Maasai Women in Architecture:

Navigating the Journey from Thorny Branches to Resilient Roots

by

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Authors Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

"Maasai Architecture: Navigating the Journey from Thorny Branches to Resilient Roots" investigates the relationship between cultural preservation and the empowerment of Maasai women through architectural design. Traditional Maasai architecture, shaped by nomadic practices, communal living, and natural, local materials, is increasingly threatened by pressures from tourism, colonization, and shifting land ownership. These forces have transformed the Maasai culture and spaces surrounding them, unfortunately leaving the Maasai women with limited opportunities and spaces for growth. Historically, Maasai women have been the primary builders of their homes, with their intimate knowledge of the land and construction practices crucial for sustaining their community. However, as cultural change accelerates, this role is gradually being erased. Women's activities are gradually being restricted to a private service, while men's are being directed toward the wider public community.[1] To address this, the research aims to design a space that honors Maasai heritage while creating new opportunities for women to thrive.

The project envisions a women's empowerment center that integrates Maasai culture and traditional construction techniques with modern architectural innovations to address present-day challenges and meet the holistic needs of Maasai women. By incorporating locally sourced materials and culturally significant forms, alongside modern features, the design aims to be both symbolic and functional - a space of resilience but also one that fosters empowerment. The proposed center will offer spaces for

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[1] Kipuri, *Maasai Women in Transition*. 214.

education, economic opportunities, healthcare, and community support, empowering Maasai women to adapt and succeed.

These multifunctional spaces will help the Maasai women with economical, intellectual, and emotional support. Additionally, the center will serve as a hub for cultural preservation, celebrating and passing on the wisdom and practices of Maasai women. In African culture, women's agency and leadership is essential to passing on cultural heritage from one generation to the next. Through their creativity, knowledge, and key role in social practices and cultural expression, women are fundamental to maintaining traditions and cultural identity across the African continent.[2]

This journey "from thorny branches to resilient roots" represents the transformation of Maasai culture and spaces—evolving to provide strength, security, and opportunity, while still remaining rooted in important cultural values. As external pressures on Maasai communities increase, this architectural project aims to preserve both the vernacular physical structures, forms and building techniques as well as the socio-cultural fabric that defines the women's identity. This vision sees Maasai women not just as passive recipients of change but as active participants in shaping their future. By embracing their cultural roots, they become the protectors of their traditions while also leading their community towards growth and innovation.

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[2] "About the Center - ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF."

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Dedication

To the Maasai women of Sekenani,

Thank you for welcoming me with open hearts and open hands. Thank you for the laughter, the quiet moments, the stories shared without needing perfect words. For showing me that architecture can be more than drawings - it can be care, connection, and community.

This thesis is dedicated to your strength, wisdom, and resilience. You are the keepers of your tradition, the builders of your homes, and the heart of your community. This work is rooted in your wisdom, shaped by your presence, and inspired by your way of moving through the world. I hope this thesis not only honors where you come from but helps create space for where you're going.

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Figure 4.75: Selfie of Beatrice, Mercy, me, and another Maasai woman at the beads museum. Image by Author

Figure 4.76: Image of me handing out sweets to the children in Simankas village. Image by Author.

Figure 4.77: Image of and Simankas outside her home after she dressed me in her cultural clothing. Image by Author.

Figure 4.78: Image of donations we had bought for Beatrices village, there was tea, sugar and maizemeal as well as treats for the children. Image by Author.

Figure 4.79: Image of Simanka and her son in their living area of her home. Image by Author.

Figure 4.80: Prints of the Banners and road sign I designed for the Beads Museum. Images by Author.

Figure 4.81: Preliminary, first draft screenshots of the website design for the Beads Museum. In both desktop and phone views. Images by Author.

Conclusion:

Figure 5: To the left - Image of Maasai women sitting under the tree at the Beads Museum with their craft making supplies. Image retrieved from the Beads Museum Facebook.


B.DUCK

Part 0

Foundations



Figure 0.1: On previous page - Visiting Simankas Village. Image by Author.

Figure 0.2: Above - A painting of two Maasai men standing side-by-side. Painting by Author. 2010.

0.1 - Preface

This thesis stems from a deep respect for the culture of Maasai women. It is inspired by their roles as builders, caregivers, and protectors of their culture. Growing up in Kenya and having school friends from Maasai origins to interacting with the community on many out-of-town trips with my father, I have witnessed the intricate relationship between the Maasai and their environment. The women of the Maasai community have always struck me with their strength and hospitality, balancing their day-to-day responsibilities while also preserving the essence of their culture and traditions. For quite some time of my childhood, the Maasai and the landscape of the Maasai land inspired many of my artworks. I was enthralled by the colors, the patterns and the beautiful Kenyan landscape they live within.

As a child I was told that women are the bearers of their cultures and traditions, they are the ones who pass down the knowledge from generation to generation. The Maasai women embody this responsibility as well. What always stood out to me about the Maasai was how the women themselves were the architects of their own homes and passed down those skills from generation to generation This is what sparked my passion for architecture, pushing me towards an intertest between the built form, preserving heritage and designing for community.

Years later, after completing my undergraduate degree in Architecture, I felt a strong pull to return to where my passion for architecture first took root and make it the focal point of my Master's degree thesis. After months of researching and exploring Maasai architecture and culture, I finally had the chance to return back home to Kenya in 2024 and surround myself in the very landscapes and communities that inspired my thesis.







Figure 0.3 Maasai women at the Beads Museum sitting under a tree beading jewelry. Image by Author.

Figure 0.4: A selfie of Simanka, Sarah and I while they were teaching me how to bead. Image by Author.

Figure 0.5: Sekenani town across the road from the Beads Museum, Image by Author.

My journey took me to Sekenani Town, at the edge of the Maasai Mara wildlife reserve. At the main gate to the reserve there is a beads museum ran by Eti Dayan, an Israeli scholar and author who has immersed herself in the Maasai culture since 2001. The beads museum is where I conducted much of my research and connected with many of the Maasai women who shaped this thesis.

Eti has lived among the Maasai for over two decades, speaking the language they speak, living the way they live. During this time, she has become deeply involved in preserving and promoting their cultural heritage. Similar to my own position, Eti's work reflects the role of the "Stranger" or "Other". Someone not born into the culture but who, through respectful engagement, can become a meaningful bridge, someone who helps others reflect on and preserve that culture. This idea ties into the concept of distanciation, which suggests that stepping back, even slightly, can bring new clarity.[3] Experiencing a culture from an outsider's perspective can create space for its traditions to be more deeply appreciated and valued. This kind of viewpoint can become a productive force, not just for the outsider but also for those within the culture and can even help build momentum and incentive for preserving culture and tradition.

At the same time, I recognize that there is a long history of research and design work by outsiders that has been extractive or romanticized, often shaped by unequal power dynamics. This project tries to consciously resist that — not by centering my own vision, but by foregrounding the voices, insights, and aspirations of the Maasai women I worked with, ensuring their knowledge leads the design process. At the beads museum, a gentle rustling of the wind filled the air as the Maasai women sat under the shade

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[3] "Distanciation." Oxford reference

of a larger tree, protecting themselves from the scorching sun while they worked on their intricate beadwork. There was a calmness to the space. A sense of focus and care in every bead threaded. But just across the street, Sekenani Town buzzed with activity. Welders sent sparks flying as they shaped iron, herders guided cattle through tight spaces, and shopkeepers called out to sell their goods. Tourist cars moved up and down the road, while Maasai women stood by, holding up their handmade jewelry, hoping for a sale. The contrast between the peaceful creativity at the museum and the restless energy of the town made me see even more clearly the differences in the daily lives of Maasai women as they navigate both tradition and contemporary challenges.

One of the afternoons I found a spot under the same tree and sat with Simanka, a Maasai woman who at first approached me like she would any other outsider, trying to sell me different pieces of jewelry she had beaded. When I sat down, I asked her to teach me how to bead and we started to communicate in Swahili, a language we both shared. My Maasai friend Mercy who also speaks English translated the things she said in Maa – the language spoken by the Maasai. Simanka noticed I had a few mosquito bites on my arm and she, with much warmth, gifted me a beaded bracelet strung with dried seeds from a medicinal plant that keeps mosquitoes away.

She told me stories about her children, her ex-husband, about her village, building her own home, which she later invited me to visit. Upon visiting her home, I noticed the simplicity and naturality of the materials she used to build her space versus the contrast to the complexity of the craftsmanship. The women gather wood and sticks for days then create a structure which lies under a layer of mud. They shape each structure with their own hands to create spaces of warmth, protection, and heritage, not just shelters. They were symbols of identity. I also learned from a firsthand

perspective the challenges Maasai women face, the economic hardships, the commodification of their culture for tourism, the gradual loss of their architectural traditions and navigating a world that is changing faster than they can adapt. This brought me to think about my research question.

"How can architecture support Maasai women's evolving needs while preserving indigenous spatial knowledge?"

This thesis is my response to those formative experiences, both as my younger self, intrigued by the roles of Maasai women, and as an adult, moved by their present-day struggles. It seeks to honor their culture and amplify their voices by reimagining architecture as a tool for empowerment. Through the design of a women's empowerment center, I aim to create a space where Maasai women can thrive, express their cultural identity, and access new opportunities for growth. This project also recognizes their capacity not only to preserve architectural traditions, but to adapt, innovate, and master new building skills using local and regional materials. By designing with them rather than for them, this thesis explores how architecture can bridge the space between tradition and modern needs—supporting a future where Maasai women continue to be the builders of both home and community.

I want to acknowledge that this thesis is grounded in the land of the Maasai people, in Sekenani near the Maasai Mara. The Maasai have lived with and cared for this land for generations through stewardship, ceremony, and everyday life. Their knowledge is held in the trees, the paths, and the homes they've built. While I am from Kenya, I am not Maasai, and I approach this work as a respectful outsider. I carry with me a responsibility to honor the knowledge, cultural practices, and spiritual connections embedded in this place.

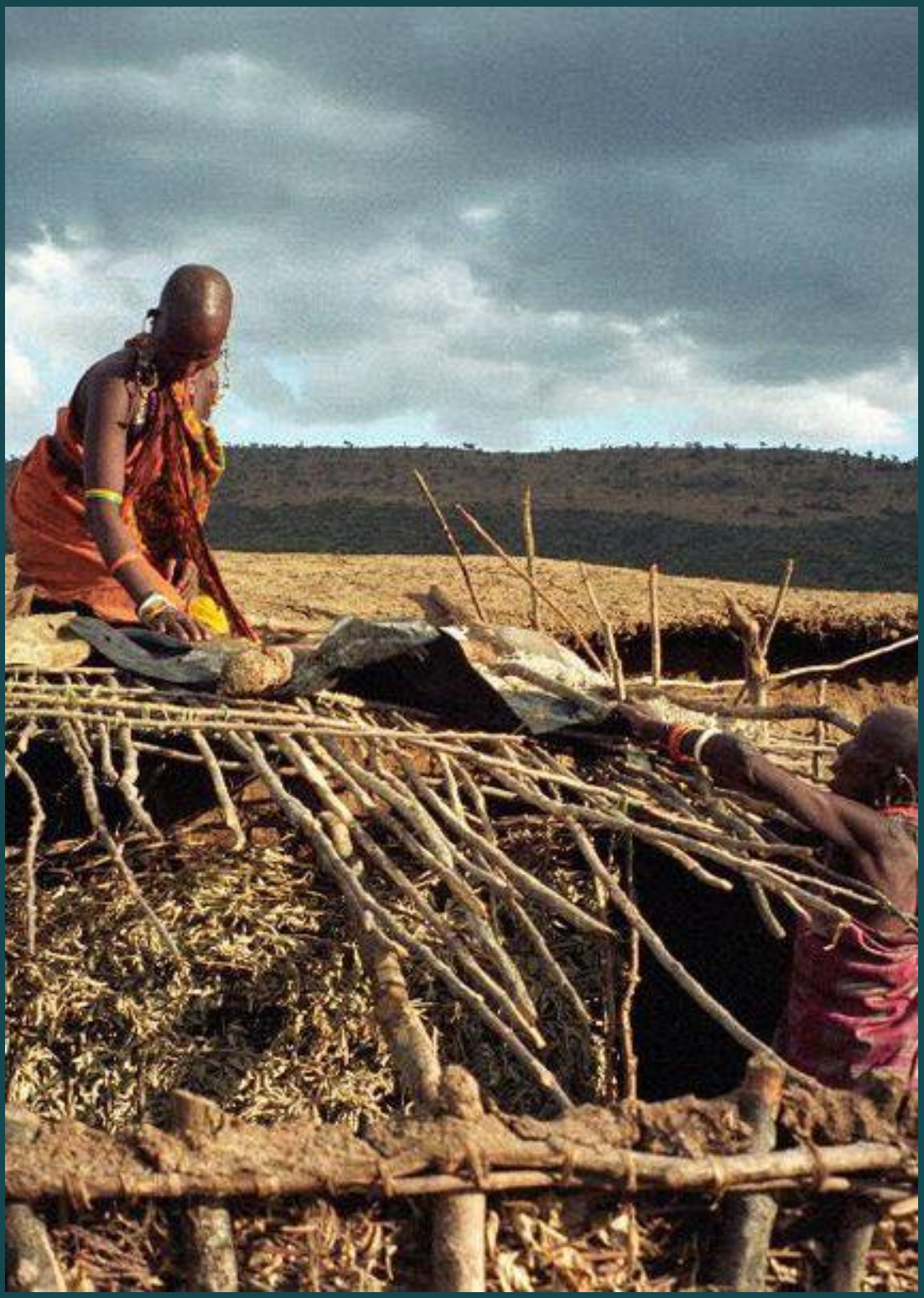


Figure 0.6: Maasai women assembling the roofing for their houses. Image retrieved from The Tribe on Facebook. 2021

0.2 Introduction

"There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women." – *Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, 1997-2006.*

Across history, women have shaped space, not always through formal architectural roles, but as builders, knowledge-holders, and caretakers of cultural continuity. In many African contexts, including Kenya, women are fundamental to maintaining traditions and cultural identity across the continent.[4] Through their creativity, knowledge, and key role in social practices and cultural expression they are what holds the community together and passes down the knowledge through generations. Among the Maasai, an indigenous African ethnic group in Kenya and northern Tanzania, women have long held the role of builders. Their architecture is a living example of vernacular architecture which reflects deep understanding of site, climate, and cultural function. Yet their contributions are often overlooked in formal architectural discourse, despite embodying the very principles that define vernacular design; resourcefulness, place-based knowledge, and responsiveness to both environment and community life.

In Kenya today, architecture remains a male-dominated profession, both in numbers and in visibility. According to recent data from the Architectural Association of Kenya (AAK), women account for only a small percentage of registered architects. In 2020, a survey by Women in Real Estate (WIRE) revealed that out of 763 architects registered with the Architectural Association of Kenya (AAK), 90 were women.[5] This means only around 12% of

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[4] Atalanta, "African World Heritage Day."
[5] "From The Ground Up, Women Are Rocking The World Of Architecture | Department Of Architecture."

formally registered Architects in Nairobi are women and even fewer hold leadership roles or design major public projects. Those who do enter the field often face challenges from limited access to mentorship and gender bias in the field. Still, a growing number of young, female Kenyan architects are reshaping the profession with a focus on sustainability, cultural relevance, and community-led practice. Despite persistent barriers, women are finding ways to reclaim space, both literally and professionally.

This thesis seeks to center the knowledge of the Maasai, and to explore how architectural design can support the evolving needs of Maasai women without erasing their roots. The project is located in Sekenani Town, at the edge of the Maasai Mara, a wildlife conservation area that is globally recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.[6] In his book *Modern Architecture in Africa*, Antoni Fokker, a Dutch Architect, urbanist and researcher argues that African architecture must be understood through its cultural, climatic, and social realities, not through Eurocentric ideals of form and progress.[7] This thesis aligns with that thinking. It aims to contribute to a different kind of architectural narrative, one that values local knowledge, community engagement, and practices that emerge from within, not from outside imposition.

Within the Maasai context, a significant shift is already underway. As globalization, tourism, formal education, and external aspirations shape new norms and desires, even Maasai communities themselves are beginning to build with International Modernism ideals in mind, prioritizing permanence and concrete. In doing so, many are unintentionally distancing themselves from vernacular forms and Indigenous spatial knowledge. This loss is not just material, it's cultural. As new

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[6] "The African Great Rift Valley - The Maasai Mara - UNESCO World Heritage Centre."
[7] Folkers and van Buiten, *Modern Architecture in Africa*.

buildings emerge, traditional methods, materials, and meanings are at risk of being forgotten or dismissed. Tour operators, NGOs, and foreign investors have become key agents of these modernizing changes, along with local builders and men who engage with these systems more directly. This thesis approaches that reality not with judgment, but with reflection and care, recognizing that change is inevitable, but questioning how architecture might honour heritage while embracing new needs. The goal is not to freeze tradition in time, but to find ways for it to evolve alongside the community, so that as life shifts, culture is carried forward too.

The focus of this thesis is the design of a Maasai Women's Empowerment Center, a space that responds to both cultural preservation and community transformation. The design is guided by the principle of designing with, not for, and was shaped by time spent with Maasai women in Sekenani. The project responds to three key challenges: the erosion of traditional Maasai architecture, the marginalization of women in economic and public life, and the reduction of Maasai identity into a fixed narrative for tourist consumption. Through design, this thesis explores how architecturally, space can support economic independence, emotional wellbeing and cultural resilience. Drawing on vernacular forms and materials, while integrating climate-responsive strategies and flexible programming, the proposed center is both a response and a gesture of care, a place where Maasai women can gather, create, lead, and thrive. This work is as much about listening as it is about building. It's about slowing down, being present, and trusting that architecture can create spaces not just to inhabit, but to belong and to grow. In doing so, it hopes to honour the past, support the present, and make room for futures written by the women themselves.



