

Spatial Agency in Empowering Vulnerable Communities of Kenya

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1. Participatory Mapping
2. Public Interest Design
3. Community Empowerment

This research aims to investigate and apply a participatory action methodology, focusing on vulnerable communities in Kenya. Learning from various projects implemented in marginalized rural areas, we have developed design frameworks that can make a greater sustainable impact. Our exploration centers around the power of community engagement and participatory mapping, which highlight community knowledge, narratives, and guide the direction of new design interventions. Our ultimate objective is to create inclusive, equitable built environments, with special consideration for the needs of vulnerable populations.

Investigating rural Kenyan communities, significant social, economic, and environmental challenges were identified due to remote locations and neglect from government authorities. The absence of support and development plans leaves these areas without the resources to address urgent needs such as healthcare and education. Additionally, the lack of formal land ownership rights and unclear property borders exacerbate the situation and make it increasingly difficult for people to invest in their community, creating an uncertain future.

To address these issues, our research and projects propose comprehensive solutions to safeguard community land, establish ownership rights, and reinforce local culture. Participatory mapping and inclusive design methods are employed, involving workshops, interviews, and ongoing monitoring with community members and stakeholders. This approach identifies challenges and cultivates opportunities for collective spatial use and sustainable development.

Our projects include the creation of village maps, inclusive public spaces, house prototypes that utilize local resources, and community facilities offering essential programs. The insights gained from these projects act as a catalyst for raising awareness among community leaders, local government officials, and NGOs, with the hope of inspiring similar initiatives in rural contexts worldwide.

Maya Community Map

Visualizing Community Narratives

A 100-acre peninsula colloquially referred to as Maya Island is located east of Kilifi district in Kenya. With only 500 people residing within the beautiful landscape, it has maintained its purity: untouched with plenty of natural resources. However, due to its remote geographic location and harsh economic status, the community has become neglected by the local government, without adequate support or development plans. Recently, the community has also been threatened by land-grabbers and is now in danger of losing their land, despite having proper documentation.

By introducing sustainable building technologies and comprehensive planning ideas, the community is empowered to transform their place into a safer and more hopeful place. The team also created a community map depicting significant geographic landmarks, public spaces, and residential units. This map—the first of its kind for the region “empowered the community, and strengthened its residents’ ties to one another.”



1. Community Meetings
-Welcoming participants and workshop identification



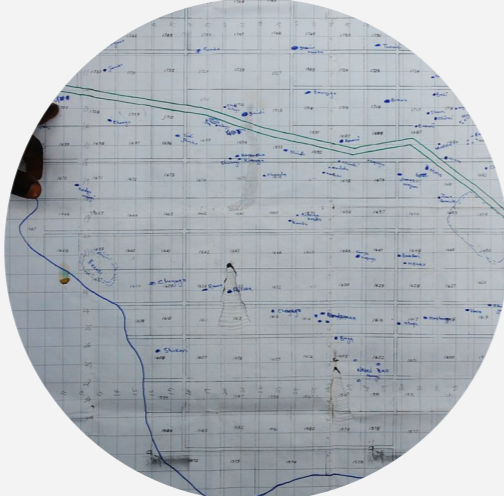
2. Community Workshop
-Facilitating small group sessions and gathering data



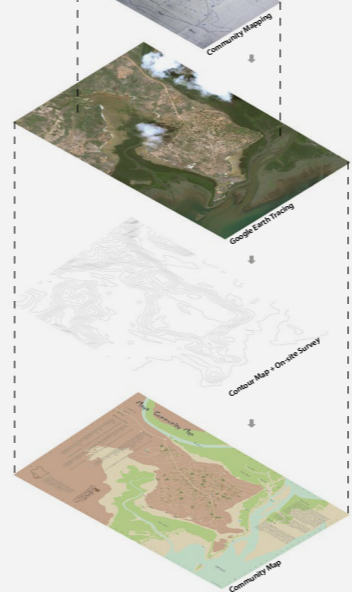
3. Mapping with the Community
-Engaging the community through participatory mapping



