

# COMMUNITY CHANGE

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## The Exchange Project: a Case Study in Public Interest Design as a Catalyst for Community Capacity Building in Entonet, Kenya

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**Abstract:** This article outlines a case study of a collaborative design process used as a catalyst for community capacity building, done through a partnership between a group of University of Minnesota graduate students and a community in Entonet, Kenya. The project approach and outputs were rooted in Public Interest Design (PID) and Social Economic Environmental Design (SEED) principles, and as such placed emphasis on process and community initiative. In this case study, the act of collaboration between the Minnesota-based project team and the community in Entonet was itself the most influential factor in strengthening local processes and effecting community change.

**Key words:** cultural exchange; international case study; community strengths approach, public interest design; SEED metric

### Introduction

Public Interest Design (PID) emerged as a response to the peak of architecture's ego and supremacy of high design just a few decades ago. In his 1968 address to the American Institute of Architects (AIA) National Convention, civil rights leader Whitney Young issued a blistering critique and challenge to the world of architecture and design: "You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights, and I am sure this does not come to you as any shock. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance" (Young, 1968). The movement that followed embodies a shift away from design as a singular professional service done for a client--individual, corporation, or city--to design that "not only produces spaces that are inclusive and place based but also creates a theoretical

framework that incorporates values of equity, inclusivity, and social justice through action or process” (Anderson, 2014). That is, PID elevates the process of design to be equally if not more important than the product itself, and centers that process on the community’s capacity to effect change for itself.

To better guide and implement PID efforts, practitioners have developed the Social Economic Environmental Design (SEED) metric: a set of principles and standards that contributes to a united approach to Public Interest Design (Design Corps website, 2017). The SEED principles are as follows:

1. Advocate with those who have a limited voice in public life;
2. Build structures for inclusion that engage stakeholders and allow communities to make decisions;
3. Promote social equality through discourse that reflects a range of values and social identities;
4. Generate ideas that grow from place and build local capacity; and,
5. Design to help conserve resources and minimize waste.

(SEED Network website, 2015)

Public Interest Design, in conjunction with SEED principles, shifts the engagement model from a service done for communities that need or merit assistance to “a reciprocal activity done in partnership with communities” (Anderson, 2014). While there may be a place for the former within the spectrum of community support and development, the latter offers a more lasting model for community change, characterized here as a process-based framework to strengthen and empower the engaged community as well as the partnering agency. The process itself further strengthens community processes and builds the community’s own power, or capacity to act. The reciprocal activity forms the basis of the partnership and frames the exchange. The Exchange Project aimed to embed this process-based framework into the budding partnership being formed between two communities - Minneapolis, MN and Entonet, Kenya.

## **Background and Trip Summary**

The Exchange Project originated with a graduate student in landscape architecture wrestling with the lack of integration of PID in graduate design education. Students invest significant amounts of time, money, and energy to develop valuable problem-solving skills, but their projects rarely go beyond the ideation stage. Design education emphasizes community buy-in, feedback, and input, but there is rarely a chance to truly explore what this means in its application. What is needed is an opportunity to develop this public interest design ethic, beginning with one experience and moving through the entire length of a career. A project team was assembled to respond to this need, attracting a group of individuals from across several disciplines interested in exploring this concept together. The group included graduate students in landscape architecture and urban & regional planning, an undergraduate student in architecture, and young professionals in communications and public health policy.

The team collaborated with Xperitas, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit focusing on global citizenship, to create a partnership with the community in Entonet-Lenkism Ward, Kenya. Entonet is located in Kajiado County in the southeastern lowlands of Kenya, just a few kilometers from Tanzania. The ward is situated between Amboseli National Park and Mount Kilimanjaro, approximately 167 miles from Nairobi. Entonet has a

population of approximately 20,000 people and is composed of the smaller villages of Bondeni, Sonkoro, Olerai, and N’gabobo. The majority of these people belong to the Maasai and Kamba tribes and have lived together for many generations.