Figure 0.7: Simanka describing the layout of her home and village by drawing them out in my notebook. Image by Author

0.3 Methodology and Resources

This thesis employs four methods of research to inform and guide the design process: a literature review, site analysis case studies and interviews with the Maasai women themselves:

1. Literature Review: The literature review provides a comprehensive overview of existing knowledge related to Maasai origin, architecture, cultural heritage, tradition, and sustainable design practices. Works like "***Maasai Women in Transition: Gender in the Transformation of a Pastoral Society"***[8](1989) examine the history of social relationships in Maasai society, showing how these connections have changed over time and influenced interactions between men and women. The book explores the key changes that have shaped the roles of pastoralist communities, especially Maasai women, and considers how these changes have impacted the development of both women and men in the community. ***"Lo-TEK: Design by Radical Indigenism"***[9] (2017) presents diagrams illustrating the relationships between land and people, as well as the construction of boundaries and homes within indigenous cultures. Landscape designer Julia Watson emphasizes the importance of landscape in Maasai culture, tradition, and architecture, highlighting how customs, beliefs, and building techniques are deeply connected to the environment. ***"Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture"***[10] (2006) examines the correlation between cultural values and evolving built structures among the Maasai of Kenya. The authors showcase how changes in variables like land tenure, education, religion, occupation, and rites of passage have influenced Maasai settlements. The transition from communal to

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[8] Kipuri, *Maasai Women in Transition*.
[9] Julia Watson, Wade Davis, *Lo-TEK - Design by Radical Indigenism*.
[10] Rukwaro and Maina, *Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture*.

individual land ownership has led to more permanent settlements, while shifts in education, religion, and occupation have resulted in spatial and material changes in dwellings.

2. Existing site study: The site analysis includes studying the topography, climate, vegetation, and existing infrastructure on and around the site, as well as understanding the spatial organization of traditional Maasai settlements and homes. Additionally, cultural practices, movement patterns, and availability of local material are also analyzed to ensure that the design respects and integrates local context. The site is in a pastoral area far from many big cities, maps were not readily available but with the use of google maps and visiting the site I was able to create maps and model out the site. I also used photography to document purposeful photographs of the site and neighboring context which helped with providing raw data for the thesis.

3. Case Studies: The precedents I used to help inform the design of my project are architectural projects based in similar climates to the chosen site which also emphasize cultural preservation, community engagement, and sustainable design. Some architects that influenced this work are Francis Kéré, who prioritizes community-driven, sustainable architecture with local materials and climate-responsive designs; Albert Faus, who integrates traditional building techniques with modern needs, focusing on local craftsmanship and environmental sensitivity; and Sharon Davis, who emphasizes social impact through sustainable architecture that fosters community interaction and empowerment. This method helps identify design strategies, material choices, and spatial configurations that can be adapted to the Maasai context. The case studies also highlight potential challenges and solutions, offering practical guidance for the design process.

4. Interviews with Maasai Women: The interviews conducted with Maasai women provided insights into both the practical and philosophical dimensions of their lives. These conversations offered a deeper understanding of their relationship to building practices, not simply as a domestic responsibility, but as a form of cultural knowledge passed down through generations. The women shared stories about how homes are constructed by hand, what materials are used, and the meaning embedded in their spatial organization. At the same time, the interviews revealed layers of Maasai mythology, symbolism, and philosophy that influence how space is perceived and experienced. These elements, from concepts of protection, femininity, and the earth, have directly shaped the conceptual framework of the empowerment center. By speaking with women from multiple generations, the research reflects both continuity and change, making sure that the design is grounded in traditional values while remaining open to evolving needs and future possibilities.

My positionality in this thesis is both an insider and an outsider. Growing up in Kenya and engaging with Maasai communities has given me personal insight into their culture, traditions, and way of life. This insider perspective allows me to approach the design with cultural sensitivity and respect. However, as someone who is not Maasai, I also recognize my outsider position, which prompts me to rely on participatory methods, such as interviews with Maasai women, to ensure that their voices, experiences, and needs shape the design. This dual positionality enriches my research by combining cultural familiarity with academic objectivity, aiming to create a space that respects and empowers Maasai women while preserving their architectural heritage.

As a Kenyan, I have a deep understanding of local values, social structures, and the broader context in which the Maasai community exists. Being born and raised in Kenya allows me to approach my work with an awareness of cultural nuances that might not be accessible to someone from outside the country. I feel that this shared cultural background provides me with a familiarity that fosters respect and empathy for the communities I work with.

Throughout my life, I have visited and interacted with people from the Maasai community on many occasions, often accompanying my father to bring donations and help the communities in ways they needed. Our family's shared love of camping, wildlife, and the outdoors has led us to spend time in the Maasai region, where we've built friendships with many Maasai people for generations, starting with my grandfather. This personal connection has established a foundation of trust and familiarity. I am not seen as just another outsider; my previous interactions and week-long visits to the mara have helped me build a rapport that allows for more genuine and open exchanges.

Additionally, my ability to speak Swahili allows me to communicate in a shared national language, which helps bridge the gap between my own background and the Maasai community. This shared language lets me connect on a more authentic level, breaking down some of the barriers of the "tourist gaze" and allowing our interactions to feel more natural and respectful.

Yet, despite these connections, I recognize that I am still an outsider to Maasai's direct lived experience. I am not part of their community, so there are aspects of their culture and history that I may never fully understand. Here, I turn to Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of the Other, which argues that the Other cannot be fully known or reduced to an object of study but must instead be encountered with ethical responsibility. He writes, *"The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity… not as a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness."*[11] This speaks to my approach in this research - not as an effort to define or change the Maasai but to hold space for their voices, narratives, and architectural resilience. Levinas reminds us that the face of the Other is a moral demand, one that calls for responsibility rather than domination.

In designing spaces that support Maasai women, I am responding to this ethical demand. I do not seek to impose external solutions but instead, through collaborative design create spaces that align with their cultural identity and aspirations. As Levinas writes, *"I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity."*[12] This responsibility informs my research: architecture is not merely space making but an act of justice, recognition, and ethical encounter. My role is not to be a voice for the Maasai women but

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[11] Bergo, "Emmanuel Levinas."
[12] Bergo.

a facilitator of their own agency, ensuring their heritage and aspirations are not lost in the tide of modernization.

Finally, as a researcher and student in architecture, I hold a position of professional influence and responsibility. This role shapes how I view the research and how I make design decisions, as my work could impact the community's physical spaces and opportunities. Balancing my professional role with a deep respect for Maasai voices is essential to ensure that my designs serve their community in a meaningful, ethical, and empowering way.

My personal connections with Simanka, Beatrice, and Mercy have been central to this work. Simanka welcomed me into her home and culture, while Beatrice and Mercy, who work at the Beads Museum in Sekenani, have become like sisters, assisting with translations and insights.

I mitigate bias through self-reflection and ensure all design programs are informed by the Maasai women I've interviewed, who agree on the need for these spaces. I am committed to collaborative design, maintaining ongoing communication with the Maasai women, and upholding ethical practices that respect their agency, culture, and aspirations.

0.4 Summaries

The Maasai – The Past explores the history of the Maasai people, their origins, traditions, culture, and religion. It looks at the roles of women and men and how the society is organized. It highlights the cultural importance of beads and jewelry in expressing Maasai identity over time. Lastly it touches on the significance of vernacular architecture and the use of local materials, along with traditional building practices. concludes by emphasizing

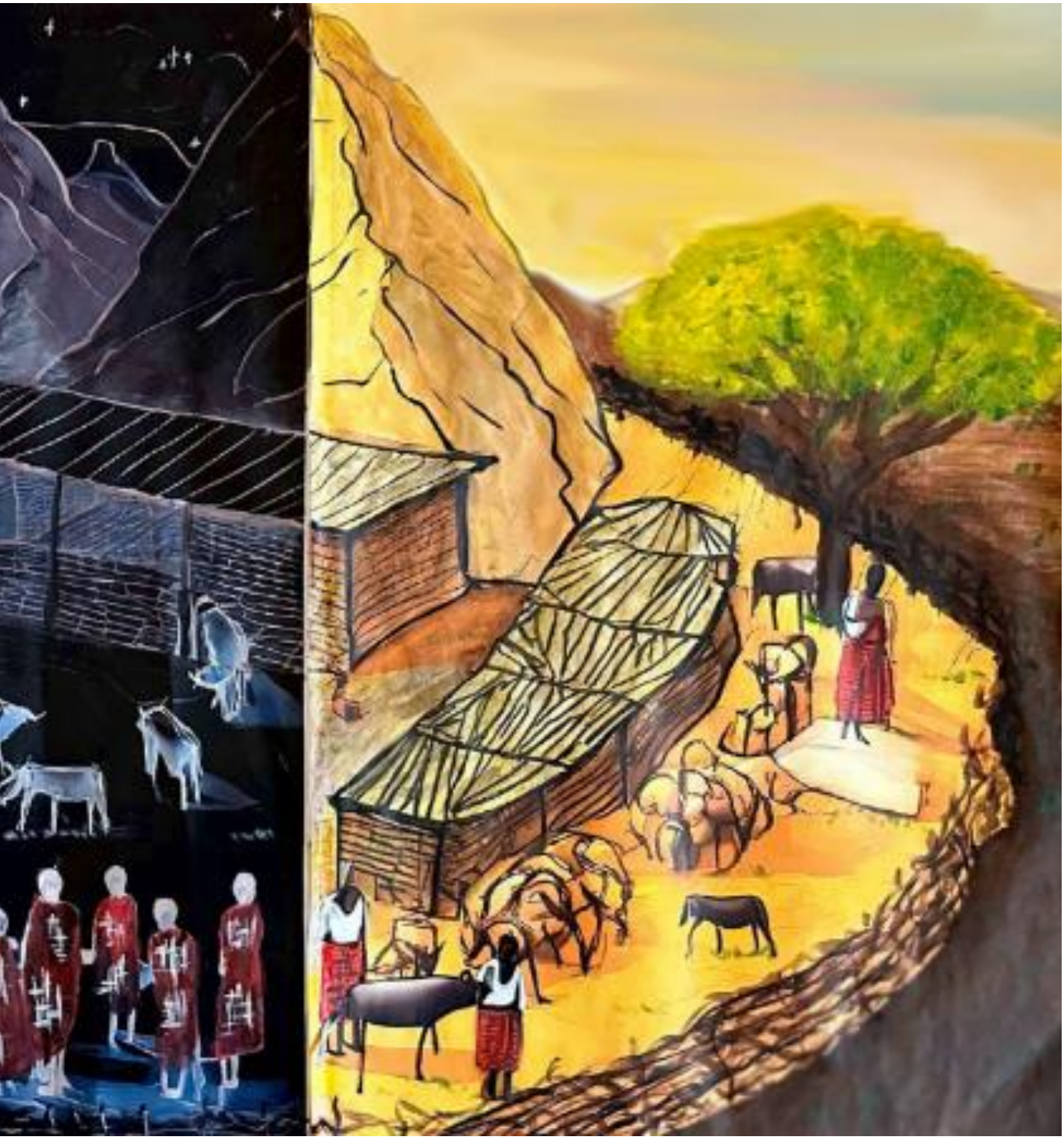
The Maasai – The Present looks at the challenges and changes that the Maasai community are facing today. It explores the impact of colonization and how tourism has impacted their economy and culture, bringing both opportunities and challenges. It also highlights the contrast between how outsiders often view the Maasai through a tourist lens and the real experiences of Maasai women, touching on themes of empowerment and exploitation. Lastly, it examines how Maasai architecture and traditions are evolving in response to modern influences and global pressures.

Focus Area – The Site focuses on Sekenani Town as the site for the design intervention, highlighting its cultural, geographical, and economic importance to the Maasai community. It examines the Beads Museum as a vital space for women, cultural preservation, and tourism. The chapter also provides a detailed site and context analysis.

Design Intervention presents the architectural project combining traditional Maasai heritage with modern design to create spaces that promote empowerment and cultural preservation. Inspired by case studies from architects with similar work, the design incorporates vernacular materials and stainable practices. The design development process details how community input, particularly from Maasai women, shaped the project's evolution, ensuring the final design reflects their needs and aspiration



Figure 0.8: Speculative painting of a Maasai homestead across different times of day, illustrating communal life, livestock interaction, and vernacular housing patterns. Painting by Author. 2023.





Part 1

The Maasai – The Past



Figure 1.1: Previous page - Cattle grazing in the Maasai land. Image by Author.
Figure 1.2: Above - Map of Africa and possible migration path of the Maasai. Drawing by Author.

1.1 Origins of the Maasai

The exact geographical origins of the Maasai remain uncertain, with historical and oral accounts offering differing perspectives. Some historians state that the Maasai originated in Egypt and they migrated through North Africa along the River Nile to their present locality.[13] According to others they came from 'somewhere far away in the North.' But the exact origin of the Maasai is something no living person today can honestly profess to know.[14] Oral traditions among the Maasai trace their roots to a northern region known as *Endikir-e-kerio* (the scarp of Kerio).[15] Scholars have linked this location to the southeastern region of present-day Lake Turkana; however, some others suggest that it may have been further north, possibly in northern Africa. Regardless of the exact location, it is widely believed that their migration southward was triggered by a prolonged dry spell, which led them to seek better grazing lands for their cattle. Another thing we do know is that their migration took place around the 17th and 18th century along the Rift Valley to where they are currently settled in Kenya and Tanzania.[16] The timing and reasons for the Maasai migration are consistent with the patterns of movement by other pastoralist and Nilotic groups in the region, reflecting broader socio-economic and environmental dynamics in East Africa during that period.[17]

Mythically the Maasai trace their origins to *Ol Doinyo Lengai*, or the "Mountain of God," an active volcano in East Africa that holds deep spiritual significance in their culture. According to oral tradition, the first Maasai people emerged from this crater, guided

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[13] Rukwaro and Maina, *Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture*.
[14] Ole Saibull, Carr, and Edward Moringe ole Sokoine, *Herd and Spear*.
[15] Kipury, *Oral Literature of the Maasai*.
[16] Mtuy et al., "The Role of Cultural Safety and Ethical Space within Postcolonial Healthcare for Maasai in Tanzania."
[17] Spear and Waller, *Being Maasai*.

by *Enkai*, the supreme god. Enkai is believed to have gifted them cattle, which descended from the heavens via a sacred *Ol-Oibor Enkai* (fig tree), establishing their role as pastoralists and custodians of livestock.[18] Traditionally, they believe that all cattle in the world were divinely entrusted to them, shaping their historical practices of cattle herding and, at times, cattle raiding. The story also speaks of a time when heaven and earth were once close, allowing direct communication between Enkai and the Maasai. However, due to human actions, the sky withdrew, creating distance between the divine and the earthly world. Even so, Enkai continues to influence their lives through two contrasting aspects: Enkai Narok (the Black God), who brings rain and abundance, and Enkai Nanyokie (the Red God), who brings drought and hardship.[19] These myths reflect the Maasai's deep connection to their land and cattle, which are central to their identity, economy, and spirituality.



Figure 1.3: Maasai people outside their kraal, or small community, in the early 1900s. Photograph from the National Geographic Image Collection.

[18] Kipury, *Oral Literature of the Maasai*.
[19] Kipury.

