

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: **Architecture, Craftwork & Empowerment:**
A Craft Center for Maasai Women in Kajiado,
Kenya.

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Master of Architecture, 2011

Thesis Directed By: Professor of the Practice Peter Noonan, Chair
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Women's work is vital to the survival of impoverished households and a key ingredient in the sustenance of local communities. In developing countries, and especially in their rural areas, weak job markets, gender inequality issues, lack of education, insufficient technology, and limited skill capacity altogether undermine women's abilities to engage in activities that would promote and sustain their economic well-being. This thesis seeks to employ architecture and design as a tool that could improve the lives of rural women by supporting and enhancing their economic ventures. Focus will be given to the Maasai community of Kajiado, an arid region in East Africa, Kenya, where women face additional challenges posed by the harsh climatic

conditions. These Maasai women have been doing beautiful, colorful beadwork for generations. The ornaments produced are worn to express their cultural identity, celebrate ceremonies and signify their social status within the community.

In a desperate effort to earn an income to support their families, Kajiado women have tried to sell their products to local and international communities. However, poor business and marketing skills, lack of proper guidance and innovation, limited access to financial advice and support encumber their creative endeavors. This thesis project proposes a craft center in Kajiado that would host facilities and programs which would preserve, promote and progress Maasai bead-working with the aim of strengthening the women's social and economic capacity.

'Women working in the informal sector are unrealized potentials trapped in poverty. It is essential to provide an enabling environment and skills to pull them out of poverty.'

UNDP

ARCHITECTURE, CRAFTWORK & EMPOWERMENT: A CRAFT CENTER
FOR MAASAI WOMEN IN KAJIADO, KENYA.

By

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Advisory Committee:
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Dedication

To my father, John Chumo Serem (1938-2005). I will continue in your footsteps, to live life responsibly and welcome each day with cheer, remembering that the greatest fulfillment comes with servitude.

To my mother, Sarah Chumo Serem. I am who I am and where I am today because of you. You have supported my dreams and encouraged me onwards despite all the challenges. You are my joy and my inspiration.

To Denis, Karen, Daisy and Chemutai. May each day reward you with love, joy and good health.

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Nareto Women's Group

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Daisy Serem

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INTRODUCTION

RURAL POVERTY



Figure 1.1. Dekho, Dadaab Refugee Camp, Kenya. Image courtesy of Daisy Serem

'Poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living in marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation.'

United Nations

In the developing world, there are 1.4 billion people that live in extreme poverty. 70% of these people are found in rural areas, majority of which are located in Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia. They are highly vulnerable to social, economic, political and climatic changes, which altogether pose severe challenges to their health and livelihood. Unfavorable conditions such as weak natural resource bases, poor infrastructure, limited educational opportunities, inadequate job markets and political isolation plague poor rural communities globally. The recent surges of food prices, oil and consequently an increase in the cost of living, have made it difficult for poor families to lift themselves out of poverty. These conditions have forced them to cut down on non-food expenses, which include education for their children and healthcare for their families. Unfortunately, without these crucial amenities, their present dire condition degenerates—these families continue down a spiral of extreme poverty.

Rural women, indigenous people and ethnic minorities are often the hardest hit in the poverty cycle. Their interests remain underrepresented within their communities and the global environment. Majority of rural women don't have the rights and/or resources to acquire any physical assets and basic education, which would effectively contribute to the economic conditions of their households. They depend heavily on the men to provide for the family. Hence when household resources are extremely limited, which would be the case for poor rural families, women are incapable of chipping in financially. When shocks such as natural disasters, conflicts, ill health or natural death

claim the breadwinner of the family, these women are unable to sustain themselves and their children. It is not uncommon to find early child marriages and prostitution in such situations, as a way to mitigate the hardships faced by these families. Needless to say, these kinds of resorts promote an unhealthy society plagued by deadly diseases, unwanted pregnancies and a high rate of child and infant mortality—all of which augment the poverty level.

As with rural women, the continuous marginalization of indigenous people and ethnic minorities in developing countries has contributed to the disproportion of resources and amenities to these communities. They represent 5% of the world's population, yet they constitute 15% of the world's poor¹. The natural resources which their generations have depended on for survival are threatened not just by climate change but also external commercial interests of outside communities, local governments and international entities. Disadvantaged by lack of, or minimal representation in government bodies, their communities remain underdeveloped and challenged by poor infrastructure, lack of technological progress, weak educational and health facilities, and a deficiency of financial institutions that would support them. Therefore, these indigenous communities constantly lack the resources, and the technical capacity to sustain themselves economically and escape poverty.

¹ IFAD, Rural Poverty Report 2011

PROJECT GOALS

Rural poverty is one of the great evils of the modern world. The lack of jobs and economic opportunities in villages drives millions of people to migrate from villages into over-crowded cities. The continuing migration causes immense social and environmental problems in the major cities of poor countries. The effects of poverty are most visible in the cities, but the causes of poverty lie mostly in the villages. What the world needs is a technology that directly attacks the problem of rural poverty by creating wealth and jobs in the villages. A technology that creates industries and careers in the villages would give the villagers a practical alternative to migration. It would give them a chance to survive and prosper without uprooting themselves.

Freeman Dyson

Relief organizations, humanitarian workers, private institutions and local governments have come to realize that it is imperative to address the global poverty epidemic in order to facilitate a more sustainable shared future. The Millennium Development Goals adopted by world leaders in the year 2000 underlined key objectives which aim to address health issues and end poverty and hunger, while promoting gender equality, environmental sustainability and a global partnership.

This thesis explores how architecture and design can support the efforts towards poverty reduction in the developing world, and hopefully

improve the lives of rural communities. It will dwell heavily on aspects of tradition, culture and craft both as a source of design inspiration and a possible means of achieving rural economic elevation. The thesis focuses on rural women belonging to the Masaai, an indigenous tribal group found in Kenya and Tanzania. Marginalized and underrepresented, they struggle to maintain a balance between their traditional lifestyle and the imposed modernization brought through development. Social, economic, political and climatic challenges have driven this once highly self-sufficient community into the bitter clasp of poverty.

