Our project explores sacred space, not as a place for religious worship, but as a place for the common and shared experiences of a community around the daily and fundamental need for water.

The Quotidian Sacred proposes that what makes space sacred is not so much about creating architecture for religious practices as it is about creating a place for the everyday human practices and social interactions in a community.

The project is based in Tanaf, Senegal and it is a response to an ideas competition named Kaira Looro, Sacred Architecture in Senegal. In Mandingo language, Kaira Looro means “Architecture for Peace.” Our project emphasizes this peaceful co-existence of different ethnic and religious populations in Tanaf village. The sacred space does not pertain to certain groups or religions but becomes a place of community and cooperation.

The site is Tanaf village, Senegal. Tanaf is located in Casamance region which is the lower part of the Senegal that is physically separated from the rest of the country by the Gambia. The history of conflict between the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MDFC) and the Senegalese government has had long-term repercussions on the development of the region. The Casamance became a forgotten land that was not included in the modernization efforts of the country. This has left the populations of the Casamance very vulnerable especially dealing with issues of drought and lack of access to water.

Tanaf village is among many villages that live along the Casamance river. The village consist of 4000 inhabitants and has the most resources among the surrounding villages. Resources include a hospital, a school and a market.
Water Issues

Water is fundamental in this project. There are two seasons in this region: the rainy season, which lasts from June to October, and the dry season. As indicated by the map, the river shrinks significantly during the dry season.

More than 40 other villages, including Tanaf, are located along the Casamance river and depend on the river for agriculture and daily water use. The river is the center of life in this region. Drought and the salinity of the river present challenges for people of Tanaf and the other villages to access clean drinking water. Hence, water becomes a central component of the project’s design.

Local Materials and Vernacular Architecture

One of the biggest challenges in the project is a limited palette of local and available materials. In addition, there is a lack of specialized workers in the village. The community usually gets together to construct new buildings and there might be few people in the village with more knowledge in construction methods than others that could instruct people during the process.

Hence, our project starts with a study of local materials and vernacular architecture. By familiarizing ourselves with traditional construction techniques, we wanted to leverage what already exists and use it in a new way in our project.

One example of local architecture that exists in the region and is particularly relevant to the issues of water is the Impluvium House. The roof slopes down towards the central courtyard to collect rainwater during the rainy season.

In addition, by studying and drawing traditional lashing techniques and construction methods, we began to develop an understanding of how people make in this place. This research influenced the way we developed our project that was heavily reliant on making and drawing.
Peaceful Diversity: A Community around Water

The Casamance region at large, where Tanaf village is located, is characterized by a multi-ethnic, multi-religious population that has co-existed peacefully for a long time. This is a unique condition in a world which has seen a lot of conflict and civil unrest between different religious groups and ethnicities. In our project, we want to emphasize this peaceful and diverse community through a design that celebrates and enhances connections between different groups of the village.

Tanaf village and more than 40 other villages located along the Casamance river depend on the river for agriculture and daily water use. The river is the center of life in this region. However, drought and increased salinity of the river present challenges for access to clean drinking water. Water becomes a central component of the project’s design; the building acts as a large water collection system during the rainy season. Water, as an essential element of life and the thing that connects the lives of everyone in these forty villages along the river, becomes a symbol of the peaceful and inclusive community and the center of the collective experience.

The building becomes a place to harvest rainwater during the rainy season, store it for off-season use, and make it available for the community to use when water is more scarce. The most basic need for water to satisfy daily necessity becomes the basis of the sacred experience in the building. The sacred is found through the everyday journey of getting water. Currently, family members walk for long distances to find water. Often, women walk with a bucket on their heads to nearby villages or wells to get water for their families. In Tanaf village, many of the wells are dried up or contaminated for lack of hygiene and sanitation. In our project, the building becomes a destination and a place of celebration of the daily activity of getting water.
Multiplying the Structure

The project does not solve the water concerns of Tanaf. It is after all only occupying a small footprint in the village, which limits the catchment area of the roof. Hence, our approach was to set a precedent of how the village might construct these water-gathering system and storage facilities for each housing block. After the community comes together to build the sacred space, the newly gained skills can be utilized to construct these for each family.
The Structure: A Gathering of Water and Community

The multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups in Tanaf village calls for an architecture that brings people together not only through its operation but through its construction and the annual maintenance of the building. The communal experience starts with the construction of the building.

The design requires that the community cooperatively construct the building through all the phases starting with laying down the foundation of the tanks to weaving the thatched roof. During the life of the building, the roof and the water tanks will require seasonal maintenance. This will become a ritual for the community. Every year before the rainy season, the community must convene to clean and inspect the water tanks and the thatched roof. The sacred space becomes a place of communal gathering and social interaction, a place from which to get water for daily use.

The structure of the roof and the forms of the storage tanks are expressive of the process of rain harvesting. The roof structure comes down to the ground and shapes the experience of the community as they collect water from the tanks/wells, and interact with one another.
**Selected Bibliography**