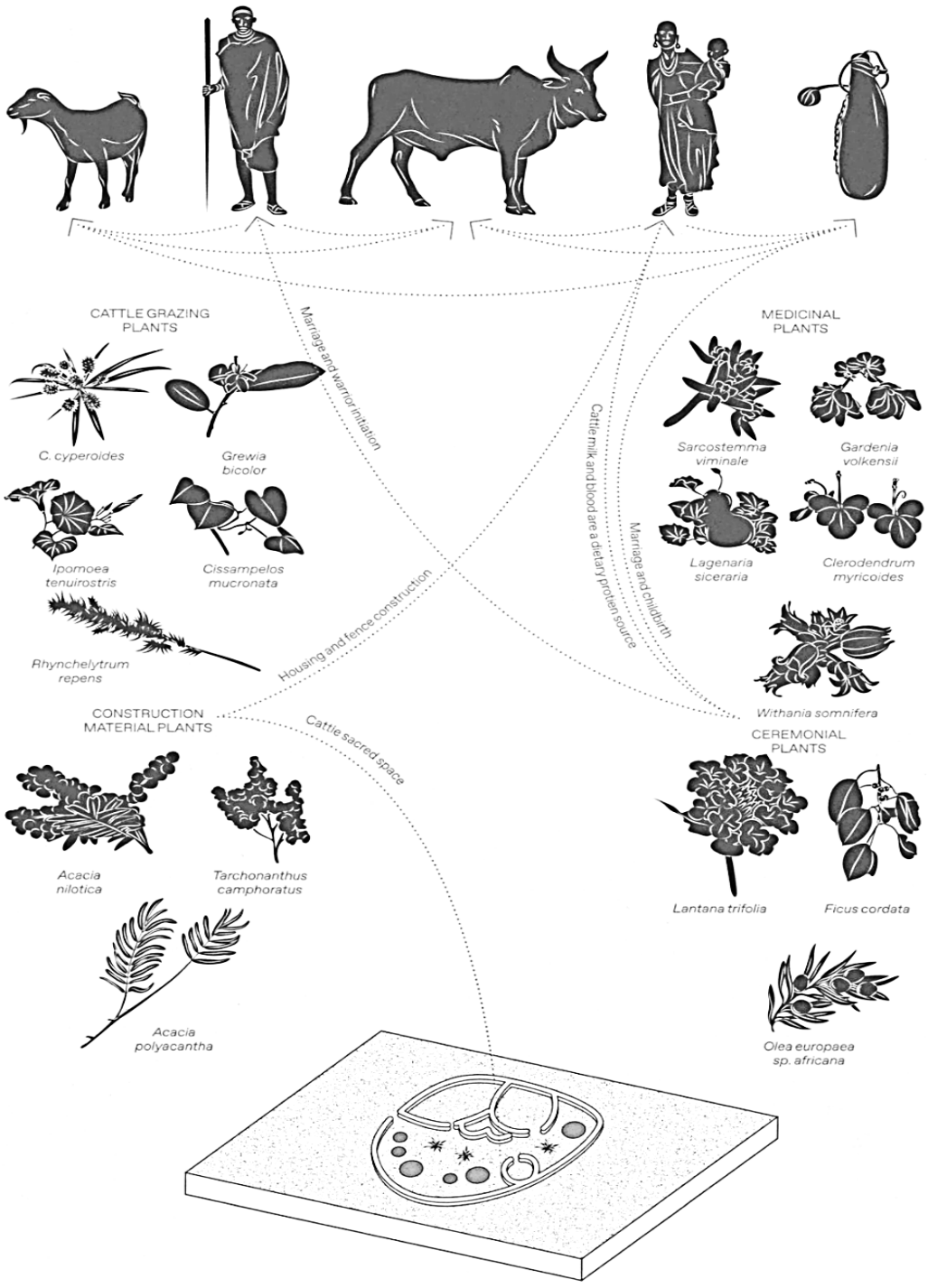


Figure 1.4: The symbiotic relationship between the Maasai and their environment. Diagram retrieved from Lo-Tek - Design by Radical Indigenism, Julia Watson, Wade Davis

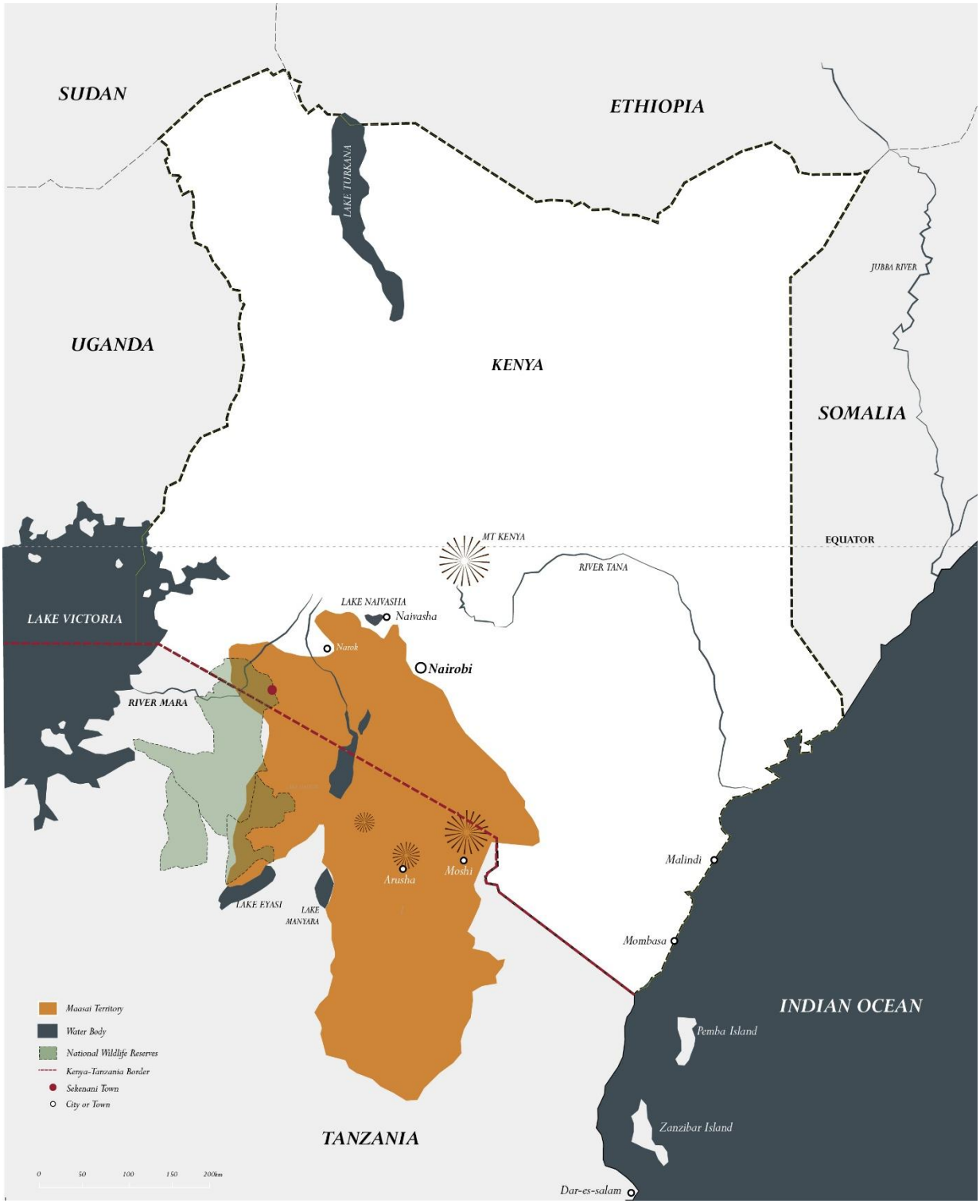


Figure 1.5: Map of Kenya and Tanzania, highlighting the Maasai territory and national wildlife reserves. Drawing by Author.

The Maasai are semi-nomadic pastoralists, meaning their movement and settlement patterns are dictated by their environments, specifically rainfall and seasonal cycles.[20] They have a symbiotic relationship with the landscape and for centuries relied on their ability to read the land and move accordingly, preventing overgrazing and ensuring the sustainability of their cattle-based economy. The Maasai see rain as a spiritual force that directs their migrations, influencing where they settle to when they hold ceremonies and marriages.[21] They follow signs from their gods in the landscape, such as rainfall patterns, for instance, the onset of rains may signal auspicious periods for community rituals or dictate the timing of migrations to new grazing areas. Mountains and hills hold also hold deep spiritual significance, often seen as sacred places where nature and the divine intersect. They are not just geographical features but symbolize connection to *Enkai,* the Maasai god.

Their system of mobile fences, which surround the homestead, and temporary settlements allowed their grazing lands to remain fertile while leaving the depleted areas to recover. However, colonial rule in the late 1800's severely confined their access to land. During the British and German colonization, Maasai lands were taken for agricultural use and later converted into national parks and reserves, such as the Serengeti and Maasai Mara. This forced displacement disrupted their migratory patterns, limiting access to grazing lands and making their traditional way of life more difficult. Even today, government-led land subdivisions continue to shrink their territory, forcing many to adapt to more sedentary lifestyles, often at the expense of their cultural traditions.[22]

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[20] Julia Watson, Wade Davis, *Lo-TEK - Design by Radical Indigenism*.
[21] Julia Watson, Wade Davis.
[22]Julia Watson, Wade Davis.

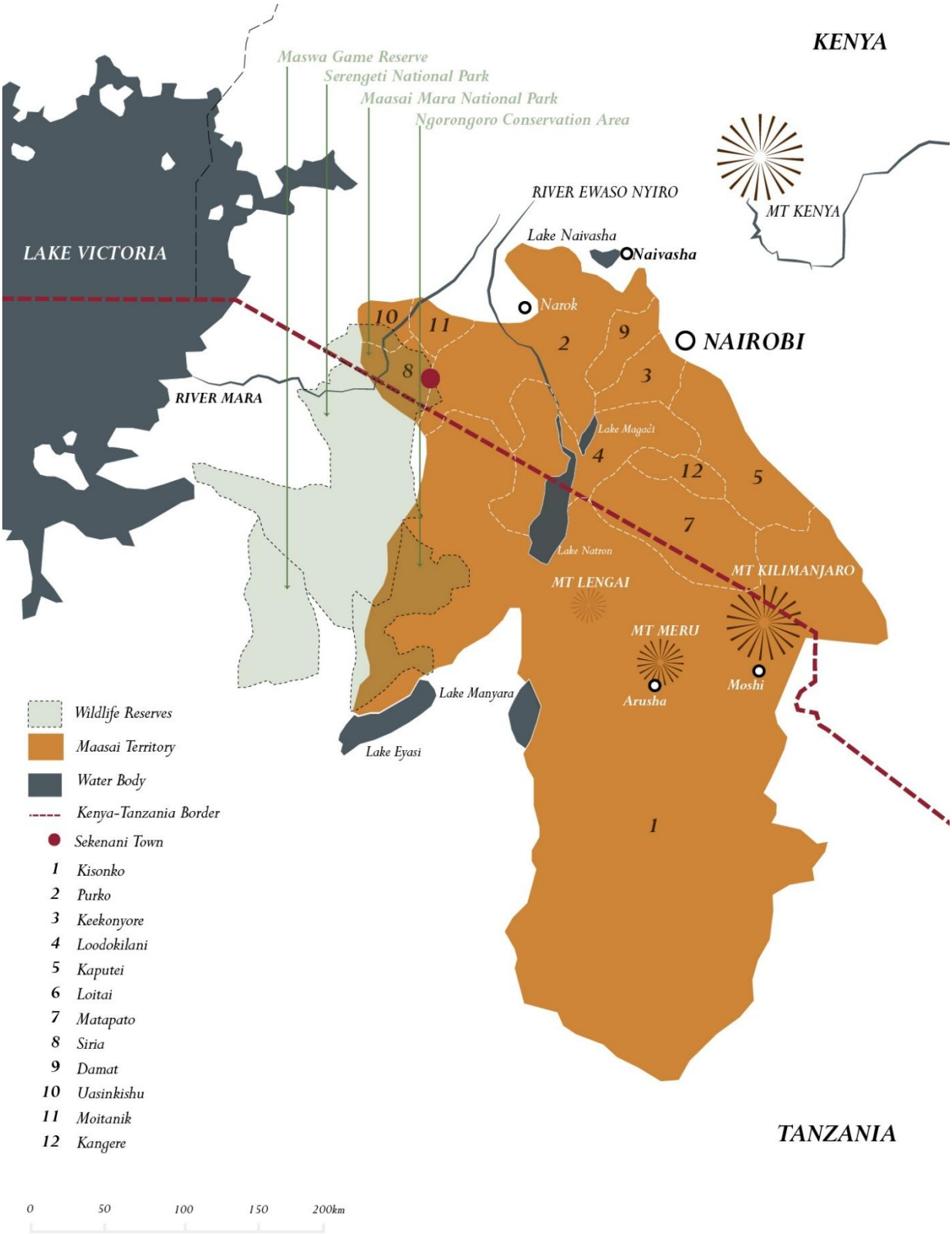


Figure 1.6: Separation of Maasai territories between Kenya and Tanzania. Drawing by Author

Cattle have been at the heart of Maasai life for as long as their history can be traced. They are more than just livestock, they represent wealth, status, and survival. A man's ability to marry depends on his herd size, and cattle are central to many ceremonies and traditions, providing milk, meat and blood for everyday nourishment and also sacred offerings during rites of passage. There is a well-known Maasai prayer: *Meishoo iyiok enkai inkishu o-nkera* which translates to "May the Creator give us cattle and children", highlighting the inseparable bond between their people and their herds. Even as land loss and modernization threaten their traditional way of life, cattle remain the foundation of Maasai identity and resiliencies, ensuring that their traditions last for generations to come.

Today, the Maasai territory spans approximately 160,000 square kilometers, stretching across southern Kenya and northern Tanzania, overlapping key conservation areas like the Serengeti, Maasai Mara, and Ngorongoro Conservation Area.[23] These protected areas are home to a rich biodiversity, including the iconic Great Migration of wildebeest. Maasai land is part of the East African plateau that rises from 91 to 1829 meters above sea level.[24] The Rift Valley splits the land into two distinct regions, each with its own unique landscape and vegetation. To the east, at higher altitudes, the region is dominated by evergreen forests that thrive in the cooler, wetter climate, providing habitat for diverse wildlife. In contrast, the west consists of vast grasslands, scattered shrubs, saline lakes, and arid desert scrub, where rainfall is lower, and vegetation is more drought resistant.

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[23] Julia Watson, Wade Davis.
[24] Rukwaro and Maina, *Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture*.

The Maasai Mara region has a moderate climate, with temperatures typically ranging from 14°C to 30°C throughout the year. Rainfall varies, with an annual average between 22 to 30mm, though some areas receive as little as 14mm. The region has two rainy seasons, long rains in March–June and short rains in November–December. However, these patterns are shifting due to climate change, with rain arriving late, falling more erratically, or not coming at all.[25] The hot season in November–February brings warm temperatures of 16°C–30°C with moderate rainfall of 60–75mm, while the rainy season in March–May peaks in April with 165mm rainfall, making travel challenging. The dry season which is June–October sees minimal rainfall of 1–2mm and is the windiest period, with August and September experiencing the mostly windy days (20–21 days above 15 km/h). This season is also the peak time for tourism and wildlife migration, significantly shaping the landscape and influencing local architectural and cultural practices.

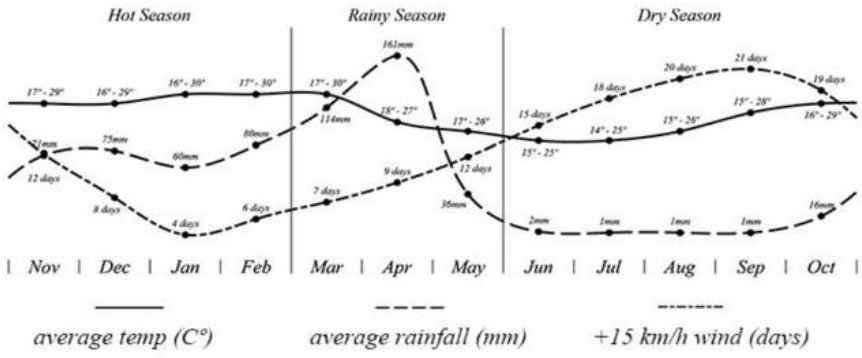


Figure 1.7: Climate diagram for the Maasai territory in Kenya and Tanzania. Diagram by Okuma Studio, retrieved from Design Boom

[25] Rukwaro and Maina.



Figure 1.8: Dry landscapes in the Maasai Land region. Image retrieved from www.masaimara.com



Figure 1.9: Forest lush landscapes in the Maasai Land region. Image retrieved from www.wanderlustmagazine.com/inspiration/masai-mara-in-april/

The Maasai mara is at the heart of the Great Migration which is one of the most incredible wildlife spectacles. After speaking with locals around the park I learned that every year, over 1.5 million wildebeest, along with 200,000 zebras and other herbivores, make their journey across the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem, covering nearly 1,000 kilometers in search of fresh grazing land. Between July and October, the migration becomes its most dramatic point at the Mara River crossing, where thousands of animals cross the Mara River. This event draws tourists from all over the world, making the Maasai Mara one of Kenya's top safari destinations. The influx of visitors brings economic benefits such as supporting the local Maasai communities and funding conservation efforts. Unfortunately, climate change and human expansion are increasingly disrupting migration patterns, threatening the future of this event. As tourism continues to grow, there is a pressing need to balance economic gain with sustainable practices that protect both the wildlife and the Maasai cultural heritage that has coexisted with this land for centuries.

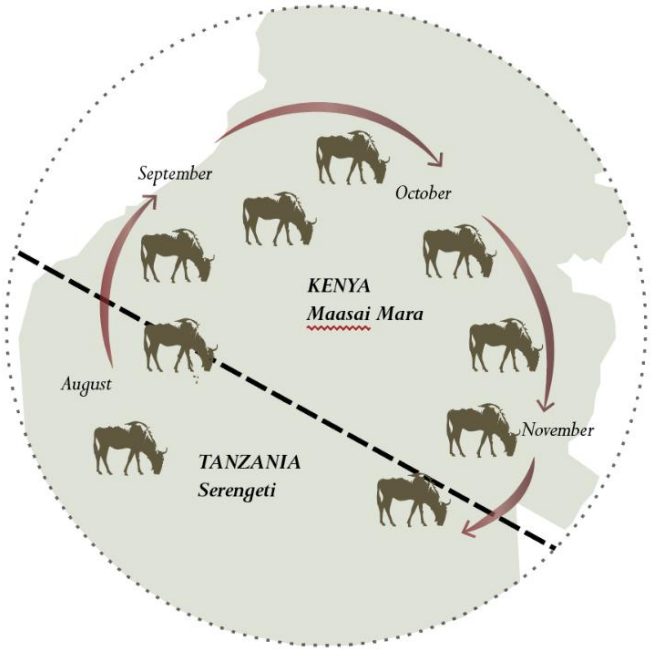


Figure 1.10: Diagram showing the Wildebeest Migration cycle. Diagram by Author

The Wildebeest Migration, safaris and the Maasai attract about 300,000 tourists to the Masai Mara each year. During the high season about 2,000 people visit the Maasai Mara National Park daily. [26]



Figure 1.11: Tourist cars on safari in the Maasai Mara. Image retrieved from www.bbc.com/news/world-africa



Figure 1.12: The Wildebeest Migration. Image retrieved from www.micato.com/africa-region-destination/the-maasai-mara-game-reserves/

[26] "The Great Migration in Masai Mara, Kenya."