BACKGROUND ON KENYA

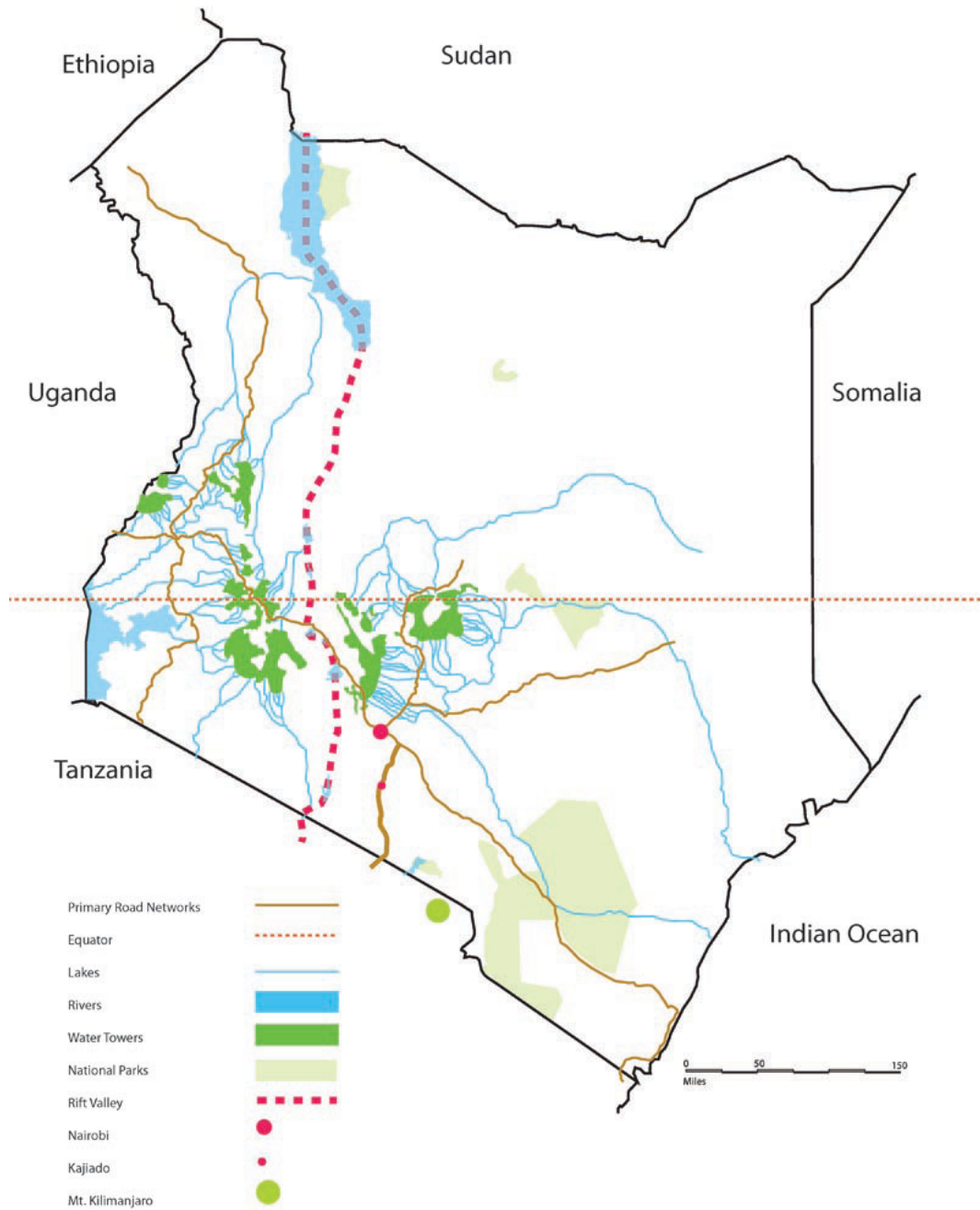


Figure 1.2. Kenya.

Kenya is one of the countries comprising the East African block. It lies adjacent to the Indian Ocean and bordered all around by Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania. Kenya also lies on the equator and is transected on the east by the Great Rift Valley—a fertile plateau that harbors historically active volcanic mountains and the African Great Lakes. The Rift Valley is also a rich source of fossils that have contributed to studies of the human evolution. It is this resource that has coined East Africa the 'Cradle of Mankind'. Kenya has a land area of 224,080 sq miles with a population of 39 million residents belonging to diverse ethnic backgrounds—there are forty-two tribes in Kenya, each unique in its culture, language and traditional practices.

Kenya's economy is heavily dependent on foreign exchange earned from the tourism and agricultural sectors. The country receives an average of 1.5 million international tourists every year, in addition to about 700,000 local tourists, who mainly come to visit the game reserves, national parks and coastal beaches. Aggressive measures are being made to improve and expand this lucrative industry. Upgrades in infrastructure and technology have made positive impacts on tourism. More impressively, the Kenyan government has developed an interest in promoting responsible tourism practices, otherwise known as *ecotourism*, which can be defined as “the practice of low-impact, educational, ecologically and culturally sensitive travel

that benefits local communities and host countries”.² The organization Ecotourism Kenya, founded in 1996 seeks ‘to promote tourism practices that will conserve Kenya’s natural environment and improve livelihoods of associated communities’.³ Even so, the program is yet to gain enough traction in the industry in order to reflect on any significant contribution to the environment and local communities.

Besides tourism, Kenya also offers a lucrative environment for international investors, together with global political, social and humanitarian bodies. Most of these institutions are located in the capital city, Nairobi. Nairobi was established in 1899 as a rail depot that linked the Mombasa-Uganda railway, which ran from the Kenyan port at the Indian Ocean to Kampala, Uganda. Nairobi has grown rapidly since then and currently harbors 3 million residents. The city’s burgeoning population as well as lack of proper planning has led to infrastructural decline, creating extreme congestion within the city and its periphery. Fortunately, plans for the redevelopment of satellite cities and infrastructural improvement are underway, which will help decongest Nairobi and make it more pleasant as a properly functioning business district. The proposed satellite cities will be located in Thika, Kiambu, Machakos and **Kajiado**—rural towns that are close in proximity to Nairobi. It is anticipated that this plan will promote economic development within the rural communities and elevate the residents’ standard of living though the creation of local jobs and improvements in infrastructure.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecotourism>

³ <http://www.ecotourismkenya.org/page.php?id=2>

Kenya is very unique as it offers a rich resource for the study of this thesis. It is marked as one of Africa's most advanced countries, admired for its political stability, international engagement, economic achievement and its wealth of cultural heritage, among many other things. Besides these positive attributes, Kenya is a developing country with a variety of challenges.

