Returning home is always refreshing and exciting. Going back to places that saw you play as a child and grow to the person you have become, sleeping in homes that watched you dream for years, eating dishes that remind you of your childhood joys, everything to remind you that you come from a place full of culture, potential and hope.

I came back home from the USA with everything planned for the next phase of the Kaloum Bankhi project. Before I left Guinea for the USA, I had agreed with the “Institut Superieur d’Architecture et d’Urbanisme” of Guinea on co-teaching a Design/Build studio and, as a personal goal, I had decided that our next challenge will be to build a school in a rural village in Guinea. My desire to build a school comes from my belief that the most important building apart from a home is a school. When one has a roof to cover their head, they deserve education to teach them how to become better members of the society. A school teaches people who will at their turn impact many lives and gradually impact their nations and eventually the world. Our first school's location would be based on a comparison of the needs of villages and the support we are able to get from the locals in the design and construction process. We are conscious that every village deserves a good school, and that our first school will serve as a prototype for more culturally aware school designs for Guinea and Africa.

It’s been few weeks since I got back home and none of the two plans we initially had are happening at the moment. I’m not teaching a studio and neither in the process of building a school. My plans of teaching have changed. The studio I designed is titled “Housing in the changing Conakry”. It would have addressed the question of - How to build innovative homes for more families in Guinea at a lower cost?-. Having such a class would perpetuate the work we have been doing for the past six to seven months working on the project and allow the faculty and students from this Guinean university to themselves design and build innovative low cost architecture that solves social problems in Guinea. This studio would focus on teamwork to serve individuals and the government for larger community design projects.

Soon upon my return, to my biggest surprise, the “Institut Superieur d’Architecture et d’Urbanisme” no longer wanted to have the design build studio we had previously agreed on having as part of their curriculum. As an excuse, the director of the school claimed a lack of direct dialogue between his university and my home university (UC Berkeley). He said they are more interested in a direct relationship between the two universities and that having a middle man (me) does not really help them. I clearly explained them that I initiated the project and that I am the best connection they have for a future collaboration with UC Berkeley, and the director still didn’t feel assured. Although, I have been doing everything in my power to create opportunities for their university, their faculty, and their students, and make sure to share the opportunity I had with them, my efforts were not appreciated at all by the university’s head. But I was still working with the group of university students I had been working with from the beginning back in June and none of them agreed with their director’s decision. So we decided to keep working on the project even without the support of the university, and the students more than ever were excited about our previous and future projects.

As a group, we decided to contact the second architecture university in Conakry about the design build studio proposal. As the opposite of the first university this one is private and the director was really interested by the project and was more than favorable to the idea of having a design build studio in their university. However, since the classes for the current semester had already started, they couldn’t make any changes to their schedules. But they were in favor of having the class in the future if we are still interested.

Even though we weren’t making much progress with our plans for the next phases, we had been working very hard on our previous prototype making final changes and correcting features that did not function as we had intended. The past month was spent retouching the interiors of our Kaloum Bankhi prototype and building the bathroom prototype to make the house fully functional. The past weeks allowed us to learn more about the prototype and figured out what worked best and what did not work so well. After, the prototype was ready for our open houses. The open houses we had planned on doing a while back following the inauguration have still not yet happened. We are now planning on organizing them in January 2019 because of the holiday seasons.

Throughout the month of December we kept on meeting as a team and discussing new ideas. Also, we met with different community
actors to discuss ways and techniques to inform the majority of the Kaloum community about our prototype, especially the ones who haven’t had the chance to see it yet.

On December, 30th 2018, myself along with one other member of our team, Amadou Djouldé Baldé, were invited to meet with the elders of Saraya (a rural village in the heart of Guinea in the prefecture of Kouroussa). Baldé’s father was born in Saraya and while growing up the village’s primary school that he attended only had three classrooms where two classes (students in different levels) would alternate mornings and evenings every week. For example, the first grade students would go to school in the morning while second grade students go in the afternoon, most of the time they also shared the same teachers. The primary school Baldé’s father attended is no longer functioning due to the bad condition of the building. About a decade ago they received some help that built another three classroom buildings not far from the old building, which have replaced the previous building.

The old school building Baldé’s father attended

The new school building built a decade ago

For all these years, the village hasn’t qualified to have a middle school due to the absence of enough classrooms. The ministry of education requires to at least have a six classroom primary school before getting approval to begin a middle school program. For over sixty years, youths from Saraya have to leave their home as soon as they finish 6th grade to attend middle school or walk about 25 kilometers to the closest middle school in order to stay close to home. Baldé’s father is part of the association of elders from Saraya and for years they have been looking for opportunities to build more classrooms for the Saraya School to allow the future opening of a middle school. As soon as Baldé heard about the school project we had in our future plans, he informed his father who also alerted their community, and that’s how we were invited to meet with the community in the first place.

At the meeting, the elders from Saraya now living in the capital Conakry were very excited for the opportunity and did not want to waste any more time. They all have been wanting to build a six classroom primary school in their hometown for a while and for them this is an opportunity they did not want to miss. Right there on the spot, both Baldé and I were invited to take a 48 hours trip to Saraya the next day. With not even a single doubt we quickly replied yes to the invitation. We left Conakry for Saraya on December, 31st around 10 am. After a day driving across the bad roads of Guinea we arrived in Saraya around 7:20pm. The same night the local leaders based in Saraya came to see us for a meeting in the short time we had there. Everything was prepared that night so that we could have more time the next day to visit the school site and spend some time with the community discussing our future project. Our New Year’s Eve was spent enjoying the stars and the amazing breeze of Saraya. The lack of electricity was compensated by nature. Our second day in Saraya went by as planned. We really enjoyed the hospitality we received in Saraya and can’t wait to go back to help them build their school or – why not – schools.
If you are still reading, thank you so much for all the support. Happy New Years to you and all your loved ones. May this new year bring you health, wealth, joy, happiness, and strength.

Stay tuned for more fantastic stories in 2019!

Aboubacar S Komara

Amadou Djouldé Baldé (left) and myself (right) posing in Saraya

Saraya
After our meeting with the Saraya community on January, 1st 2019