Figure 1.13: A Maasai Woman puts soot from the African senna tree into a gourd that will store sour milk. Image by Edwin Ndeke/The Guardian

1.2 Traditions and Roles of the Woman

Traditionally the Maasai social structure is organized around age sets, with each set representing a specific life stage, from childhood to elderhood. The organization within these age sets is egalitarian; an example is the Maasai rely on *enkiguena* (councils of elders) to make decisions for them. Leadership transitions naturally through the age-set system, which prevents power imbalances and reinforces cooperation within the community. In Eti Dayans book *One of Them,* there is a chapter titled "When the child is in the belly - It is yours. When it is out - It's everyone's!."[27] Maasai children grow up with multiple mothers, including their biological mother, their father's other wives, and other women from their homesteads. This shared motherhood ensures no child is ever left alone, even in the face of loss. The Maasai traditionally believe that permanence is rare, and adaptation is essential. From rain being unpredictable, to homes that are temporary, relocation is often necessary. From living with the Maasai community Eti learned that they believe "*The less attached you are, the less you'll suffer from the sensation of losing a father, a mother, a house, or various possessions.*"[28] Even gifts are given and received without attachment because social bonds and community hold greater value than material possessions.

In childhood and adolescence, young girls assist their mothers with household chores, such as cooking and fetching water. They also learn the art of beadwork, an important skill that carries cultural and economic significance. Young boys learn to herd and protect cattle, a skill essential to their pastoralist lifestyle. As the boys grow older, they undergo circumcision as an initiation ceremony, marking their transition into the Moran (warrior)

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[27] Eti Dayan, *One of Them*.
[28] Eti Dayan.

stage, where they are responsible for defending the community, leading cattle migrations, and upholding Maasai traditions. During this stage girls also traditionally would undergo female circumcision (FGM) marking their transition into womanhood and preparing them for marriage and motherhood. In recent years, due to legal reforms, increased education, and advocacy from human rights organizations, the practice of FGM among the Maasai has greatly declined. [29]



Figure 1.14: Maasai Women beading jewelry. Image by Mark Williams. Retrieved from National geographic.

As women and mothers, the Maasai play a central role in their communities, balancing family life, cultural traditions, and economic contributions. Traditionally, a woman's responsibilities revolve around building and maintaining her own home, caring for children, and raising the next generation It's the women who construct the *enkaji* (the Maasai house) because they are the ones who are in and around their homes all day. They also handle daily chores like cooking, fetching water, and collecting firewood. Marriage usually brings a woman into a polygamous household, where she forms close bonds with co-wives, sharing responsibilities and supporting each other. Aside from that, the women play a big role in ceremonies and rituals. From weddings to childbirth celebrations, or rites of passage, they are the ones who sing and dance. Older women, especially mothers and

[29] Kipuri, *Maasai Women in Transition*.

grandmothers, hold great wisdom and act as spiritual guides, ensuring that cultural knowledge and practices remain alive.

Beyond the home, Maasai women are also providers and economic contributors. While men own the cattle, it's the women who milk the cows and manage dairy production, a key part of both nutrition and trade. Many women sell milk, handmade beadwork, and crafts in local markets, helping support their families financially. Even though herding is traditionally a male role, women sometimes assist in caring for livestock, especially when the men are away on warrior duties. Warrior duties among young Maasai men include protecting the community from external threats such as wild animals or rival groups, herding and defending livestock during seasonal migrations and living in separate manyattas where they train, bond, and prepare for adult responsibilities.

Today the role of Maasai women is changing. Women's groups and organizations now support Maasai women in pursuing education, business ventures, and leadership roles, helping them gain more independence. Although, even as things change, one thing remains the same, Maasai women are the backbone of their community, carrying traditions forward while adapting to a changing world.



Figure 1.15: Maasai woman with cattle. Image by Ton Koene. Retrieved from National Geographic.



Figure 1.16: Maasai Women's jewelry from Tanzania. Exhibit in the Beads Museum. Image by Author

1.3 Beads and Jewelry

One of the ways Maasai women uphold their traditions is through the art of beadwork and jewelry making. Their craftsmanship goes beyond creating beautiful ornaments; it serves as a means of preserving heritage and expressing identity. Every piece that is created, whether necklaces, bracelets, or earrings tells a story, about the status, identity, tribe, or age set of a person within the community. During my visit to the Beads Museum in Sekenani Town, Beatrice and Mercy, two Maasai women in their early twenties, taught me about the significance of jewelry and the narratives it carries. They explained that Maasai homes are bare and practical, with no decoration, as all ornamentation is worn on the body instead. Unlike many other cultures that embellish their homes, the Maasai, whose dwellings are temporary, use personal adornment to express cultural identity and tradition wherever they go.

The Massai women used natural materials to create their traditional jewelry and clothing. They crafted them using materials like, seeds, animal bones, animal teeth, ostrich shells, cowrie shells - brought through early trade routes but used even before widespread bead trading, strips of animal hide and wood. This was until colonizers settled in Kenya and opened trade routes to the rest of the world. This changed when colonizers settled in Kenya and opened trade routes to the rest of the world. With these new exchanges, glass beads were introduced to Kenya and became a form of currency among the Nilotic ethnic groups that settled in this region of Kenya or Tanzania. The beads were used to trade for food, shelter, and other goods. I was told that these beads originated from Bohemia, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic. As the beads spread across different tribes, each group adopted distinct colors and styles. The Samburu are known for their bright and colorful jewelry, while the Maasai in Tanzania

primarily use white beads, which symbolize purity for them but death for others. In contrast, the Maasai in the Sekenani area also wear colorful beaded jewelry, where all the colours have a symbolic attachment to their values and their cattle.







Figure1.17: Maasai necklace made from flexible twigs. Image by Author
Figure1.18: Maasai traditional clothing and ornament made from natural materials. Image by Author
Figure1.19: Maasai traditional jewelry made from ostrich shells. Image by Author



Figure 1.20: Collage of beaded jewelry across different nomadic tribes in East Africa. Images by Author.



Figure 1.2 1: Picture of glass beads in my hand, Simanka was teaching me about the different colors and how to bead. Image by Author.

Onyokie (red) is the colour of cows' blood. It represents bravery and unity, often when the Maasai come together for a ceremony or a meeting a cow is slaughtered and there for unity is associated with red. The *Moran* (warriors) also wear this color.[30]

Oibor (white) is the color is cows' milk. It represents peace, purity and health. The Maasai drink milk to stay healthy and it is also used during ceremonial activities to signify blessings.[31]

Barikoi (orange) is the color of the mixture of milk and cows' blood. It represents hospitality. The milk is given to ill or recovering people as it is rich in proteins, fats and irons for quick recovery. Yellow beads also symbolize the same. [32]

Olonyori (green) is the color of the land. It represents health and the green grass given to the cattle to graze on. The maasi use various plants and herbs from the landscape to heal themselves.[33]

Olpus (blue) is the color of the sky. It represents energy and the sky. The Maasai believe the sky is the source and origin of all water for the cattle. Light blue beads are also worn by mothers to signify that their sons have gone to become *Moran* (warriors).[34]

Beyond making jewelry to portray ones status or identity, beading has become an important source of income for Maasai women, providing financial independence to help support their families. Beadwork cooperatives such as the Beats of Beads organization also run by Eti Dayan at the Beads Museum have emerged, allowing women to earn a livelihood while keeping these traditions alive.

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[30] Naikuni, *Maasai Socio-Cultural Ethnography*.
[31] Naikuni.
[32] Naikuni.
[33] Naikuni.
[34] Naikuni.

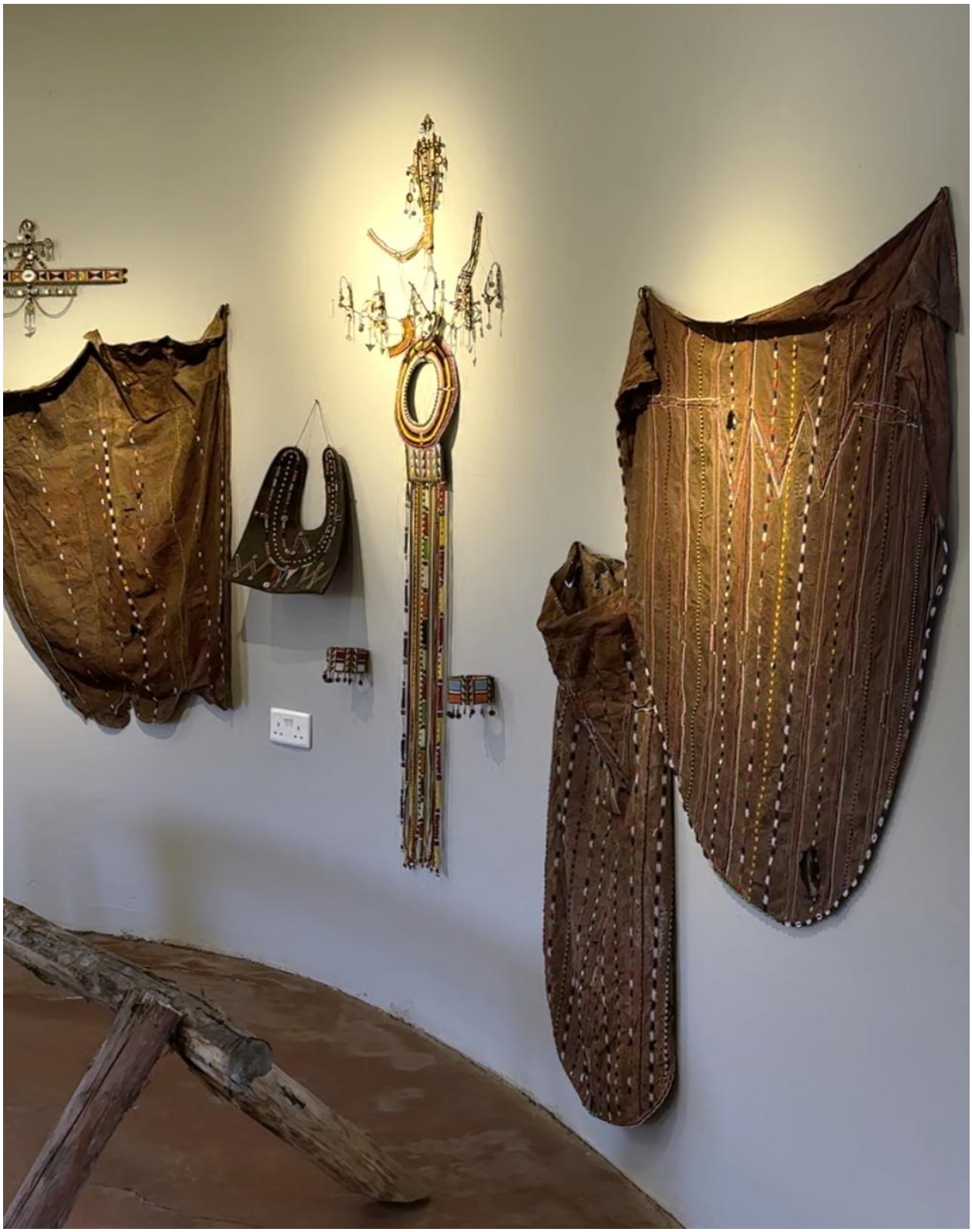


Figure 1.22: Maasai traditional bridal clothing and ornament made from cow hides and glass beads. Image by Author



Figure 1.23: Maasai jewelry made from glass beads. Image retrieved from seattlestravels.com/visiting-a-masai-village.



Figure 1.24: Maasai Village (Enkang) in plan. Image retrieved from www.sensesatlas.com/maasai-villages-an-architecture-designed-by-the-traditional-pastoral-way-of-life/

1.4 Vernacular Maasai Settlement & Architecture

Architecture, like poetry, music, and dance, is a form of cultural expression that reflects the values and identity of a community. Unlike literature or music, architecture is physical and functional, shaping the spaces where people live and interact. It embodies a society's beliefs, economy, and traditions through built forms. While architecture in the Western world has historically been seen as an artform requiring technical mastery, in African societies, architecture has long been an adaptive and functional practice influenced by the needs of the people.[35] The idea of African architecture has often been overlooked due to Western definitions of architecture, which prioritize permanent structures and written traditions over vernacular knowledge that is most times passed down orally and designed to be temporary.[36]

As Phillip Goetz the Executive Editor for the first version of the 15th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, explains, architecture is not just about technical skill but about fulfilling the practical and emotional needs of a community.[37] Though the Maasai do not have a specific word for "architecture," their building techniques align with their way of life, ensuring structures remain both practical and meaningful. Architect Bernard Rudofsky argues that what matters in architecture is its ability to reflect a people's material culture and way of life.[38] For the Maasai, using temporary, natural materials reflects their nomadic lifestyle, not a lack of complexity and despite their temporary nature, these dwellings follow consistent design principles, ensuring continuity in architectural tradition.[39] The

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[35] Mburu, F.M. and Mukono, K.M., *Art, Tradition and Culture in the Development of an Authentic Regional Architecture in Africa*.
[36] Rukwaro and Maina, *Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture*.
[37] Philip W. Goetz, *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*.
[38] Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects*.
[39] Rukwaro and Maina, *Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture*.

Maasai understand architecture as a process of building and achieving a built form that is functional and pleasing to the occupants and observers.

The spatial elements that characterize the traditional Maasai settlements are scattered *Enkang* (homesteads), vast grazing lands shared by the cattle and wild animals from the wildlife reserves, animal watering points and pathways for animals and people. The homestead is composed of many *Enkaji* (homes) organized close to each other on the site, an exterior boundary and an interior boundary both made from Acacia branches and thicket. The homestead will usually have about three to four families residing in it.[40] The boundaries, built by the men are to protect the homestead and ensure no wild animals or trespassers are able to get through. The outer boundary encompasses the whole homestead while, the inner boundary protects the *Kraal* (cattle enclosure) from the same threats during nighttime when the cattle are kept there. The areas between the two boundaries is where the homes are built. The cattle are kept at the center of the homestead as this is what is most valuable to the Maasai so spatially, they are the most important and the most protected.

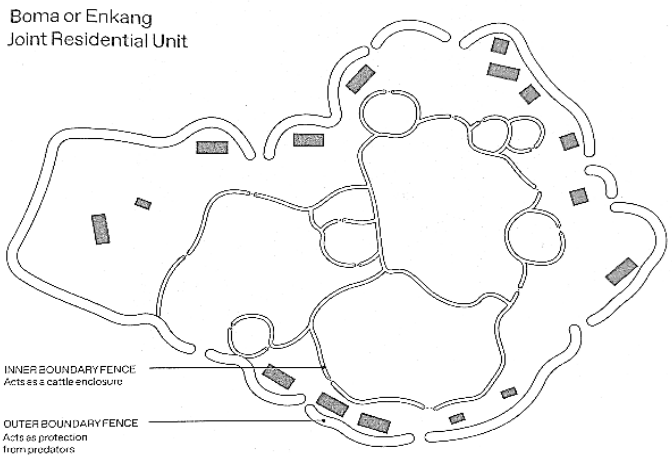


Figure 1.25: Diagram of an Enkang. Diagram retrieved from Lo-Tek - Design by Radical Indigenism, Julia Watson, Wade Davis

[40] Julia Watson, Wade Davis, *Lo-TEK - Design by Radical Indigenism.*

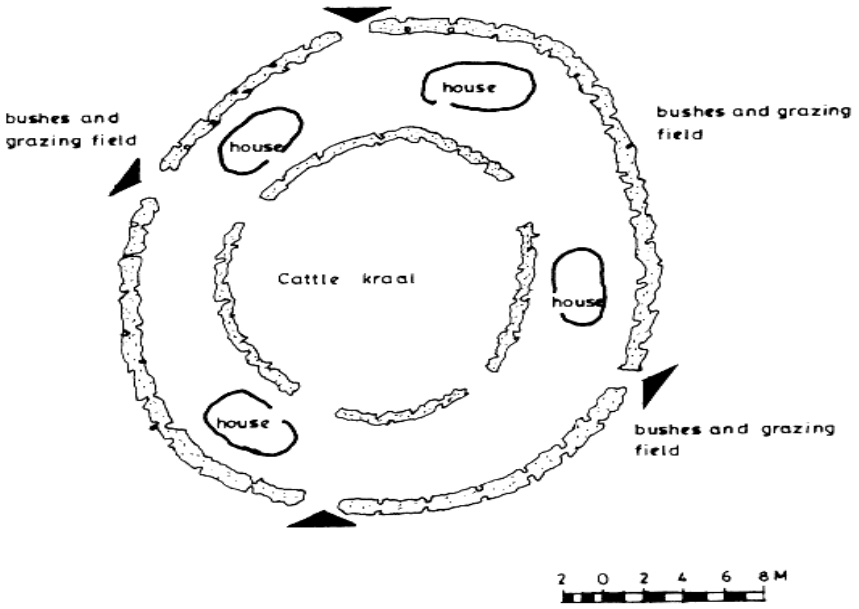


Figure 1.26: Diagram of Enkang showing the boundaries, homes, cattle kraal and entrances into the boma. Retrieved from Architecture of societies in Transition - The case of the Maasai of Kenya. Rukwaro and Mukono



Figure 1.27: Image of an entrance into a homestead. Retrieved from gpatanzania2011.wordpress.com. Image by paigeschadekcole

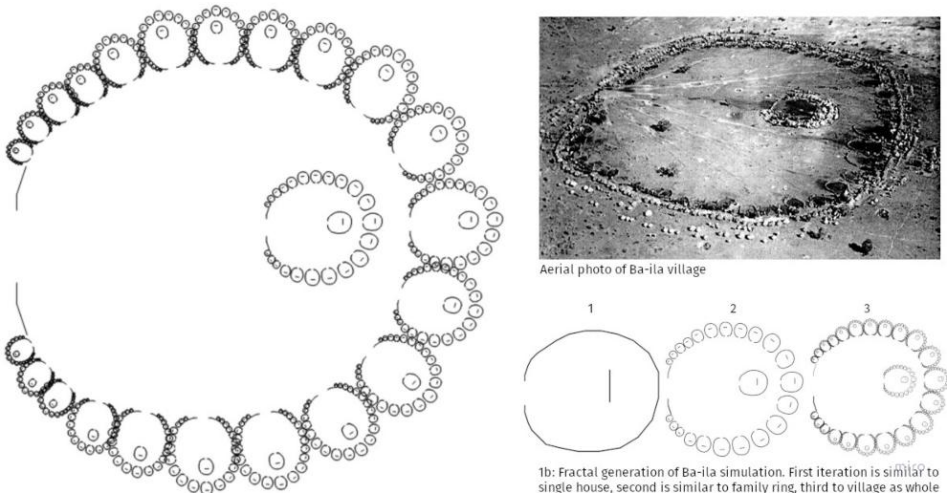


Figure 1.28: Diagrams of The Ba-ila settlements of Southern Zambia. Image retrieved from ArchDaily "The Fractals at the Heart of Indigenous African Architecture".