CULTURE AND CRAFT



Figure 2.1. Maasai woman making traditional craft items. Image courtesy of Daisy Serem.

Defining Culture

The concept of *culture* first emerged in the 18th-19th century Europe to reflect progress, or rather improvement in horticulture and agriculture, which was called *cultivation*. Its modern meaning draws its etymology from the writings of Cisero, a Roman philosopher, when he “wrote of a cultivation of the soul or *"cultura animi"*, thereby using an agricultural metaphor to describe the development of a philosophical soul”⁴, which was understood to be ideal for human development, especially when it was in its most natural and purest form. The term culture has been revised numerous times and today, it has a plethora of meanings. Relative to this thesis, culture takes the definition, “a shared way of life that includes values, beliefs and norms transmitted within a particular society from generation to generation”⁵ Culture relates to an accepted pattern of life that defines a society. But even so, because of the innate nature of human creativity and the need for improvisation to meet internal needs and external demands, these patterns change with time. These unique characteristics, within diverse cultivated societies, give flavor to the global community. Different cultures can be identified by their languages, lifestyle, traditions, dress, and crafts, together with their natural and built environments.

Culture and Craft

In architecture, the study of culture is imperative especially when the design context is situated within a community that has a strong identifiable

⁴ Culture, Wikipedia

⁵ Scupin, Raymond, Cultural Anthropology, A Global Perspective.

culture. Architectural aspects such as tectonics, materiality, form and aesthetics are all qualities that help define such a culture. Observations show that these communities use materials that are within their environment and are readily available. Depending on the lifestyle of a community, be they nomadic or permanent in nature, the form of their built environment reflect upon this.



Figure 2.2. Construction with readily available, local materials. Image by Author.



Figure 2.3. Maasai Warrior. Image from *Maasai*.

The Maasai

The Maasai are a pastoral people located in Southern Kenya and Northern Tanzania. They are one of the most popular ethnic groups in Africa, admired for their beautiful dress, intricate ornamentation, and their distinctive

customs, which include a warrior-like quality. In addition, they reside near

game parks that are renowned for their wildlife and are frequently visited by both local and international tourists.

Maasai people originated from Southern parts of Sudan, near the River Nile. . Their migration to Northern Kenya is traced back to the 15th CE. Fearless, dominative and very organized, they quickly conquered tribes along their path. By

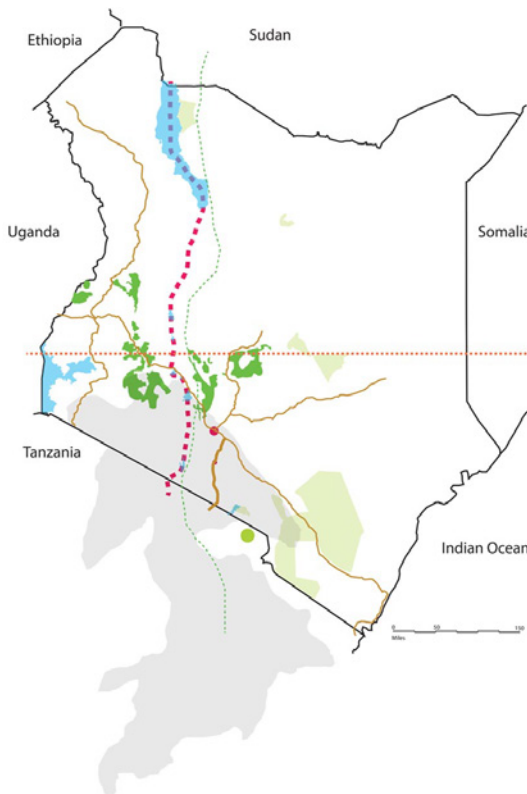


Figure 2.4. Maasai occupation in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania

the end of the 19th CE, the Maasai occupied an area within the Rift Valley (in

Kenya and Tanzania) about 700 miles north to south and about 200 miles east to west. Their days of glory were however brought to an end with the onset of the European colonization..."Through the biased treaties of 1904, 1911 and 1912, they lost their best territory to Europeans, including lands that had formerly been important as retreats during the dry season and periods of drought."⁶ Because of their fearsome reputation and their defiant nature towards the Europeans, the Maasai territories remained alienated from any

⁶ Beckwith, Carol, Tepilit, Ole Saitoti. *Maasai*

development—a condition that has continued to plague their community to this day.

The marginalization of the Maasai people has continued on to this present day—the government has appropriated Land, whose resources were commonly shared by them and the natural wildlife, as conserved national parks, making it illegal for them to graze their cattle there. This, together with prolonged droughts due to climate change, has caused a huge number of cattle losses, and led this once completely self-sustaining people into poverty.