Image 1. Context maps  
 Source: Bridget Ayers Looby, Google Earth, 2016

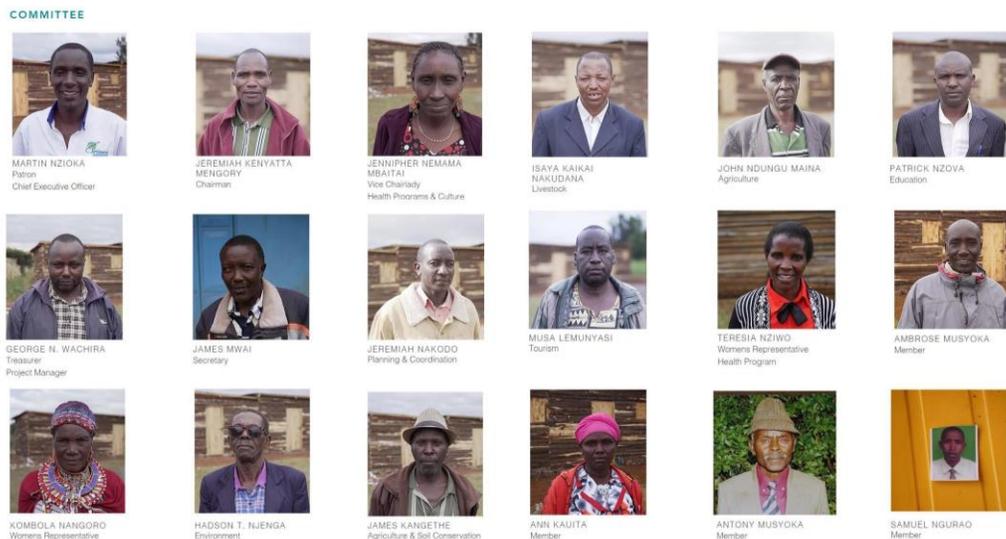


Image 2. Entonet Development Forum committee members

The project team partnered primarily with local non-political grassroots organization Entonet Development Forum (EDF). EDF is grounded in the principle that community development enhances livelihood, health, and environment, and strives to empower Entonet through these beliefs. Eighteen community members make up the EDF

committee, with special emphasis on the inclusion of women and youth as well as equal representation of the primary tribes of Entonet. It was this committee that initially reached out to Xperitas regarding what would eventually become the Exchange Project.

The EDF committee directs efforts to improve preventive and curative health practices, empower youth and women, and promote sustainable environmental management in the Entonet-Lenkism ward. The patron, Martin Nzioka, is from the region of Entonet and trained in community organization. As such, Mr. Nzioka possessed the local connections, contextual understanding, and professional experience necessary to make the Exchange Project an effort truly from and for the community. EDF played the central role in garnering local support and building the team's capacity to act throughout the project's process. For video, refer to [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jx\\_nw29251c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jx_nw29251c)

During the exchange process, EDF committee members identified two primary project objectives. First, the Entonet Development Forum aimed to build a central community gathering hall that embodied the goals of their community and facilitated local social and economic empowerment. The building was to be a social space wherein community members could join in different types of activities, healing, and learning. To accommodate for the specific needs and strengths of the community, the design for this gathering hall would include additional space for maternal health services, youth technical skills institute, women's group meetings, farmer and environmental workshops, and a large flexible space for community meetings and events. The project team's immersion within the community over several weeks was key in developing a holistic plan, gathering information about the final users and their needs from the users themselves, and addressing expectations on both ends. Repeated meetings with stakeholders and various community members regarding the challenges in their village and their ideas regarding both physical and social growth of Entonet were an essential part of this schematic design process.

The second objective was to develop an online presence for the committee, including its mission, information about the community in Entonet, and details regarding the social hall project itself. EDF had determined that a website would be essential in order to communicate their effort to the local government, to share their story with those outside Entonet, and to assist with fundraising efforts for the social hall. Additionally, the Entonet-Lenkism Ward was facing an upcoming political election. EDF explained that an online presence for the social hall would centralize the project in community discourse and help to open up potential funding streams. Because of these important components, the forum had been prepared to hire a web designer from Nairobi to develop a website. However, the project team was able to meet this need, thus offsetting that cost and redirecting the money toward the social hall fundraising budget instead. The team collaborated closely with the committee to create a website that outlined not just the social hall project but also the EDF committee, past EDF projects, and a larger strategic vision of the group.