Figure 1.29: Diagram of a Maasai settlement that highlights the concepts of radial and fractal architecture through a center point and repetition of the same form at different scales. Diagram by Author.

The layout of Maasai settlements naturally reflects spatial patterns that resemble fractal and radial configurations, even though the Maasai themselves do not operate from a formalized concept of fractal geometry or design theory. These patterns, often observed in Indigenous architecture across Africa, are characterized by recursion, scaling, self-similarity, infinity, and fractal dimensions.[41] which emerge intuitively from cultural and environmental needs.

In Maasai homesteads, the repetition of circular and oval forms at various scales is particularly noticeable. Individual dwellings are arranged in enclosed rings, which themselves form part of a larger clustered settlement, a kind of self-similar logic that mirrors the Maasai's social organization. This sense of recursive spatial order also appears in other African communities, such as the Ba-ila people of Southern Zambia, where ring-shaped livestock pens and housing layouts reflect both social hierarchy and communal life.[42]

Radial architecture, which organizes structures around a central point, is also a defining feature of Maasai settlements. The livestock kraal is that center point in this case. Historically, circular and radial-concentric designs have been employed in various cultures to provide a natural sense of unity and practical defense against dangers from all sides. For instance, the Viking settlement of Trelleborg in Denmark, dating between 1000 and 1050 AD, utilized a circular form to offer protection against attacks from all directions.[43]

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[41] "The Fractals at the Heart of Indigenous African Architecture." ArchDaily
[42] "How to Properly Design Circular Plans." ArchDaily
[43] "4.1.3.1. The Circular/Radial Model."

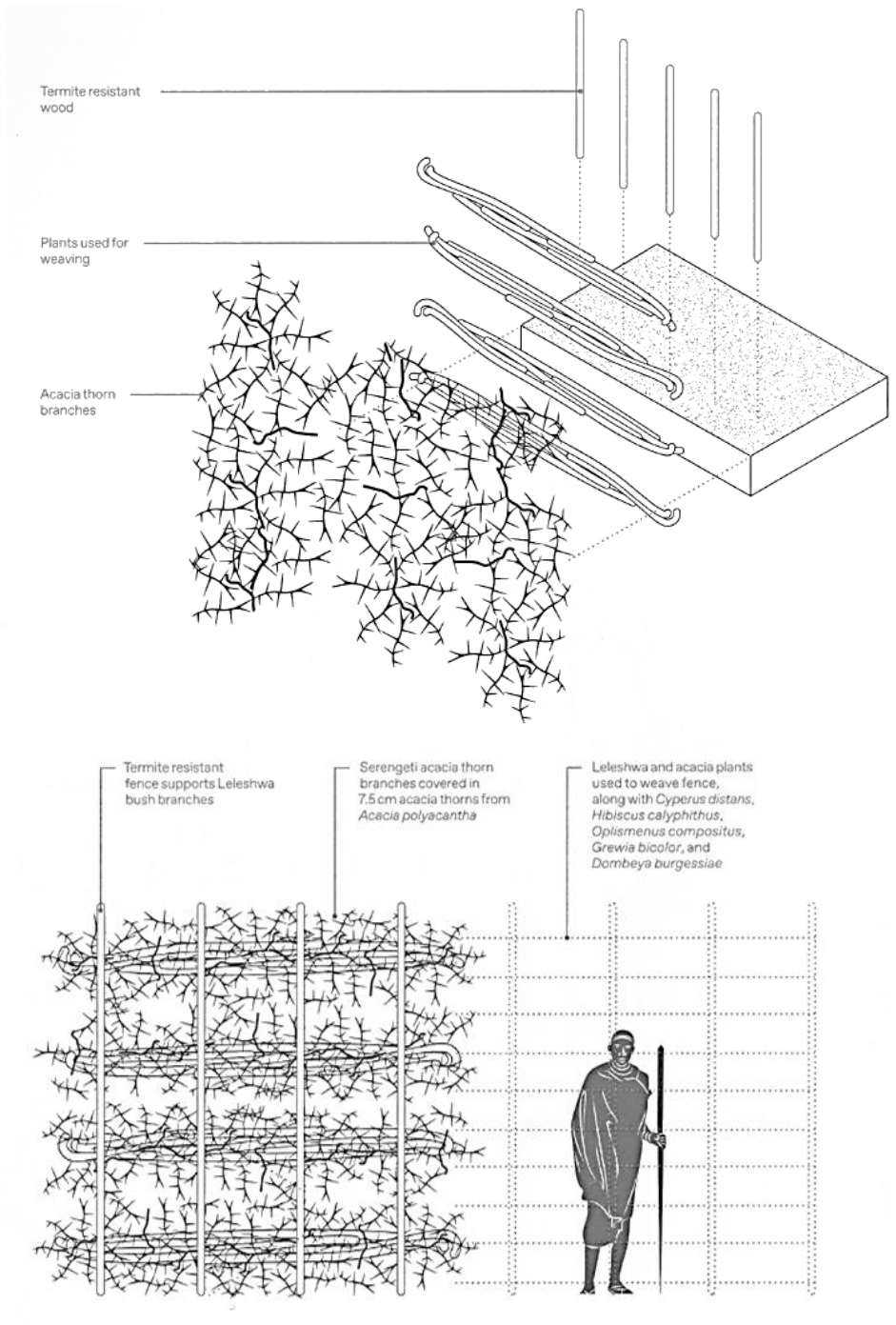


Figure 1.30: Diagrams showing the assembly of the homestead boundary fences. Diagrams retrieved from Lo-Tek - Design by Radical Indigenism, Julia Watson, Wade Davis

While the Maasai may not describe their spatial layouts in theoretical terms, their settlements show a practiced understanding of how people, structures, and the environment interact. Patterns repeat at different scales, from the circular organization of the kraal at the center of the homestead to the clustering of multiple homesteads into a larger community. This self-similarity isn't just an aesthetic; it reflects a way of life built on relationships, between family members, between people and livestock, and between the community and the land.

In the design proposal for this thesis, I've drawn on these embedded patterns to shape a design language that aspires towards cultural groundedness and environmental responsiveness. The concept of adaptability is central, just as Maasai settlements shift in response to seasonal needs or social changes, the design of the empowerment center incorporates flexible spatial arrangements and layered gathering spaces. By echoing the logics already present in Maasai spatial traditions such as circular gathering zones, nested spaces of increasing privacy, and landscape-oriented layouts, the design aims to feel both familiar and empowering. By recognizing and building upon the spatial knowledge that already exists within the culture, architecture becomes a bridge between tradition and contemporary life.

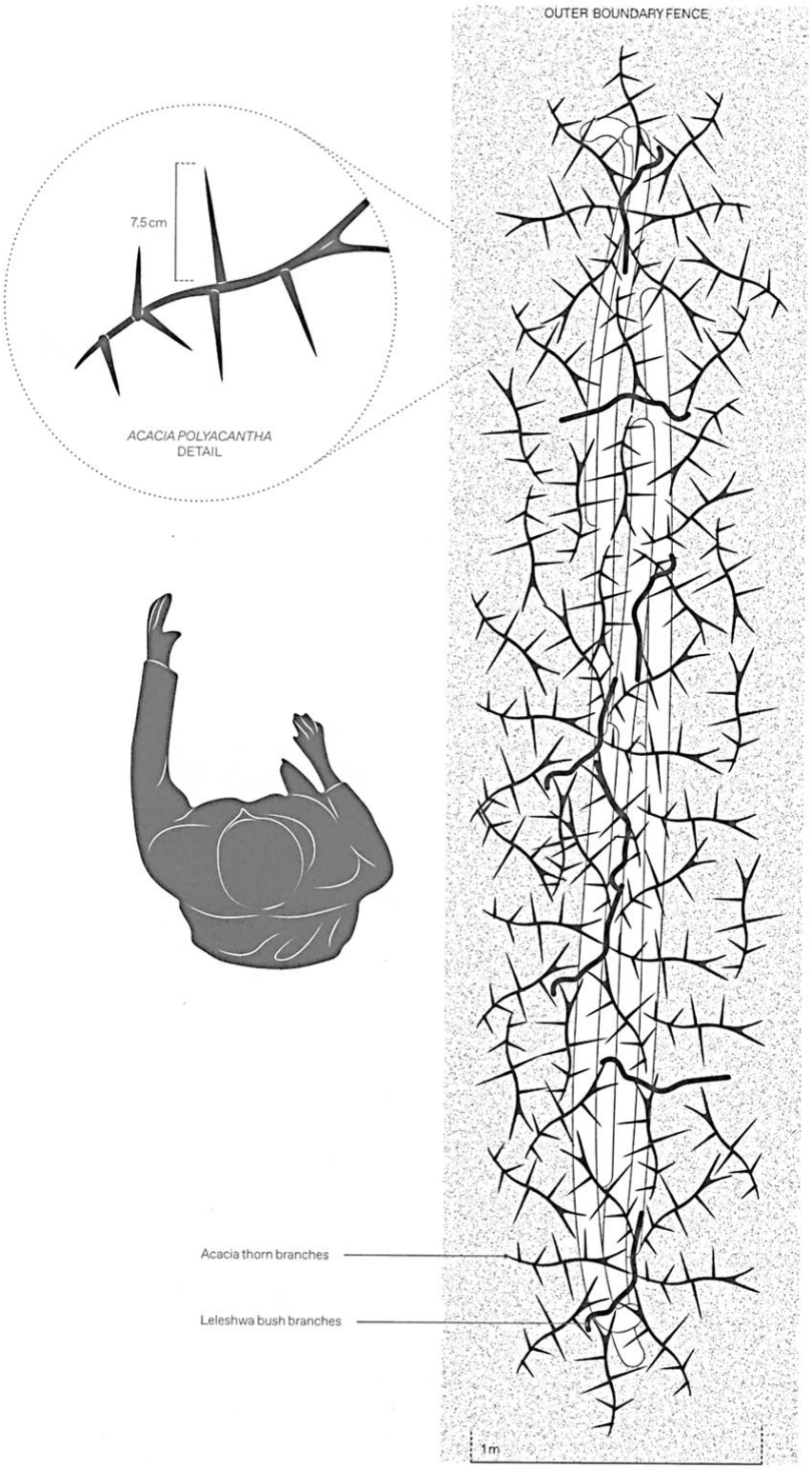


Figure 1.31: Diagram showing the homestead boundary fence in plan. Diagram retrieved from Lo-Tek - Design by Radical Indigenism, Julia Watson, Wade Davis

Public spaces, such as the central courtyard and the area outside the homestead, serve as gathering places for larger social interactions and community events. Semi-private spaces, like transitional dwelling areas near the entrances, accommodate smaller social groups, fostering more intimate communal interactions. Meanwhile, private areas within the home provide a setting for close family connections and personal social intimacy. The *enkang* is well integrated with the surrounding low-lying grassland landscape as the houses and private spaces are around 1.8 metres in height and the vegetation averagely is 3.6 meters.[44]

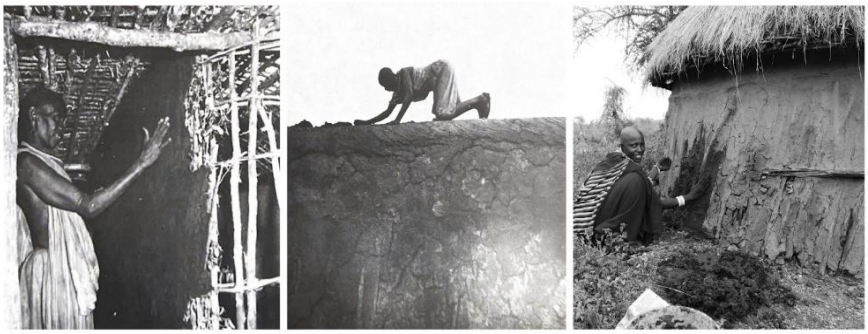


Figure 1.32: Imagess showing Maasai women building their homes. Images retrieved from African traditional architecture, Kaj Blegvad Anderson.

The homes themselves are built by the women.[45] Traditionally, when a man marries, the wife is supposed to stay in her mother-in-laws house until the groom's mother builds her daughter-in-law a new house on the site designated by the father, for the sons homestead.[46] The drawing below shows the structural aspect of a home in plan as well as the layout and spaces where different activities take place. 1 is the entryway, 2 is the transitional space, 3 is the baby animal pen, 4 is the kitchen/ hearth, 5 is storage, 6 is the children's bed and 7 is the mother's bed.

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[44] Rukwaro and Maina, *Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture*.
[45] Andersen, *African traditional architecture*.
[46] Rukwaro and Maina, *Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture*.



Figure 1.33: Collage of images of an Ekanji that show scale (in relation to my brother who is 6'2"), roofing structure and materials, window openings, door openings and overall form. Images by Author.

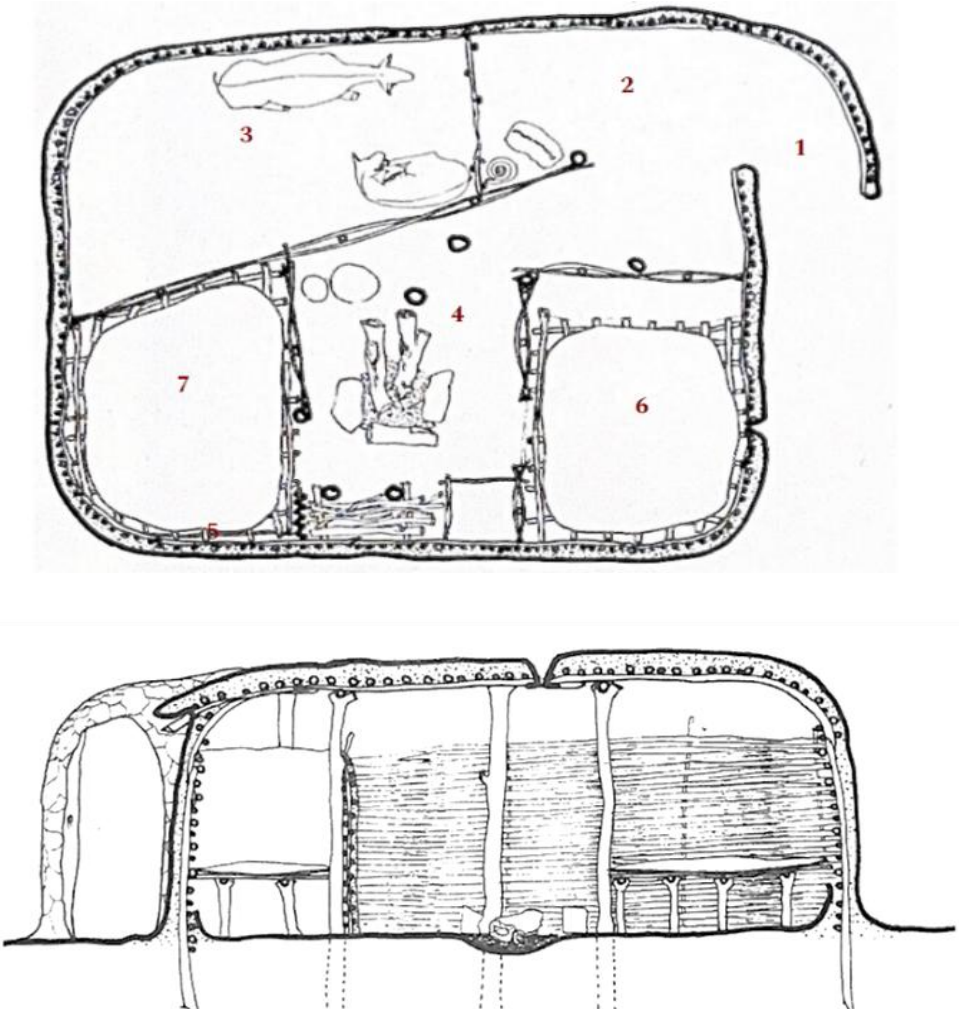


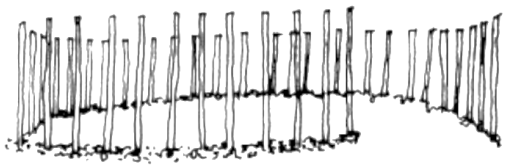
Figure 1.34: Diagrams showing the plan and section of the Enkaji. Diagrams retrieved from Architecture of societies in Transition - The case of the Maasai of Kenya. Rukwaro and Mukono

The homes are typically built to be around 3 meters in width and 5 meters in length. They are big enough to have room for a hearth, a place to sleep and storage. They are built using naturally sourced materials like branches, mud, grass, cow dung, and cow urine. Cowhides are used as partitioning material and as mattresses. Whenever the Maasai migrate, they normally carry only their artifacts and personal possessions while they leave the rest of the structure to decay.