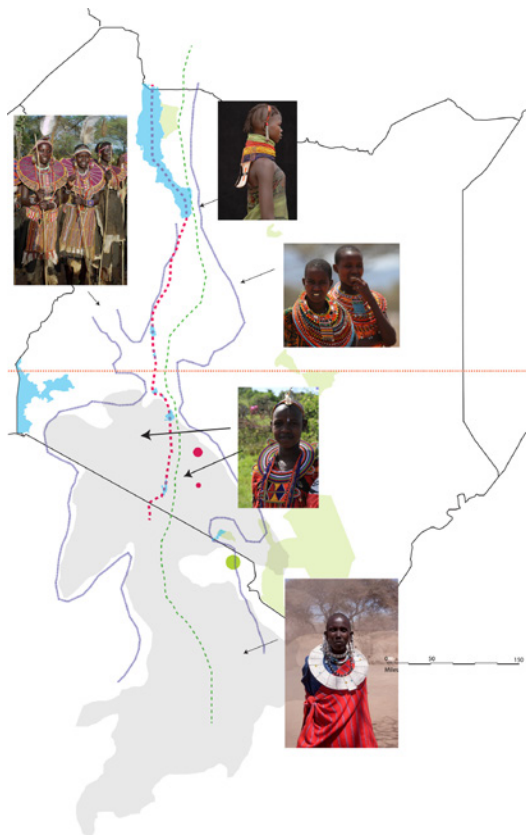


Figure 2.5. Maasai influence on culture and craft

The Maasai have a strong structured community with defined gender roles. The community is divided among age groups, each having their roles. The young uncircumcised boys, for example, take care of the cattle. The older young men, called the Morans (warrior), guard the villages. The much older men, Maasai elders, offer counseling and discipline the community. The women are usually background figures yet play a very important role in sustaining the community. They build and

refinish the huts, fetch water and firewood, cook and feed the family, and milk the cows. In their free time, they make beautiful ornaments that are worn by

everyone to signify social status and during ceremonies. Maasai people are polygamous and have arranged marriages, where bride price is paid in the form of dowry. With the current challenges the facing the community, this traditional practice has taken a wrong turn. Younger and younger girls are being circumcised and given away for marriage in exchange for cattle. In a desperate effort to save their young girls and find an alternative way to feed and educate their families, Maasai women are making beaded crafts for sale to the local and international community.

It is along these challenges that this thesis was constructed, where architecture is proposed as a tool to empower and elevate a community that is living in poverty.

PROGRAM

This thesis proposes a craft center that would host facilities and programs which would preserve, promote and progress Maasai bead-working with the aim of strengthening the women's social and economic capacity. It would also offer other supporting functions which include a health and wellness place, a community gathering place and a short-term residing area for visiting artists and designers. The added aspiration is that such a place would encourage a better cultural understanding between the disenfranchised Maasai and the outside community.

The center will draw upon natural resources for energy with the use of solar panels and heaters, and will also harvest rainwater to support small scale agricultural efforts. A local well for the community has also been envisioned on the site. The programs proposed include:

- Craft-making spaces-indoor and outdoor
- Administration offices
- Restaurant/café
- Craft retail/gift shop
- Indoor learning places
- Museum exhibition place
- Gathering place
- Health and wellness place
- Performance/presentation space

- Temporary resident artists living and studio spaces
- Caretakers residence

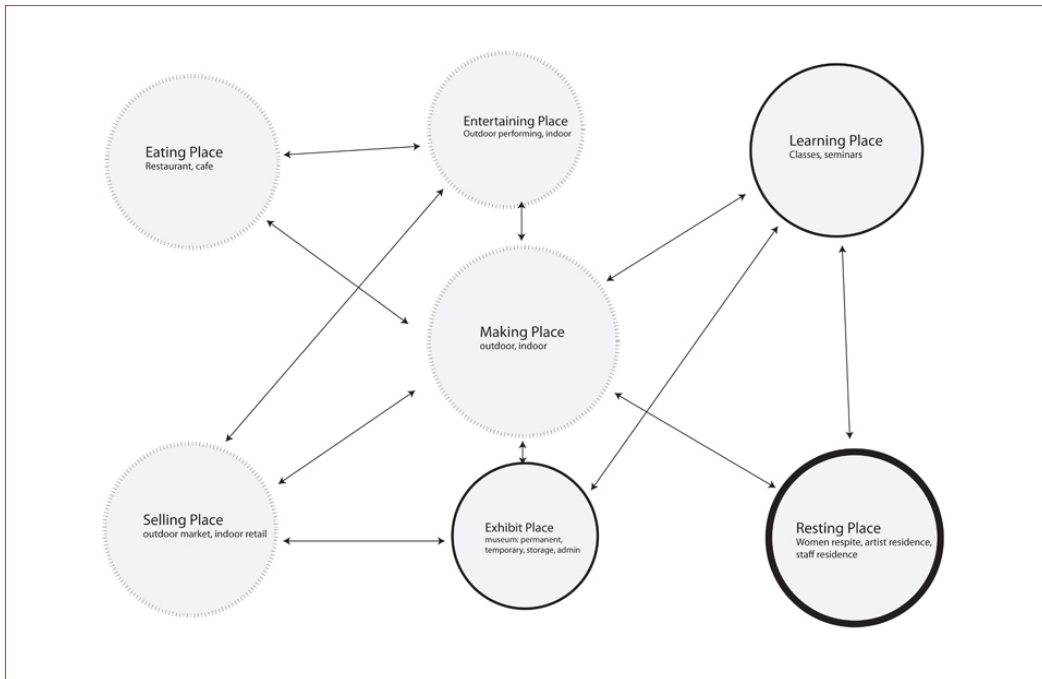
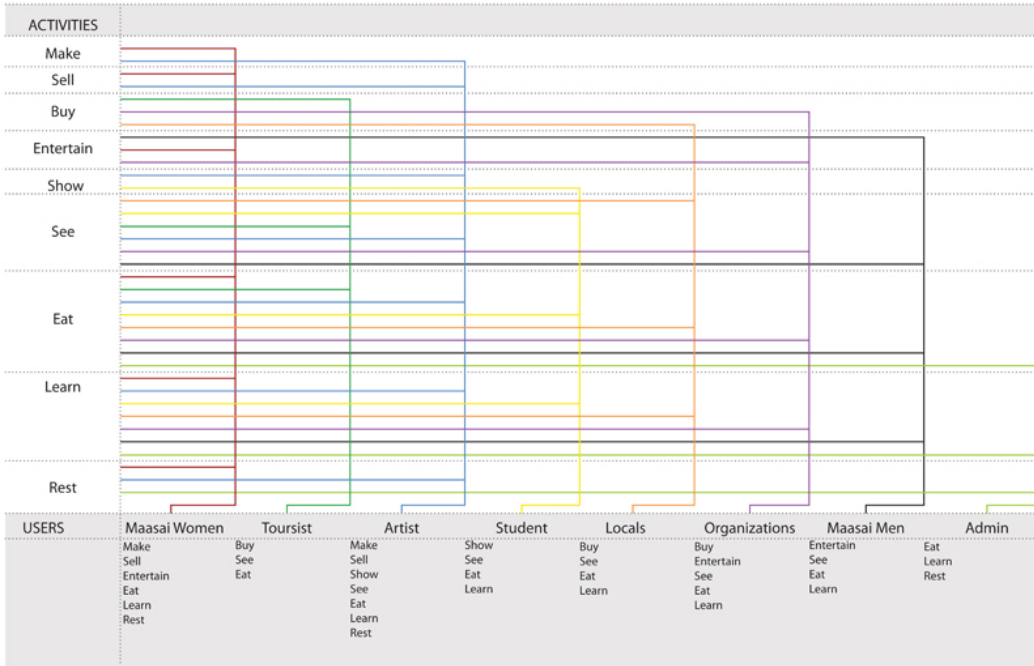


