ignored in Conakry and this was a sign of hope for me to see the work that was being done in this space to create a healthy environment that favors creativity. The BleuZone also produced all the energy used here, and they create their energy from photovoltaic panels installed on a big part of the site.

It’s July 9th and it’s hard to believe one month really went by! I am at the BleuZone with few members of the Kaloum Bankhi team working on the Project. Today is a great sunny day and we are getting an amazing breeze here! Although there is a strike going on in Conakry, this part of the city is one of the safest. This morning, we finally selected the remaining members that will be participating in the project. The process took about a week during which we reviewed over 45 applications, interviewed 17 students to finally select the top 9 students that will be added to the team of 6 we already have. For the first time, I experienced the struggle most teachers or recruiters endure when having to choose between talented students. Most of these students had a unique story and all deserved a spot on the team. Even though it wasn’t possible to select more of them to directly work on the project, I invited all of them to stay in touch with the project and be on the lookout for future possibilities to work on current or new projects.

Now that the team was complete, we moved forward to quickly start planning out activities and tasks that need to be complete in order to stay on track and begin the construction of the prototype no later than August 1st. Building the prototype in August, the rainiest month in Conakry, would allow us to test out our ideas and construction timeline in the most difficult scenario possible. If you can build in two weeks in August, it means you could definitely build in less time during warm seasons.

The work was divided into three phases. The first phase consisted of conducting interviews in the targeted community in Kaloum to access their current living conditions, gather all their needs and also find out what they really want to see change from their current conditions. For this first phase completed in a week, we split the team into 3 sub-groups where each team was assigned to a neighborhood (a slum in Kaloum). This allowed us to both quickly and effectively talk to a lot of people to gather a significant amount of information on their lifestyle and needs. The second phase of the work was a follow up to the interviews during which all the 3 sub-groups gathered in one place to discuss all of our findings. Our goal was to draw a conclusion of what the imminent problems found in these communities were and what the populations wanted to see change or happen. Simultaneously, we initiated the last phase of this month’s work that consisted of designing the final prototype to be build including all the furniture. While working on the final design of the prototype, we also explored the diverse options of building materials available to us by going into the field and exploring all of our options. Once we finished all of our designs and connected to a furniture maker we were all set to begin the construction of the prototype.
July has been our busiest month so far! The team was able to make up for the delay we suffered from at the beginning of the project and we officially began the construction of the Kaloum Bankhi prototype on Thursday, July 26th. I very proud of our team and can’t wait to see what we are able to accomplish in the next two weeks.

Stay tuned!

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