Similar to the PID and SEED concepts, the iterative and community-driven process of designing the website was in itself a catalytic action toward change. The website development was strengthened by the team's immersion within the community and process of gathering stories and information, obtaining feedback from EDF members, and revising designs to incorporate their input. The act of gathering stories and

information to create this online presence served not just as a manner for cultural exchange to occur, but also as a platform for dialogue about the very mission and values of the EDF committee. As with the nature of Public Interest Design, the process of the website development was just as important as the webpage itself in strengthening the partnership and building a community change narrative.

## Process: Building a Partnership around Notion of Community Change



Image 3. EDF Website Homepage

The primary aim of the incoming project team was to partner with the community of Entonet via local grassroots organization Entonet Development Forum (EDF) and work toward long-term, sustainable community development as conceptualized by local leaders and stakeholders. In this case, EDF had already begun coalition building around a social hall that would serve the community by providing a central location for gathering as well as space for preventive and curative health services. With this in mind, the team developed an intentional community change approach rooted in public interest design and SEED principles which emphasized utilization of the strengths and knowledge of the community. This community-driven, strengths-based approach--seen globally not just in design efforts but also in the closely-tied partner of public health and health equity--sought to build local capacity for self-empowerment, resource conservation, and social cohesion (Wallerstein and Duran, 2004). The Exchange Project approach focused on designing democratic structures for inclusion. Following these principles, EDF and the project team were able to create a partnership that supported bottom-up, place-based change, which integrated local ways of being and knowing into a project that empowers the community and reinforced the pattern of sustainable growth and development across the region.

It was integral to the team's Public Interest Design approach and the long-term sustainability of the project that this initiative arose from the people of Entonet, advanced

by local change-makers in concert with community members. They developed the idea of the social hall to address the general lack of health care facilities and economic opportunities in Entonet, as well as to grapple with environmental and social challenges such as widespread soil erosion and inconsistent access to water for people throughout the year.

The design itself drew its inspiration from the needs that the community emphasized to the team, as well as from the local resources available. For example, as many in Entonet cannot afford to attend secondary school and even fewer can attend university, providing an alternative wherein the youth can learn technical skills to empower themselves in an increasingly technical economy was of utmost importance to community members. Therefore, after in-depth input from different stakeholders the project grew to include a library and classroom space for a badly needed polytechnic school, as well as space for private meetings and a repair station for motorbikes (the primary form of transportation throughout the villages of Entonet). These additions to the social hall are the direct result of community feedback, and are aimed at building local skills and capacity for the community to thrive well into the future. Central to this partnership was an outlined understanding of the deliverables that would be met after the joint time together. Though it was understood that this work and its outcomes were to be adaptable and responsive to community need, the follow-through of direct deliverables while in Kenya was an important tenet of the relationship-building process, allowing the team to show accountability and real-time efforts toward the partnership.

The trip had two main and immediate deliverables, which reflected EDF's primary objectives. The first deliverable was the Entonet Development Forum website. Although they had regular meetings at the site base camp and seemed to be in good communication with one another, EDF had no formal transcribed mission, goals, project track record, or online presence. Most records were handwritten and distributed among members. The creation of a web presence was determined by EDF to be particularly important in order to spread their mission, communicate with a larger audience, and fundraise for their efforts. Because the team was able to spend so much time interviewing, learning, documenting, and getting to know both EDF and the community, they were able to design and launch the official EDF website. The site also describes in detail the community, the future social hall project, and the committee itself. For the site, refer to [martinzioka.wix.com](http://martinzioka.wix.com)

#### 01\_EDF Website

HOME

WHO WE ARE

VISION

PROJECTS

WHERE

CONNECT

EDF

EDF believes in a holistic vision and long term planning. We strive to promote a healthy community by focusing on health, women and youth, and environment. We realize that these areas are interrelated and our approach reflects this. Our vision unites Entonet through development that builds community.



#### HEALTH

To improve preventive and curative health practices, EDF promotes:

- Preventive health alongside current curative practices
- Health education
- Health insurance advocacy
- Environmental health, including sanitation methods
- Creation of a local health clinic



#### WOMEN AND YOUTH

To empower women and youth, EDF promotes:

- Creation of a polytechnic school to educate youth in technical skills (engineering, electrical, construction)

Image 4. Vision Statement, EDF website

The second main deliverable was a set of schematic designs for a regional social hall. Given that the team included several designers, they were able to produce a set of schematic design documents and renderings that can be used to spread the vision in the community and inform and direct future construction efforts. The trip format and the Entonet Development Forum itself stressed this focus throughout the progression of this program, as well as the duration of the visit. As the team and the designers were able to be immersed in the culture, gain exposure to local building methods, learn about challenges and concerns, and listen to desires and goals over a period of two weeks, the social hall design is rooted in and derives from the local population. It should be noted that the strength of this design comes not only from the cultural immersion, but the diverse makeup of the team (2 landscape architects, 1 architect, 1 business/communications, 1 public health, and 1 urban planning).