Figure 3.1. Program Relationships

SITE

The proposed project is currently on 12 acres of land and is located in rural parts of Kajiado, yet close enough to a highway that is frequently used by tourists. The location was also chosen because of its close proximity to the homestead where meetings were held with the Nareto Women's group.



Figure 4.1. Kajiado Town, aerial view. Image courtesy of Hans Michna

CHARACTERISTICS OF KAJIADO

Geography

Latitude -1.85° , longitude 36.7833° , altitude 5,675 ft above sea level.

The town lies on a flat plateau that rises above valleys with seasonal rivers and dry river-beds.

Climate

It is located in a semi-arid region with an average rainfall of 18in. Potential evapotranspiration is 62in. The temperature ranges from 53°F to 80°F.

Population:

Kajiado Central is 1,123 sq miles has a population of 46,555 people, with a female/male ratio is 100:103. The Maasai group dominate Kajiado's ethnic population.

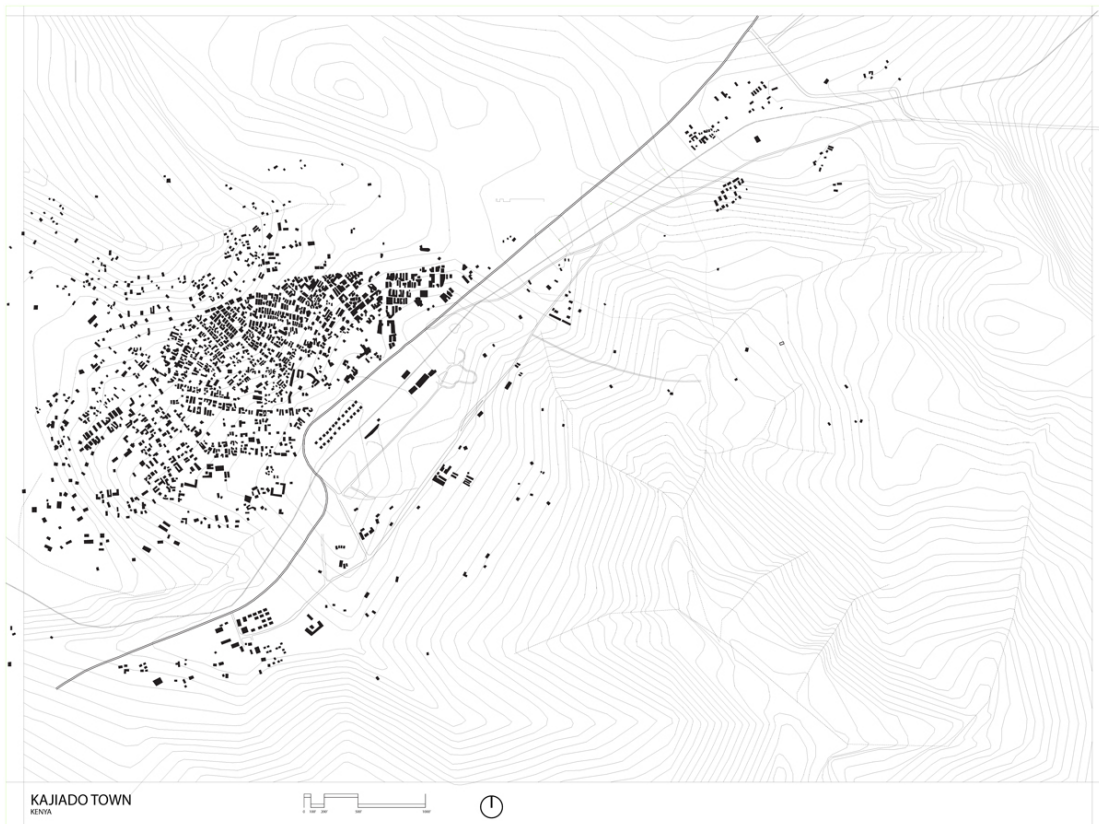


Figure 4.2. Kajiado Town.