These materials don't only provide excellent insulation and waterproofing, but they also align with the Maasai's semi-nomadic lifestyle, allowing for easy dismantling and reconstruction as they move in search of fresh grazing lands. The process of building a home starts with the site being chosen by elders based on security, water access, and grazing land. Women gather wooden poles for the frame, mud and cow dung for the walls and the roof. Before building, Maasai women traditionally measure the layout of their homes using their own footsteps. This technique relies on the woman own body as a measuring tool where each step marks a consistent unit of length. This allows the Maasai women to intuitively determine the scale and proportions of the house. For example, a layout of around 12 by 20 footsteps would result in a structure that is approximately 3 by 5 meters in size. This ensures the layout aligns with the woman's physical habits and daily routines. Because the measurements are based on the body of the person building the home, the structure becomes uniquely adapted to her lived experience.

In terms of the height of the house, the structure is built according to practical needs rather than fixed measurements. The structures typically measured by the woman's own height are normally between 1.5 and 1.8 meters tall. The women construct the frame tall enough for basic functions such as sitting, standing, and moving around comfortably, using the length of wooden poles and the reach of their own arms as guides. The body-based approach creates a space that is both practical and resource-aware, while also deeply rooted in the daily lives of Maasai women.

The structure begins with vertical wooden poles arranged in an oval shape, reinforced with smaller branches horizontally. [47]



STAGE 1 pole embedded into earth



STAGE 2 fastening horizontal members to create structural form



STAGE 3 constructing roof structure by criss crossing and fastening members



STAGE 4 placing infill branches and thatch

Figure 1.35: Diagram of the construction of a Enkaji. Diagram retrieved from Architecture of societies in Transition - The case of the Maasai of Kenya. Rukwaro and Mukono

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[47] Rukwaro and Mukono, "Architecture of Societies in Transition — the Case of the Maasai of Kenya."

Next, is the assembly of the roof completed by criss-crossing more wood members and fastening them with smaller more flexible branches or sticks and then lastly placing infill branches and thatch to the structure. After that, a mixture of mud and cow dung is applied to create insulated walls that regulate temperature. A grass-thatched roof is added for protection and ventilation. Once dry, additional layers of mud may be applied for reinforcement. More recently, the women have been adding a layer of polythene between the roof structure to protect themselves and their homes from the rain and wind.



Figure 1.36: Photo: Maasai women assembling the roofing for their houses. Image retrieved from The Tribe on Facebook. 2021

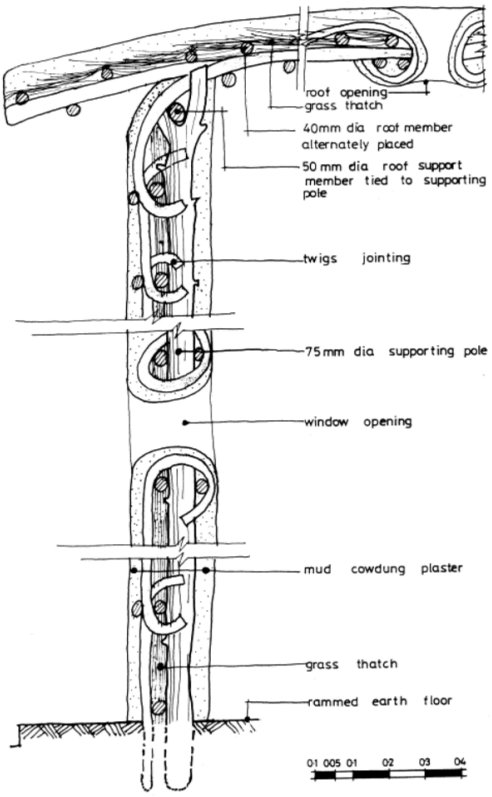


Figure 1:37: Section showing the detail connections of an Enkaji. Diagram retrieved from Architecture of societies in Transition - The case of the Maasai of Kenya. Rukwaro and Mukono

This is a connection detail drawing that shows the construction process. main traditional architecture and settlement designs are deeply rooted in spiritual, social, and functional principles. Their spatial organization is based on centrality, dualism, and mythology, with each structure having a specific role and symbolic meaning. Creativity is seen as feminine and is spiritually connected to *Enkai-en,* the Maasai deity, who embodies both masculine and feminine energies and is often associated with rain, fertility, and life itself. According to the Maasai, *Enkai* is not a distant god but one who dwells within the natural world, in the sky, the rain, the mountains, and the womb. Because of this life-giving and nurturing nature, women are seen as creators, closely aligned with Enkai's essence. That is why it is women who build houses, they are the bringers of life and continuity.

As the Maasai say, "They perpetuate humanity and therefore man's abode shall be blessed by women. Like the hearth that keeps the fire alive, the Maasai women ensure that man shall never perish."[48]

What is at the center of everything is important; the hearth is the heart of the home, representing family unity and continuity, while the central courtyard within the *enkang'* serves as an organizational element for family houses and a space for cattle. The circular movement and shape is central to the Maasai concept of being, hence why the settlements and homes are arranged circularly, it reflects their cosmic worldview and echos the shape of the earth, the sky viewed from the earth, the hills and the stones. This is transposed into their homesteads, homes and artifacts.[49]

The organization of space in Maasai settlements is defined by the activities that take place within it. Interior spaces are flexible, allowing multiple activities to occur in the same area as needed. For example, the central hearth serves as both a cooking and gathering area, providing warmth and a focal point for family interactions. The design also prioritizes ventilation, ensuring that smoke escapes while maintaining warmth. These homes are built to be easily expandable, allowing additional structures to be added as families grow.

For the Maasai, separate structures are built to meet different social and practical needs sometimes to maintain gender boundaries, other times to make space for a growing family. Kenyan architect and professor Robert Rukwaro speaks about how these separate structures reflect the Maasai's way of organizing life, not just physically, but also socially and culturally. While the overall layout of a traditional Maasai settlement tends

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[48] Rukwaro and Maina, *Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture*.
[49] Rukwaro and Maina.

to follow a familiar structure, each space has a clear purpose. Some areas are meant for privacy, others for gathering, and together they create a balance between individual and communal life. Maasai architecture and organization is about adapting to daily needs, responding to social roles, and carrying traditions forward. Open layouts, flexible uses of space, and clear distinctions between public and private areas all reflect how the Maasai organize their lives and relationships through the spaces.



Figure 1:38: Photograph showing Maasai women in the Enkang. The roof of the house has a polythene layer over it. Image retrieved from Maasi Wilderness Conservation Trust.


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Part 2

The Maasai – The Present

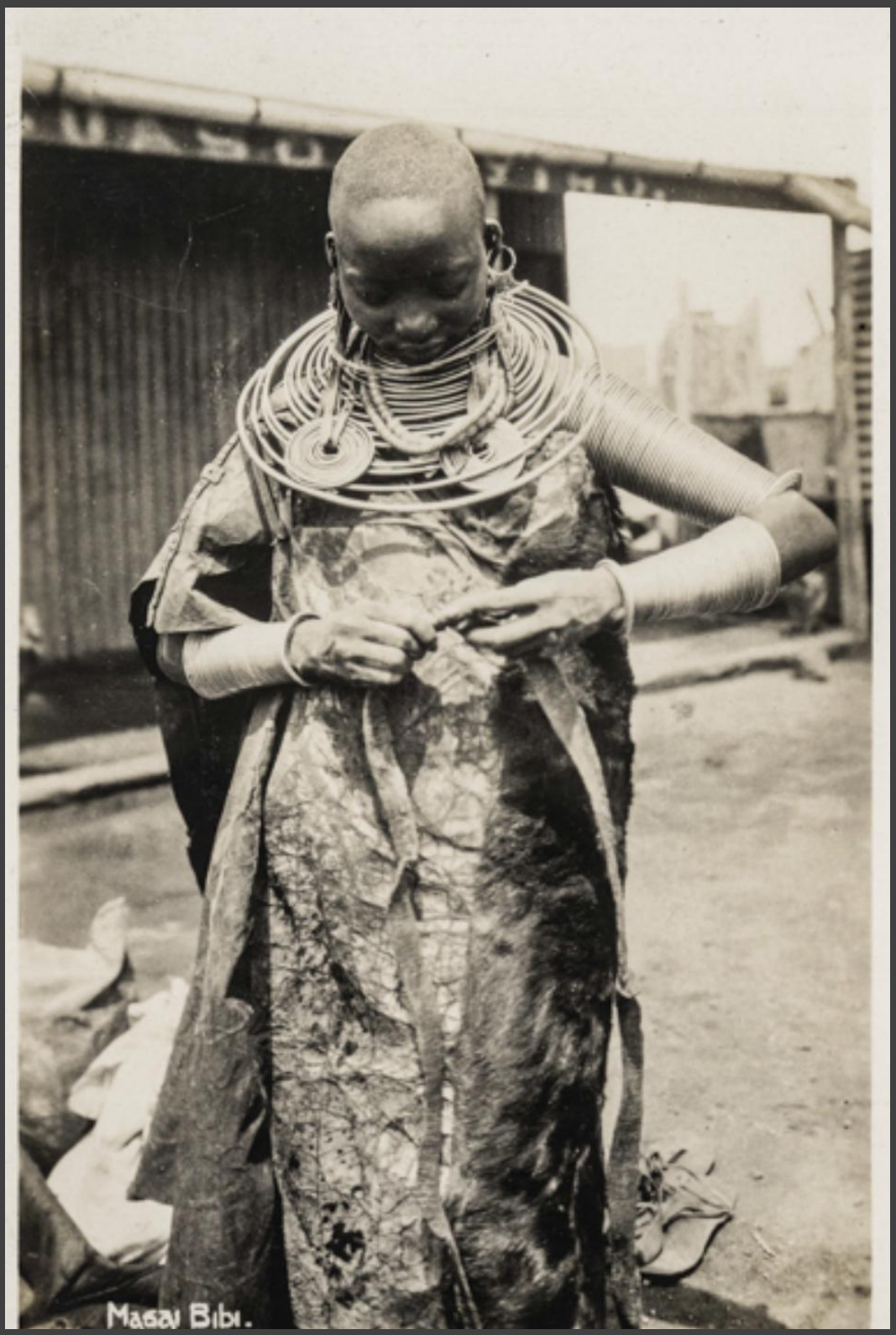


Figure 2.1: Previous page - Image showing Maasai women selling jewelry to tourists in safari cars. Image by Author
Figure 2.2: Above – Image of a postcard of a Maasai Woman dressing for her wedding. Dated 1929. By Houwse and Macgeorge Ltd.

2.1 Impacts of Colonization

The Maasai have inhabited the plains of southern Kenya and northern Tanzania since the 17th century. They had already, for quite some time, developed deep connections to the land before this was disrupted with the integration of East Africa into the European capitalist system, formalized by the Berlin Treaty of 1884. This resulted in the partitioning of the region into British and German spheres of influence, ultimately leading to the establishment of Kenya under British rule and Tanganyika (now Tanzania) under German control.[50] The British colonial administration in Kenya forcibly displaced the Maasai from their ancestral lands into smaller, less fertile reserves, an act of injustice that continues to have long-term repercussions but which benefited European settlers.

The Anglo-Maasai Agreements of 1904 and 1911 led to the Maasai being removed from the fertile Rift Valley and Laikipia regions, forcing them into the Southern Reserve, which was less suitable for pastoralism due to water shortages, disease prevalence, and limited grazing land.[51] The Maasai struggled to sustain their cattle-based economy under these increasingly restricted conditions. The British justified this move under the pretense that the Maasai had willingly agreed, though historical evidence suggests otherwise.

Economically, British colonial policies prioritized European settler agriculture, which restricting Maasai access to grazing land.[52] Colonial taxation and land restrictions worsened these challenges, forcing some Maasai men to seek wage labor on settler

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[50] Hughes, *Moving the Maasai*.
[51] Hughes.
[52]Galaty, "'The Land Is Yours': Social and Economic Factors in the Privatization, Sub-Division and Sale of Maasai Ranches."

farms, which disrupted their self-sufficient pastoral economy and heightened their reliance on external aid. The loss of land further impacted food security for both the Maasai and the Cattle, forcing shifts in pastoral practices. [53] Even presently, the expansion of agriculture, urban development, and conservation areas has increasingly encroached on traditional Maasai lands. National parks and game reserves, while crucial for conservation efforts, often restrict the Maasai's access to important grazing areas.

Politically, the forced moves disrupted Maasai governance structures, as the age-set system and council of elders were undermined by colonial administrators who prioritized settler interests over indigenous land rights. The failure of British officials to honor agreements and the concealment of key reports,



Figure 2.3: Image of a Postcard of the Maasai interacting with settlers. Dated 1925. By "The Lens" (H.Zeltmann)

[53] Spear and Waller, *Being Maasai.*

such as Arthur Collyer's 1910 "Report on the Masai Question," reveal how the Maasai were misled and manipulated.[54]

Socially, colonial education and missionary influence wanted to integrate Maasai youth into European customs, discouraging indigenous beliefs, attire, and cultural practices.[55] The introduction of Christianity pressured Maasai communities to



Figure 2.4: A Maasai catholic church. Image by Jim Rector, A Tanzania Global Mission Trip Participant

abandon traditional spiritual practices and rituals, further altering their cultural identity.[56] The role of Maasai *Morran* (warriors) was also diminished, as British authorities worked to end inter-tribal cattle raiding and militarized resistance. The roles of Maasai women within their home and community. also, significantly changed.

Culturally, colonization accelerated shifts in land use, economic survival, and settlement patterns. The British introduced private

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[54] Hughes, *Moving the Maasai*.
[55] Hodgson, "Pastoralism, Patriarchy and History."
[56] Saitoti and Beckwith, *Maasai*.

land ownership, a concept that conflicted with the Maasai's communal land tenure system, leading to fragmentation of traditional grazing areas.[57] Over time, many Maasai adapted to modern economic pressures, engaging in tourism, conservation work, and beadwork trade as alternative livelihoods.[58] Their diet changed from milk, blood and meat to incorporating more vegetables, leafy greens, maize meal and tea. The Maasai historically avoided growing crops but now it is more common as they eat these foods and if land is used for farming it has more secure land tenure than livestock keepers do. This protects them from encroachment by other ethnic groups.[59]

Interestingly, many groups of Maasai women have begun embracing farming as a new livelihood. Maasai women in Tanzania's Mvomero district are leading a shift toward climate-smart agriculture, recognizing it as a sustainable way forward amid increasing environmental challenges.[60] They are now integrating farming into their livelihoods to combat food insecurity and adapt



Figure 2.5: Naserian a Maasai Woman who has started growing her own food. Image by Kizito Makoye.

[57] Galaty, "'The Land Is Yours': Social and Economic Factors in the Privatization, Sub-Division and Sale of Maasai Ranches."
[58] Homewood, Kristjanson, and Trench, *Staying Maasai?*
[59] https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/lead/pdf/05_article01_en.pdf
[60] Makoye, "A Climate-Smart Revolution Is Brewing in Tanzania and Maasai Women Are Spearheading It."

to changing climate conditions. Through initiatives that promote drought-resistant crops and sustainable irrigation techniques like the use of drip irrigation systems, these women are redefining economic independence. "We cannot rely only on livestock anymore," says a Maasai woman spearheading the movement. "The land is changing, and we must change with it."[61]



Figure 2.6: A Maasai man with his families crops. Crops are fenced off to keep animals away from destroying the vegetation. Photo by Mashulai Maasai Conservancy on Facebook.

[61] Makoye.



Figure 2.7: Image of Maasai women at the beads museum interacting with tourists. Image by the Beats of Beads Museum

2.2 Impacts of Tourism

Colonization paved the way for modern tourism by altering Maasai land ownership, economy, and cultural traditions. When communal lands were taken and privatized, the Maasai were displaced, and much of their land was turned into national parks, conservancies, and safari lodges. Colonial policies also weakened their self-sufficient way of life, forcing them to rely on outside income, a pattern that continues today as many Maasai depend on tourism for jobs, selling crafts, and performing cultural traditions for visitors.[62] Scholars like Tom Ondicho argue that while tourism has introduced opportunities for women to earn income through craft, performance, and hospitality, the benefits often remain limited, and in some cases, reinforce dependency rather than promote sustainable empowerment.[63]

Western education and religion gradually transformed and commercialized Maasai culture by portraying traditional practices as outdated and backward, encouraging younger generations to adopt foreign values, yet as tourism grew, a paradox emerged. The same traditions that were discouraged within the community were now being showcased to outsiders as symbols of cultural identity. In many cases, these practices were revived or reshaped to meet tourist expectations. Dances, blessings, storytelling, and adornments became performances scheduled to align with safari tours rather than community rhythms.[64] Godfrey Ayubu, an Architecht and lecturer in Tanzania refers to this as the "ambivalence of authenticity," where cultural performances are both preserved and distorted under tourist expectations, often disconnecting them from their original ceremonial and

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[62] Kipuri, *Maasai Women in Transition*.
[63] Ondicho, "Empowering Kenyan Maasai Women through Cultural Bomas Tourism."
[64] Ayubu, Cleempoel, and Kombe, "AMBIVALENCE OF SUSTAINING CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH MAASAI ARCHITECTURE IN CULTURAL VILLAGES."

community meanings.[65] The image of the Maasai as "authentic" and "unchanged" became marketable, even though that image often did not reflect the lived realities of the people themselves.