4. Data Collection
-Identifying households and community stories



5. Transforming the Gathered Data into Digital Format



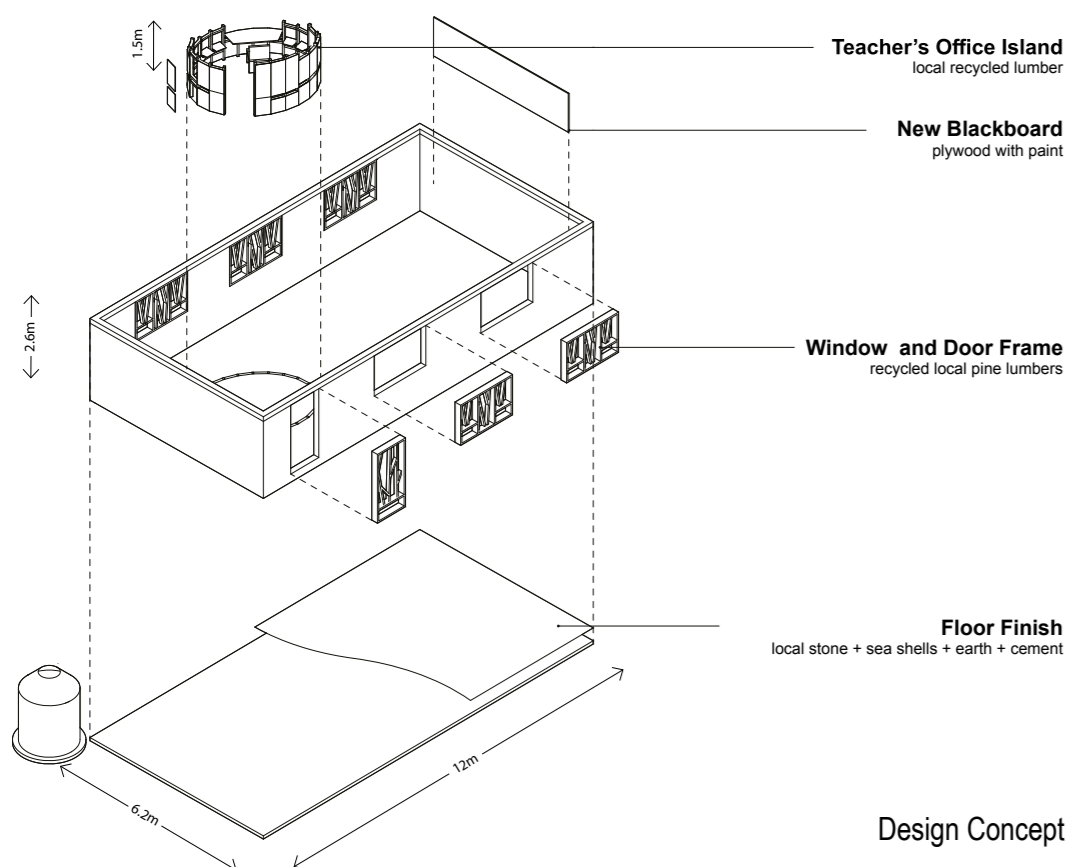
6. Deliberations on Potential Projects
-Verifying data/mapped locations and discussing prospective projects



Maya Primary School

New Social Infrastructure for the Next Generation

Following community meetings, surveys, and individual interviews, it became evident that the top priority was enhancing the quality of the current primary school and its surroundings. Collaborating with local volunteers and skilled workers, the team embarked on a project to revitalize the school and construct an outdoor playground. Local materials like sea stones, native soil/sand, and seashells were employed in the renovation. The new spaces were meticulously designed to embrace and showcase the cultural values and distinctive traits of the community through integrated design features.