#### 02\_Social Hall SchematicDesign

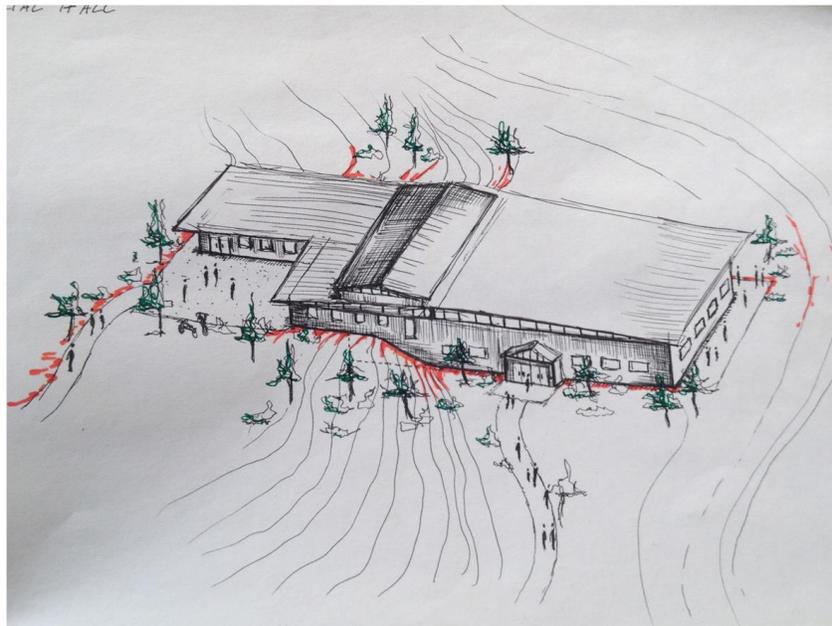


Image 5. Building Axon

Source: Bridget Ayers Looby for EDF

02\_Social Hall Schematic Design

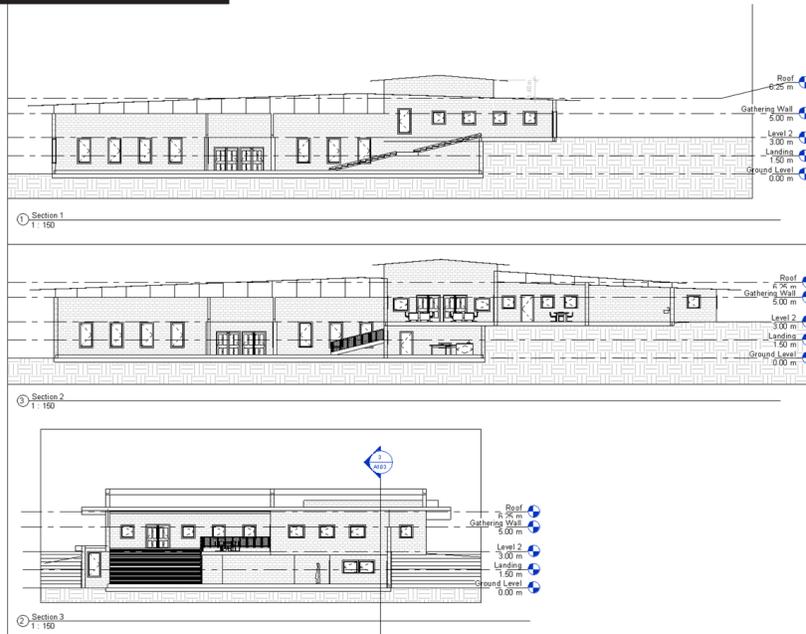


Image 6. Building Elevations

Source: Jessika Yelk for EDF

02\_Social Hall Schematic Design

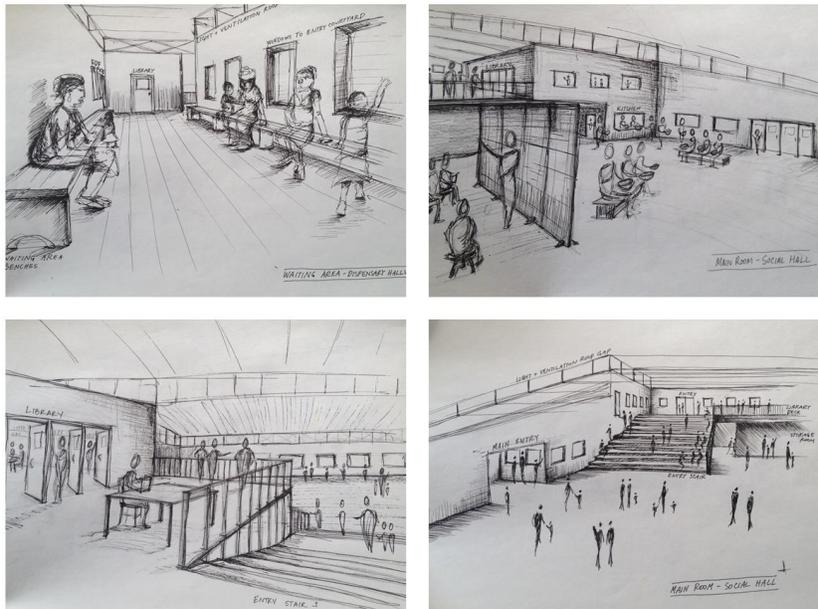


Image 7. Interior Renderings

Source: Kelly Watters and Bridget Ayers Looby for EDF

The team's partnership with Entonet Development Forum culminated in an official pass-off of designs, schematics, and a website platform which they can now use to accelerate the process into the future. While ongoing partnership and collaboration with the community is considered an important part of the mission, the goal is for EDF to be able to continue autonomously as a local effort with support and consultation from external groups only as needed.

### **Discussion: Revisiting Notions of Community Change and Reflection**

By building upon local will and agency within the community, the project team's work fit into a larger, long-term, local effort. The needs were self-identified, the local stakeholders were united in common vision, and when the team departed after handing off the deliverables, the work was able to continue with renewed vigor. Part of this strategy involved the timing of the upcoming local elections. With a website, specific design plans, and community buy-in, EDF and the Entonet community is well-situated to explore opportunities for fiscal, social and political support from local politicians seeking a constituency in the elections. Martin Nzioka discussed how even the partnership of American collaborators would lend legitimacy to EDF in the eyes of officials, and could get the attention of both local and international change agents.

Long-term viability of a project in the local context is essential to the public interest design approach. Too often, NGOs enter a community for an externally defined goal and leave without the local ownership needed to maintain the project into the future. The advantage of the public interest design framework is that the need and agency arises out of the community, and once the external partner withdraws, that community is able to maintain that agency and ownership, its capacity to act having been strengthened through the relationship.

### **Conclusion and Next Steps**

What is community change in this context? The community is both that of the Entonet ward and the exchange group who visited. In Entonet, the construction of a social hall will serve as a catalyst for the development of physical and social infrastructure. For the young designers and professionals who visited, this case study acted as a primer for the focus of their careers and their methods of practice; the roots of PID, SEED, and community strengths approaches will continue to shape their career direction both in interest and awareness. In the Exchange Project, the commitment to PID and community strengths as a means of approaching community change went beyond the design process: the fruit of that process is, itself, an incubator for more community change and community-driven design. There was an exchange of knowledge and experience between the two entities by which each was able to reinforce and strengthen positive patterns of action. But this exchange also yielded a space for future interaction and exchange, the goal being to perpetuate a cycle of sustainable, locally led interdisciplinary development.

Beyond the social hall itself, the longstanding partnership between two differing communities with unique skills and knowledge will equally serve as a driver for adaptive transformation and community-driven change. The Exchange Project yielded many byproducts: not only the schematic design and website, but also a relationship that will continue between EDF, the individual members of both communities, Xperitas, and the University of Minnesota. This pioneer trip served to learn more about Entonet, and EDF

will welcome another group in May 2017 to continue collaboration on these community-driven efforts.

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