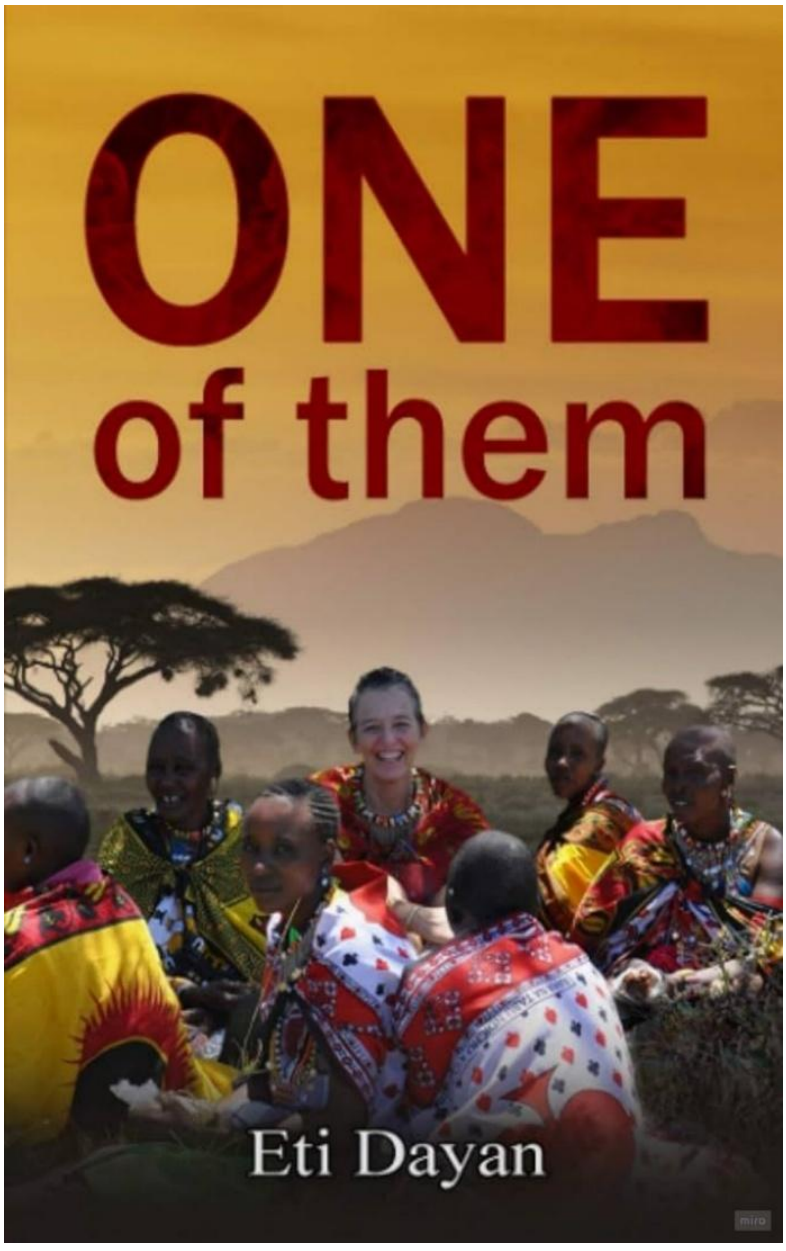


Figure 2.8: Eti Dayans book; 'One of Them'. Image by Eti Dayan

[65] Ayubu, Cleempoel, and Kombe.

While tourism does not use direct force like colonization, it continues to create economic and cultural dependence, benefiting outsiders more than the Maasai themselves. In the years after colonization, tourism became a major economic force in Maasai territories, especially due to their location near the Serengeti and Maasai Mara. As a result, the Maasai shifted from relying solely on cattle to participating in a cash economy, engaging in tourism-related businesses like wildlife safaris, balloon safaris, and selling handmade beadwork. While this has created new sources of income, it has also made them financially dependent on unpredictable tourist activity.

From interviewing Eti Dayan, reading her book 'one of them' and being able to visit the mara and experience the change for myself, these are some things that stand out to me. Firstly there is a famous Maasai proverb, "*Mepal oloitiko isirat*" – "the zebra can not deny its stripes"[66] which questions whether people can truly distance themselves from their heritage.

Yet, as modernization and tourism bring new economic opportunities, the Maasai are adapting in ways that blur the lines between tradition and change. With money now available, the maasai are purcahing more goods including modern clothes and plastic household items that are replacing traditional ones. Food habits have changed to incorporate more rice, potatoes, cabbage and spices, however this shift has led to issues like weight gain and other health concerns. Many of the young men now buy motorcycles which serve as taxis to transport sick people to clinics, women to markets and brides to their new homes. The amount of day-to-day walking has been severly reduced. The influx of cash income has also attracted people from other Ethnic

[66] Kipury, *Oral Literature of the Maasai*.

Groups such as kikuyus, luos and kambas who engage in other trades such as carpentary, welding, mechanics and farming.

Modernization has also changed marriage customs. Nowadays men are beginning to focus on smaller nucelar families, one wife and a few children.[67] Cattle, once central to Maasai identity, are losing their economic and social value. Fathers now prefer to marry off their daughters to men who own land rather than cattle. The girls want larger homes made of concrete block that are more permanent. They want televisions, nice furniture, well equiped kitchens. During weddings now, brides wear white dresses and not the traditional wedding attire the Maasai used to wear.





Figure 2.9: Simankas kitchen, an example of the use of plastic items. Image by Author.

Figure 2.10: Maasai men on a motorcycle just outside of Sekenani town. Image by Author.

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[67] Rukwaro and Maina, *Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture*.

Education has also played a significant role in the shift. Since 2002, free mandatory schooling in Kenya has ensured that almost all Maasai children now attend school and study in English, which hastens their integration into global society.[68] However, this also contributes to the erosion of the Maasai language and traditions. The schools also encourage children to adopt Western names, replacing traditional Maasai names with Robert, Dan, Andrew, etc. An example are my friends from the beads musuem, one of the girls introduced herself to me as Mercy but her name is actually Nyamalo. Traditional practices like ear peircings are now discouraged at school while more serious practices like female gential multilation are now illegal in Kenya.

Churches have also become a major force of social change. Many young Maasai who did not complete elementary school have become pastors, leading religious gatherings and challenging the authority of elders. Instead of large village-wide ceremonies, individuals now attend separate churches, reducing social cohesion.[69] Christianity's spread has weakened traditional spiritual beliefs and practices.

Cell phones are also widespread, further transforming daily life. The Maasai always have their phones, the women crowd the outlets at the beads museum in the mornings to charge their phones while they work on beading jewelry. Phones are used for practical communication, warning shepherds about approaching wildlife rangers, listening to music, and keeping up with news about ceremonies, births, and deaths. Because of this, people no longer need to gather for news.

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[68] Rukwaro and Maina.
[69] Naikuni, *Maasai Socio-Cultural Ethnography*.



Figure 2.11: Maasai man using cellphone. Image retrieved from www.foodtank.com by Suzannah Schneider

The younger generation are on social media all the time. In fact, many people I met and interacted with asked me to follow their TikTok and Snapchat accounts. Villages also have electricity and access to Wi-Fi and networks. One of the most pressing issues raised during conversations with the elder Maasai women and Eti Dayan as well was the growing disinterest among younger generations in continuing traditional practices. With increased access to education, mobile technology, and Western cultural norms, many young women are moving away from beadwork, oral storytelling, and traditional construction. This center aims to address that gap by creating spaces where culture is not only preserved but made dynamic and desirable. Through workshops,

intergenerational teaching areas, and hands-on building experiences, young women can reconnect with these skills as tools for resilience and identity. Furthermore, by introducing design literacy and basic construction training, the center may serve as a pathway for girls to explore architecture as a career — helping to raise Kenya's current figure of only 11% female architects.

With all these changes and advancements, the primary beneficiaries of these changes, however, have been men and children. Men have gained employment opportunities in hotels and nearby nature reserves, working as rangers, drivers, and guides. Children now have access to education, and upon graduation, many women, those who have never received an education and speak only the Maasai language have been largely excluded from these benefits.[70]

Yet, paradoxically, it is these same women who manage the household, ensuring that food is provided, and their children's education is paid for. According to Evod Rimisho and Onesemo Matei, who are professors from East Africa, Maasai women remain central to cultural continuity and economic adaptation, yet they are rarely involved in shaping the long-term planning or infrastructure of tourism projects reinforcing a gendered imbalance in decision-making.[71] To adapt, many of these women have turned to tourism, using their traditional skills in beadwork to create and sell handcrafted jewelry.

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[70] "Women Empowerment | Beats Of Beads Trust I Maasai-Mara."
[71] Rimisho and Matei, "The Role of Maasai Culture in Tourism Industry Development in Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania."

The Maasai engage with tourists in various ways, from selling beadwork to performing cultural dances and guiding walking safaris. These interactions shape both the perception of Maasai culture and the economic opportunities available to the community.



Figure 2.12: Maasai guides lead tourists on nature walks educating them about local flora, fauna and conservation efforts. Drawing by Author.

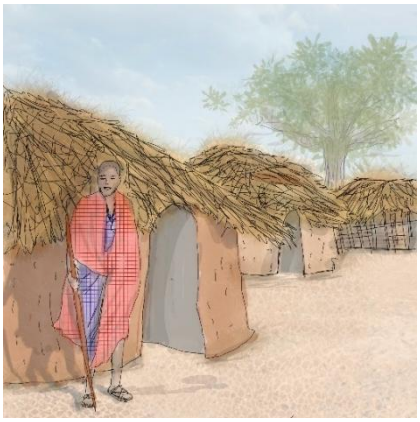


Figure 2.13: Maasai guides tourists through their village educating them on the vernacular architecture, lifestyle and culture. Drawing by Author.



Figure 2.14: Maasai warriors perform traditional dances like Adumu (jumping dance) while women sing songs for tourists. Drawing by Author.



Figure 2.15: Maasai women sell a variety of traditional jewelry and crafts to tourists to make money for their families. Drawing by Author.

These drawings are visual representations of these encounters, illustrating how they unfold in different settings. By analyzing these instances, we can better understand the dynamics at play and use them to design a space that fosters meaningful, respectful, and sustainable engagement between the Maasai and visitors.



Figure 2.16: Maasai men teach tourists traditional skills such as making fire from natural materials found in the landscape. Drawing by Author.



Figure 2.17: Maasai elders share stories and knowledge of their ancestors, culture, myths and the history of their people with tourists. Drawing by Author.



Figure 2.18: Maasai men teach tourists how to use traditional tools such as horns and educate them on cultural ceremonies. Drawing by Author.



Figure 2.19: Maasai women teach tourists the importance of cattle and the landscape to their everyday lives and wellbeing. Drawing by Author.



Figure 2.20: Maasai Women standing beside a tourist Vehicle. Image by Author.

2.3 Tourist Gaze vs Reality of the Maasai Women

As I sat at the beads museum with Beatrice and Mercy watching Simanka and many of the other Maasai women as they strung together delicate beads, I found myself caught in a moment of realization. I observed the women lift their gaze momentarily, watching as tourist-filled safari vehicles drive past, heading into the Maasai Mara National Reserve. The contrast struck me. On one side, the women sat, focused on their craft, creating pieces of jewelry rich with history and meaning. On the other, tourists peered out of their windows, cameras in hand, eager to capture the Maasai experience. For a moment, I felt as if I were in the middle of two worlds - one where I sat with the Maasai women who gazed outward, watching these visitors disappear into the park and the other where the tourists gazed inward as outsiders and seeing the Maasai through the narrow frame of what they expected to find.

For the tourists, the Maasai women represent an image of timeless tradition, a living spectacle that reinforces the expectations of an untouched, indigenous culture. From behind the lens of a camera or through the tinted windows of a safari jeep, the women in their vibrant *shukas* (attire) and adorned with layers of beaded necklaces become part of the landscape, just another element of the exotic scenery alongside the wildlife they have come to see. Many tourists stop briefly, snapping photos or purchasing beaded souvenirs, engaging in fleeting interactions shaped by the tourist gaze.

For the women, the tourist-filled vehicles symbolize a world that is both distant and intimately tied to their survival. These visitors bring money, fueling the local economy, yet they remain transient figures, passing through without truly engaging in the realities of Maasai life. As the women watch the convoys disappear into the park, they are reminded that the very land where these tourists

seek adventure was once fully accessible to their ancestors, before conservation and privatization fenced off much of their grazing territory. The same economic system that makes the wildlife reserve profitable for the government and tour companies has also created the necessity for them to sell their beadwork to sustain their families.

This moment, where two gazes meet but do not fully connect, embodies the paradox of tourism. While tourists seek an authentic experience, the Maasai women understand that their presence is shaped by economic necessity and curated tradition. The women's beadwork, is now both a cultural practice and a commercial transaction, adapted to fit the expectations of visitors. Yet, as they string each bead, they remain keenly aware that their view of the tourists is just as meaningful as the tourists' view of them. To the tourists, they were a spectacle. But to themselves, they were mothers, daughters, artisans, providers, navigating the intersection of past and present, tradition and survival. And as I sat between these two gazes, I realized that neither truly saw the full picture of the other.

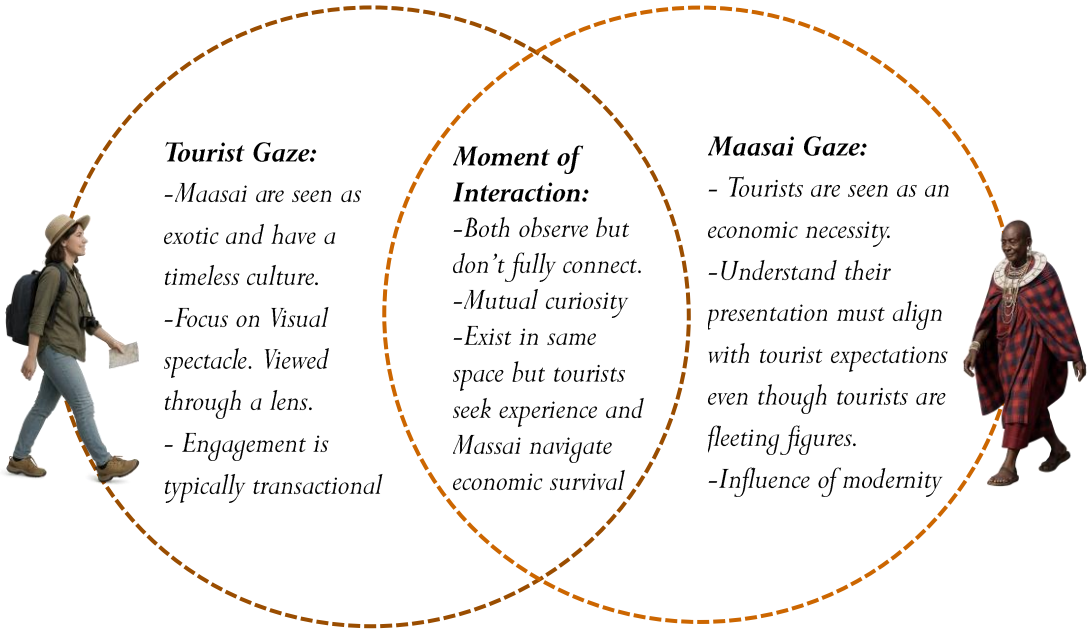


Figure 2.21: Diagram outlining the tourist gaze vs the Maasai gaze. Diagram by Author.

The tourist gaze is a concept introduced by John Urry, a British sociologist who refers to the way tourists perceive and consume cultural experiences, often through romanticized, exoticized, or staged representations. In order to fully understand the 'tourist gaze' it would be useful to have a clear understanding of what a tourist is and what tourism as an activity is. A tourist is, "someone who has travelled to another place for a brief sojourn, an experience that necessarily entails a distinct period of transition and discontinuity from the everyday world"[72]. Urry describes the act of tourism as, "a leisure activity which presupposes its opposite, namely regulated and organized work. It is one manifestation of how work and leisure are organized as separate and regulated spheres of social practice in 'modern' societies."[73]

The environments that these tourists visit are subject to what Urry has described as the 'tourist gaze'. He states that tourists are, "directed to features of the landscape that, which separate them off from everyday experience. Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary". The tourist and the viewpoints are manipulated, "so that the gaze falls upon what the gazer expects to see."[74] Urry also states, "the typical tourist experience is…to see named scenes through a frame, such as the hotel window, the car windscreen or the window of the coach"[75] In a sense, real life is suspended or hidden away in these places so that the tourist can gaze upon what upon they expect to see.

Tourists visiting Maasai villages expect to see women engaged in beadwork, singing, and traditional dance, reinforcing a stereotype of cultural purity. This performance aligns with Western ideas of

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[72] Turner, Turner, and Carroll, "The Tourist Gaze."
[73] Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*.
[74] Turner, Turner, and Carroll, "The Tourist Gaze."
[75] Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*.

authenticity, where Maasai women are presented as untouched by modernity, living in a seemingly unchanged, traditional society. [76] This perspective ignores the economic and social changes Maasai women face. Bead-selling, once a cultural practice, has become a key source of income, allowing women to support their families amid economic changes but the tourist gaze reduces this labor to just a cultural performance, often failing to recognize its economic importance in the women's lives.

While tourism has provided economic opportunities, it has also reinforced gendered inequalities. Men typically have access to higher-paying tourism jobs, such as guides and safari drivers in conservancies, while women remain largely limited to selling beadwork and performing cultural roles for visitors even though the women contribute significantly to household income. Furthermore, tourism has influenced beauty standards and social perceptions among Maasai women. While tourists admire their intricate jewelry, stretched earlobes, and shaved heads, younger Maasai women are increasingly influenced by modern fashion, education, and social media.