1. Community Workshop
-Small group discussion and interviews



2. Data Collection
-Gathering data + identifying needs



3. Inclusive Design Process
-Participatory design charrette +sharing design concepts



4. Using Indigenous Materials
- Identifying and gathering locally sourced stones and seashells



5. Community Participation
-Collaborating with local volunteers and constructing collectively



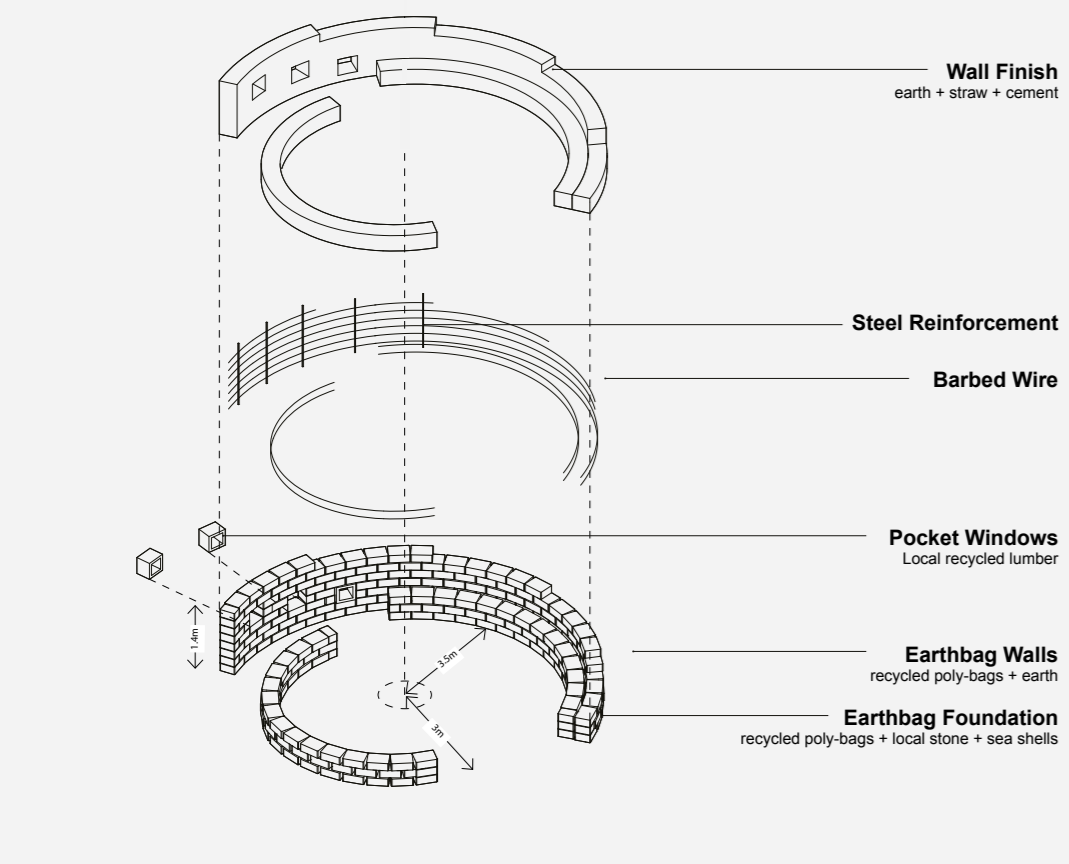
6. Creation of New School
- A redefined social infrastructure for the new generation



Maya Community Agora

New Public Gathering Place for All

The school's outdoor space lacks a distinct identity, with a shortage of seating, communal areas, and designated spaces. After engaging in design charrette sessions with community members, we collectively decided to establish an outdoor gathering space—an agora—where everyone is welcome to meet, relax, play, and celebrate. Utilizing earthbag construction for the primary framework, the entire design and construction process was orchestrated by community volunteers. The resulting agora has become the school's iconic centerpiece and is now the community's favorite destination.



1. Design Charrette
- Involving the younger generation in the design process



2. Using Local Materials
- Identifying locally available resources for the main structure and foundation



3. Technology Sharing
- Introducing the technique of earth-bag construction



4. Collaborative Community Effort
- Building and laying the blocks together with the community



5. Finishing with Children
- Completing the structure a mixture of soil and straw



6. Creation of New Community Place
- A new place for gathering, resting, playing, and celebrating