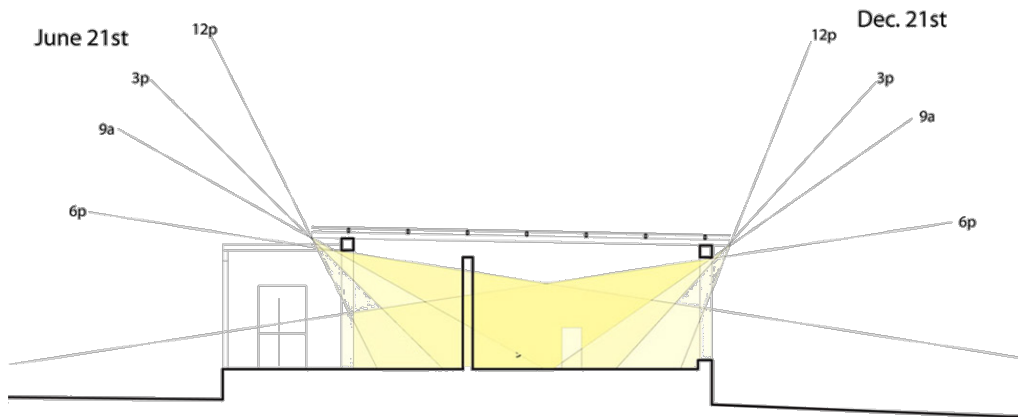
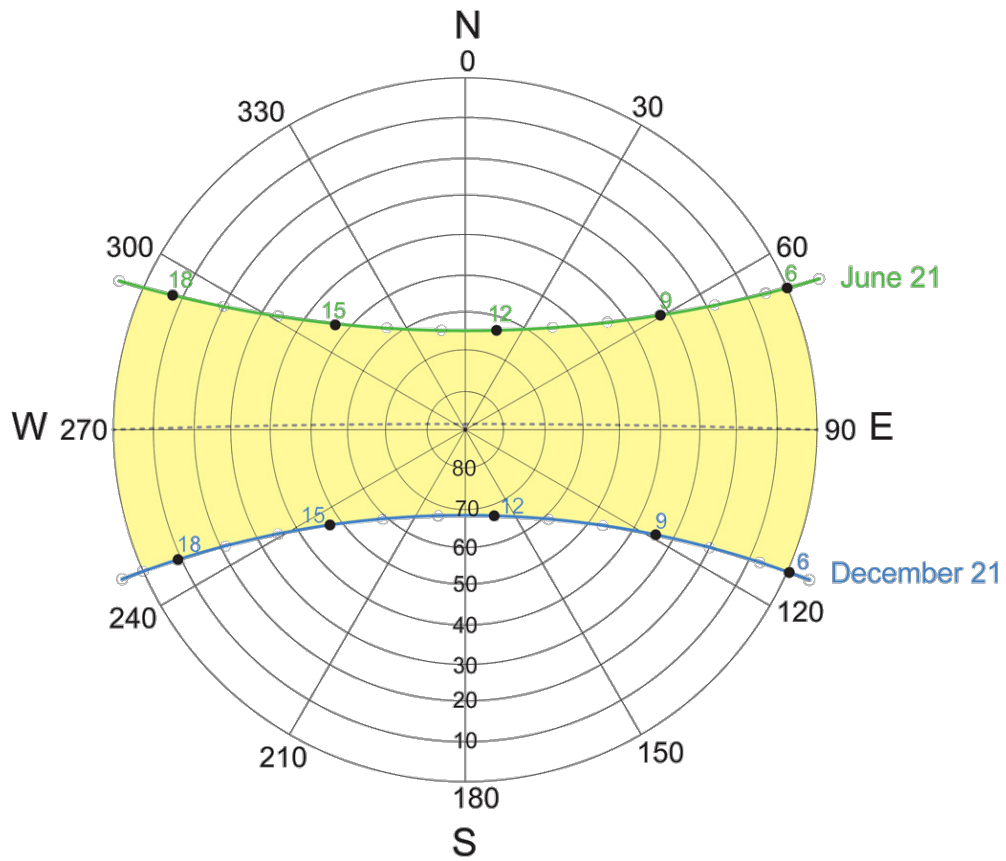


Figure 4.3. Sun Diagrams.

ARCHITECTURAL RESPONSE

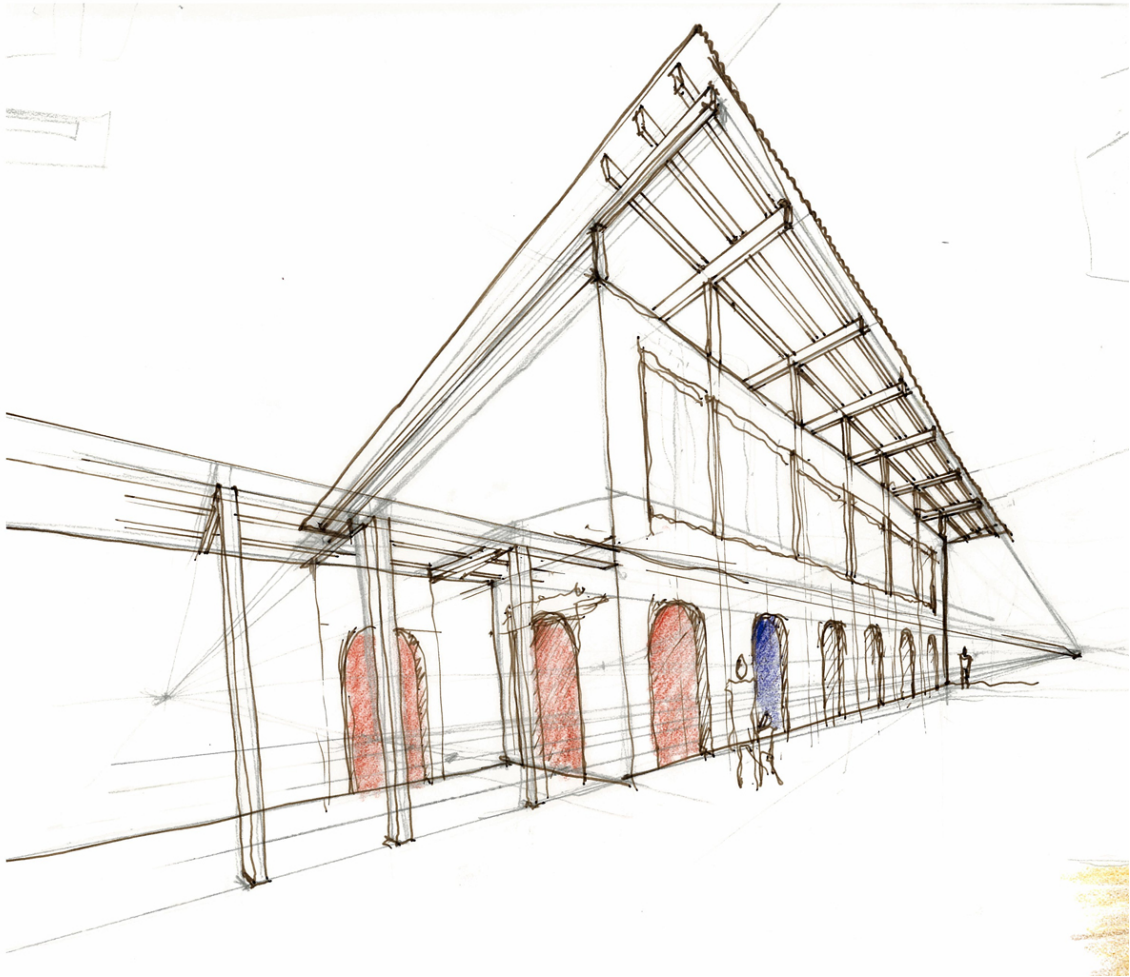


Figure 5.1. Perspective concept sketch

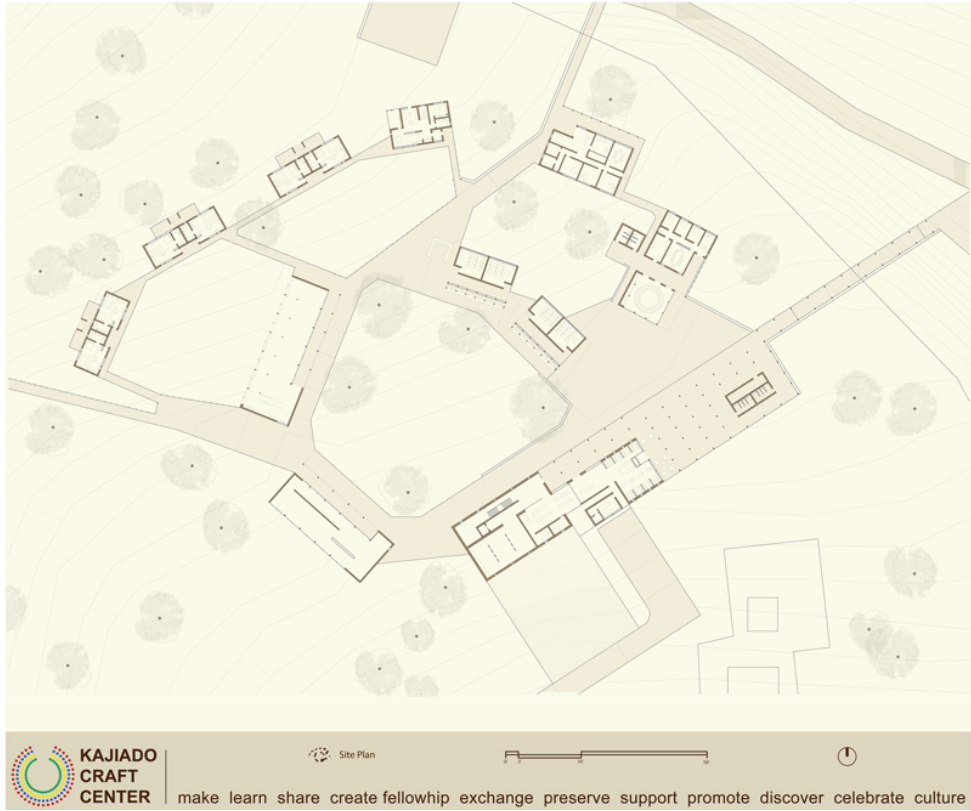


Figure 5.2. Site Plan

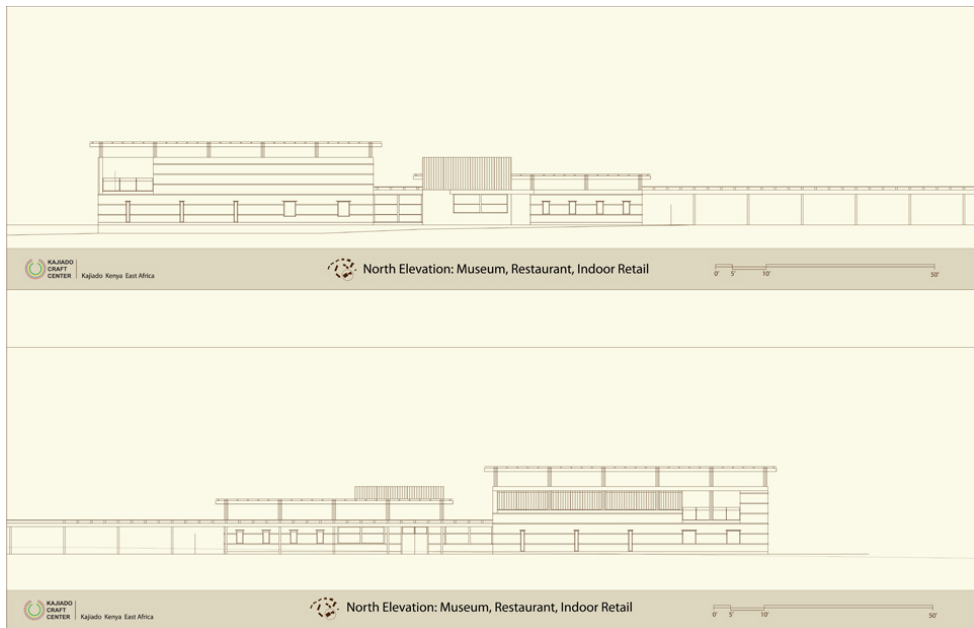


Figure 5.3. Elevations

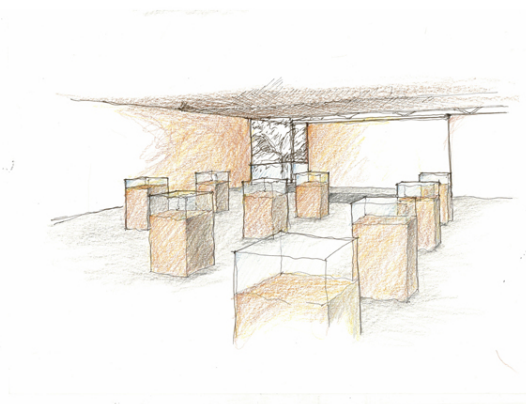
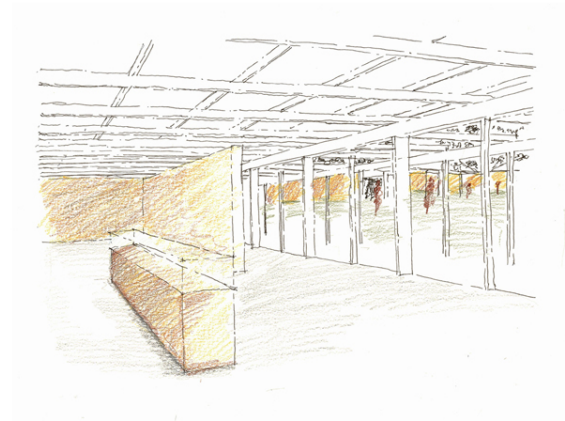
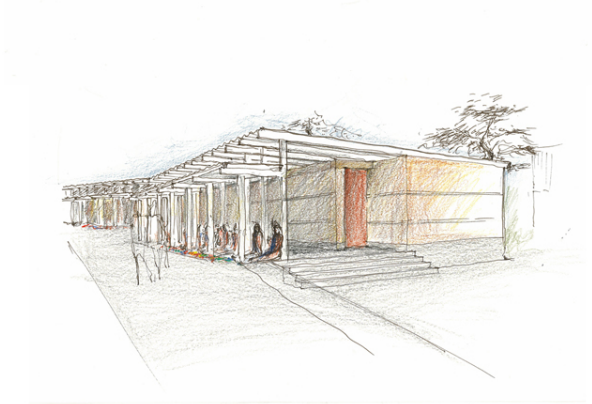


Figure 5.4. Perspectives



Figure 5.5. Sections

CONCLUSION

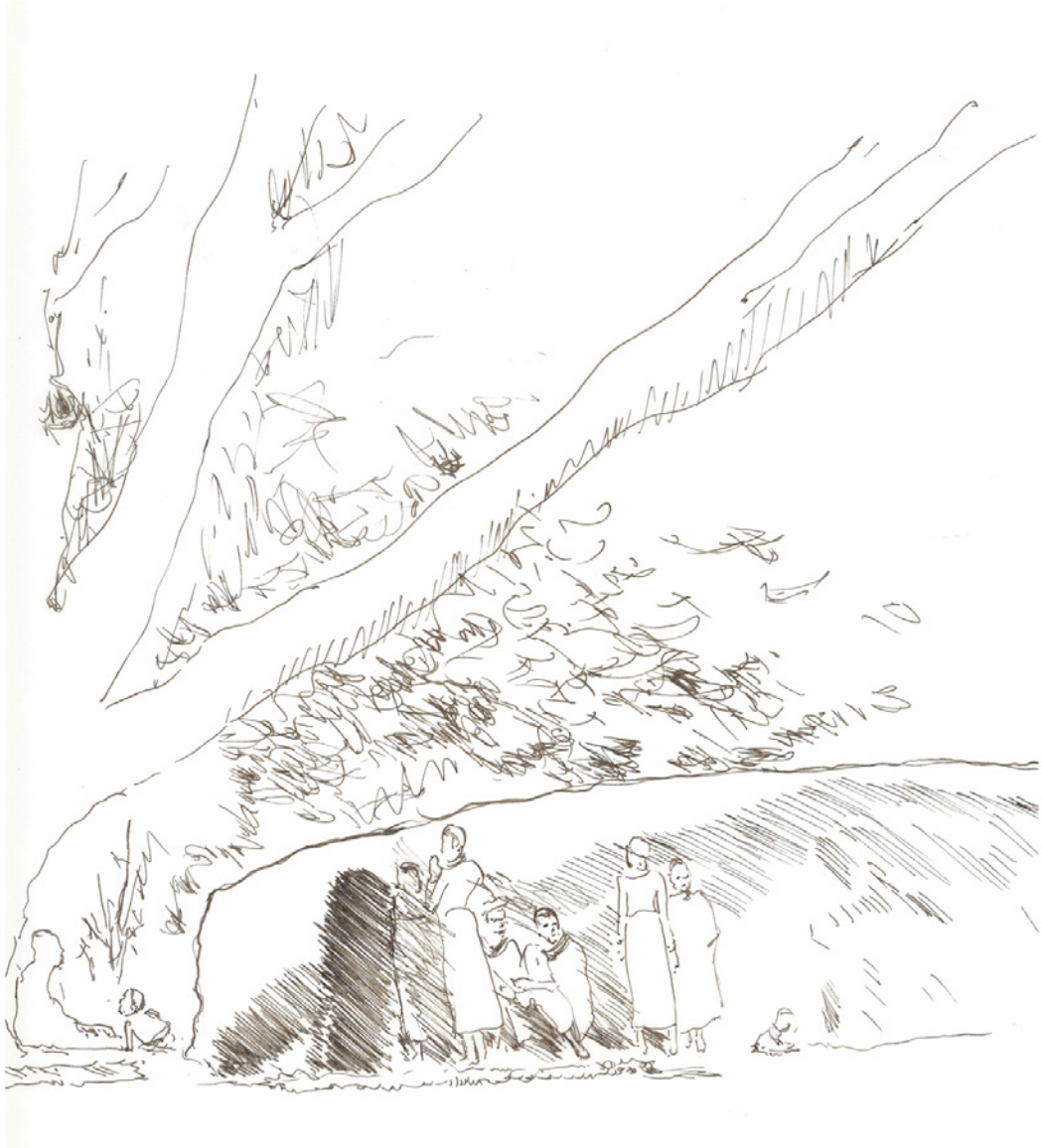


Figure 6.1. Sketch showing a Maasai homestead

Kajiado Craft Center uses design and craft to empower a community and elevate them from poverty. Through design, the act of craft making that is so significant within the Maasai, is reignited and its values and beauty shared

with others. It is with a strong intent that the center will bring the world to the Maasai and become a platform of cultural exchange and a celebration of craft. The activities that are programmed to take place in the center will offer

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