Tourism has also led to the commodification of Maasai women's identity, where their traditional attire, the shuka and their jewelry become symbols of authenticity packaged for tourist consumption. [77] In some cases, Maasai women are encouraged to wear full traditional attire even if they do not normally do so in daily life, reinforcing a performative aspect to their identity. This pressure to conform to tourist expectations can make it difficult for Maasai women to express their evolving roles and realities, as they are often expected to maintain a static image of tradition.

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[76] Salazar, "Imaged or Imagined?"
[77] Salazar.

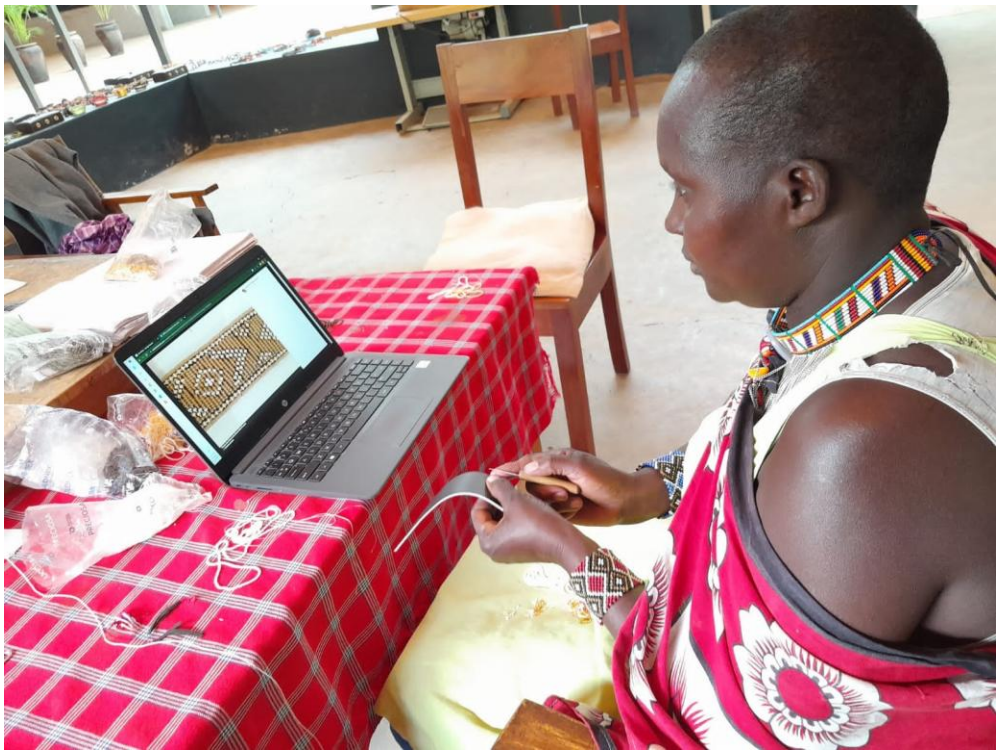




Figure 2.22: Image of a Maasai woman using a laptop for beading pattern inspiration. Image retrieved from basecampexplorer.com.

Figure 2.23: Image of women from Simankas village and I. Note how all the younger women are wearing non-traditional clothing. Image by Author.



Figure 2.24: Modern Maasai house outside of Sekenani town. Image by Author.

2.4 Transformation in Architecture

Colonization reshaped Maasai architecture, transforming the traditional Maasai nomadic dwellings into more permanent structures. Tourism and modern technology have accelerated this shift recently and now, one in every three Maasai are abandoning the traditional way of life. Both traditional and non-traditional houses are still being built, but in every three houses, one is traditional and the other two are non-traditional.[78] Newer houses have a rectangular shape and some traditional programs that existed within the house do not any longer. An example is the calf/ animal enclosure. Modern homes come in varied typologies. They are bigger and so require long structural spans, sometimes resulting in pitched roofs which is a complete different typology.

The layout and social organization of homesteads as a whole have changed too. Traditionally, the nuclear system was used, centering the homestead around a focal point, usually the cattle Kraal, with houses arranged in a circular layout. New planning methods, including the segmental and axial systems, have emerged due to modernization and tourism. The segmental system organizes homesteads into linked segments, allowing for gradual expansion at the ends rather than around a central point. This system accommodates changes such as larger family homes, detached kitchens, and latrines. The axial system follows a linear arrangement, where homes and the cattle Kraal form a structured axis. This system introduces formal organization, enclosed homesteads with gates, and integration of modern materials like barbed wire fences. It reflects a shift towards permanence. Houses in this system often include modern elements like corridors and gardens.[79]

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[78] Rukwaro and Maina, *Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture*.
[79] Rukwaro and Maina.

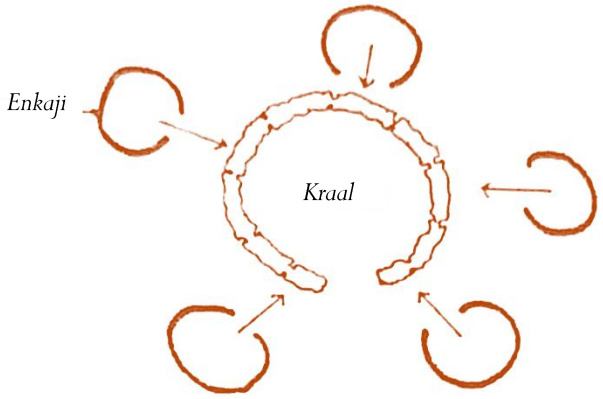


Figure 2.25: Diagram showing the nuclear system. Diagram by Rober Rukwaro

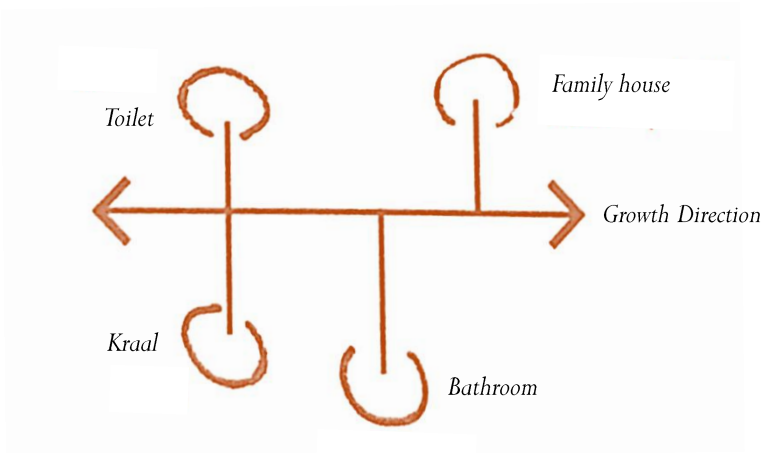


Figure 2.26: Diagram showing the Axial system. Diagram by Robert Rukwaro



Figure 2.27: Diagram showing the Segmental system. Diagram by Robert Rukwaro

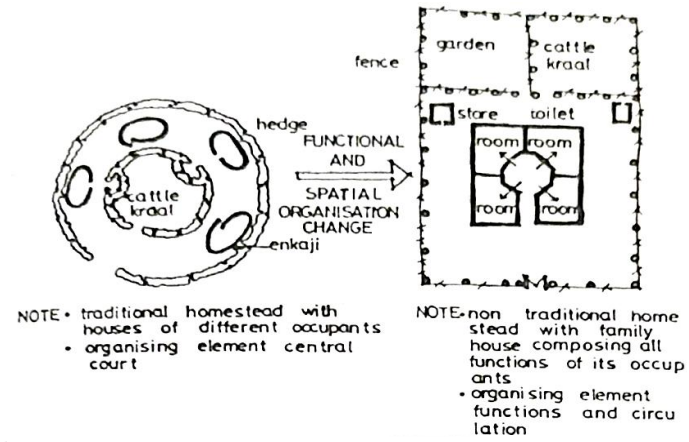


Figure 2.28: Functional and spatial organization change of the homestead. Diagram by Robert Rukwaro.

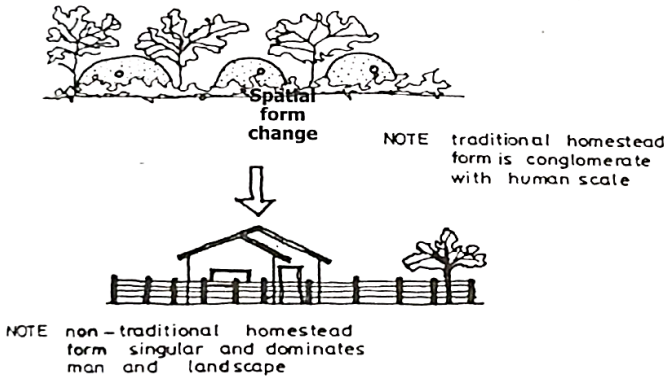


Figure 2.29: Spatial form change of the homestead. Diagram by Robert Rukwaro.



Figure 2.30: Example of spatial and form change of the Maasai homesteads. Located in Sekenani. Image retrieved from Google Maps

Based on information from Robert Rukwaro's book 'Transformation of Maasai Art and Architecture' as well as the different housing typologies I personally saw when driving through the Maasai land and Sekenani, I have constructed the diagram below portraying the different typologies and the materials used for the architectural elements. In Rukwaros book he says that in 2006, 33% of the Maasai still live in their traditional homes, 25% in modern home type 1, 33% in modern home type 2 and 9 % in modern home type 3. Much has changed from then till now with more percentages of the Maasai moving into houses like type 3.[80]



Figure 2.31: Diagram showing percentages of Maasai people living in housing typologies (2006). Diagram by Author.

Apart from just new housing typologies, the Maasai are also integrating modern technologies like photovoltaic systems for electricity and chimneys for better ventilation in their traditional homes. These upgrades improve daily life by providing lighting, electricity for phone charging, and reducing indoor smoke.

[80] Rukwaro and Maina.





Figure 2.32: Image of a Maasai woman installing a solar panel on her home. Image retrieved from. "http://assets.inhabitat.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2015/06/Maasai-Green-Energy-Africa-solar-lead.jpg

Figure 2.33: Image of an Enkaji with a chimney attached to it. Image by Eti Dayan

The diagrams below portray what the different housing typologies are as well as mention the construction materials used for the different structural elements.

Traditional Home

Foundation:
Wooden poles
Floor:
Rammed earth floor
Wall:
Pliable sticks, branches, mud, cow dung, hides skin
Roof Structure:
Pliable sticks and fasteners
Roof Covering:
Branches, mud, cow dung



Figure 2.34: Diagram showing the traditional typology of a Maasai house and the construction materials. Diagram by Author.

Modern Home Type I

Foundation:
Wooden piles embedded in tempered soil
Floor:
Rammed earth floor
Wall:
Mud
Roof Structure:
Wooden truss and rafters
Roof Covering:
Thatch



Figure 2.35: Diagram showing the modern typology I of a Maasai house and the construction materials. Diagram by Author.

Modern Home Type II

Foundation:
Wooden piles embedded in tempered soil/ shallow concrete raft foundation
Floor:
Rammed earth floor/ concrete floor slab
Wall:
Timber frame/ metal sheets
Roof Structure:
Wooden truss/ rafters
Roof Covering:
Galvanized corrugated iron sheets



Figure 2.36: Diagram showing the modern typology II of a Maasai house and the construction materials. Diagram by Author.

Modern Home Type III

Foundation:
Shallow strip foundation
Floor:
Concrete floor slab
Wall:
Natural stone
Roof Structure:
Wooden truss rafters
Roof Covering:
Galvanized corrugated iron sheets, concrete or clay tiles



Figure 2.37: Diagram showing the modern typology III of a Maasai house and the construction materials. Diagram by Author.

The reason why many of the Maasai are moving towards more modern houses is because of their durability and low maintenance of materials like galvanized corrugated iron sheets, aggregates, and cement. These materials offer better protection from weather, insects, and wear while also improving interior lighting and ventilation through larger openings. Unlike traditional homes, which were built using locally sourced, biodegradable materials, modern houses require skilled labor and specialized tools. The preference for modern homes reflects changing values and perceptions of durability and convenience.

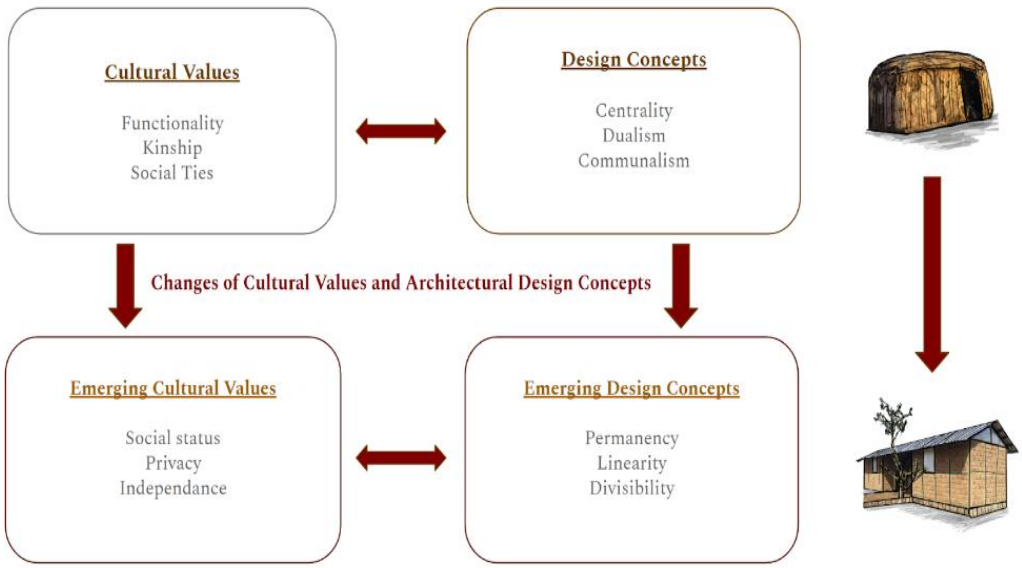


Figure 2.38: Diagram showing the changing values and architectural design concepts of the Maasai. Diagram by Author.

The Maasai way of life has always been centered around community, kinship, and mobility, reflected in their shared land, cattle-based economy, and adaptable homesteads. But as things are changing such as the introduction of private land ownership and a cash-based economy, individual wealth and privacy are becoming more important than communal living.[81] The open, flexible spaces of traditional Maasai homesteads are giving way to rigid, permanent houses designed for nuclear families rather than extended kin.

This change raises important questions, what does it really mean to live well? Is comfort and modern functionality, having electricity, private bedrooms, and solid structures that don't need to be repaired or replaced frequently? Is it more important for well-being than the collective support and identity of traditional life? Perhaps the answer isn't either-or. Instead of defaulting to Western models of development, could there be a way to design that blends both. Keeping the values of shared space, adaptability, and cultural continuity, while also offering privacy, and material security and easier access to things like electricity and water? These are all questions this thesis explores, the idea of seeking ways to design not just for shelter, but for a meaningful way of living that holds onto tradition while responding to the realities of today.

[81] Rukwaro and Maina.



Figure 2.39: Image of a traditional home next to a Maasai home made of concrete in Sekenani. Image retrieved from "Chrysalis: A Metamorphosis of African Vernacular Architecture". Image by Alykhan Neky.



Figure 2.40: Image of an Enkanji next to a home made from concrete block. The roofing is corrugated metal, the cows are grazing in the foreground. Image by Author.



Part 3

The site



Figure 3.1: Previous page – Image of the landscape in Sekenani. Image by Author
Figure 3.2: Above - Image of local shops in Sekenani town. Image by Author

3.1 Overview of Sekenani Town

Sekenani town, located on the eastern edge of the Maasai Mara National Reserve, serves as the primary entry point through the Sekenani Gate. Unlike the larger towns of Narok or Talek, Sekenani exists at the intersection of Maasai life and the encroaching influence of tourism and conservation efforts. The town itself is a hub for the local Maasai community, who have historically relied on pastoralism and communal land ownership but are now navigating a landscape shaped by privatization, conservation policies, and an economy increasingly tied to tourism.

The town lies approximately 229 kilometers southwest of Nairobi, Kenya's capital city, a journey of about 4 to 5 hours by road. The landscape surrounding Sekenani is defined by vast savannahs, rolling hills, and scattered acacia trees, creating a terrain that has long supported pastoralist practices. The climate is generally warm, with daytime temperatures averaging between 20°C to 30°C. The area experiences two primary rainy seasons: the long rains from March to May and the short rains between October and December. These rainfall patterns are crucial for sustaining the diverse flora and fauna of the Maasai Mara ecosystem.[82]

While livestock herding remains central to Maasai life, the economy of Sekenani has expanded to include tourism-driven businesses, such as lodges, safari camps, craft markets, and transportation services. Accommodations like Sarova Mara Game Camp and Sekenani Camp cater to visitors, while small-scale shops and food stalls serve both residents and tourists. Many Maasai women in the area now rely on beadwork sales, a shift

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[82] "2024 Guide to Your Masai Mara Safari in Kenya."

from traditional economic roles, as men increasingly take up jobs in conservancies, lodges, and guiding services.

At the heart of this transformation is the Sekenani Gate, the busiest entry point into the Maasai Mara. Every day, hundreds of safari vehicles pass through, carrying visitors into a land that was once exclusively Maasai territory. Conservation efforts have created wildlife protection zones and tourism infrastructure, but these initiatives have also restricted Maasai access to land, altered settlement patterns, and commodified their cultural practices. The built environment near the gate reflects this shift, where traditional Maasai *enkangs* (homesteads) now stand alongside permanent structures like lodges, souvenir shops, and administrative buildings. This evolving landscape highlights the broader tension between preserving Maasai heritage and adapting to a modern economy, forcing the community to navigate the complex intersection of tradition, tourism, and land rights.



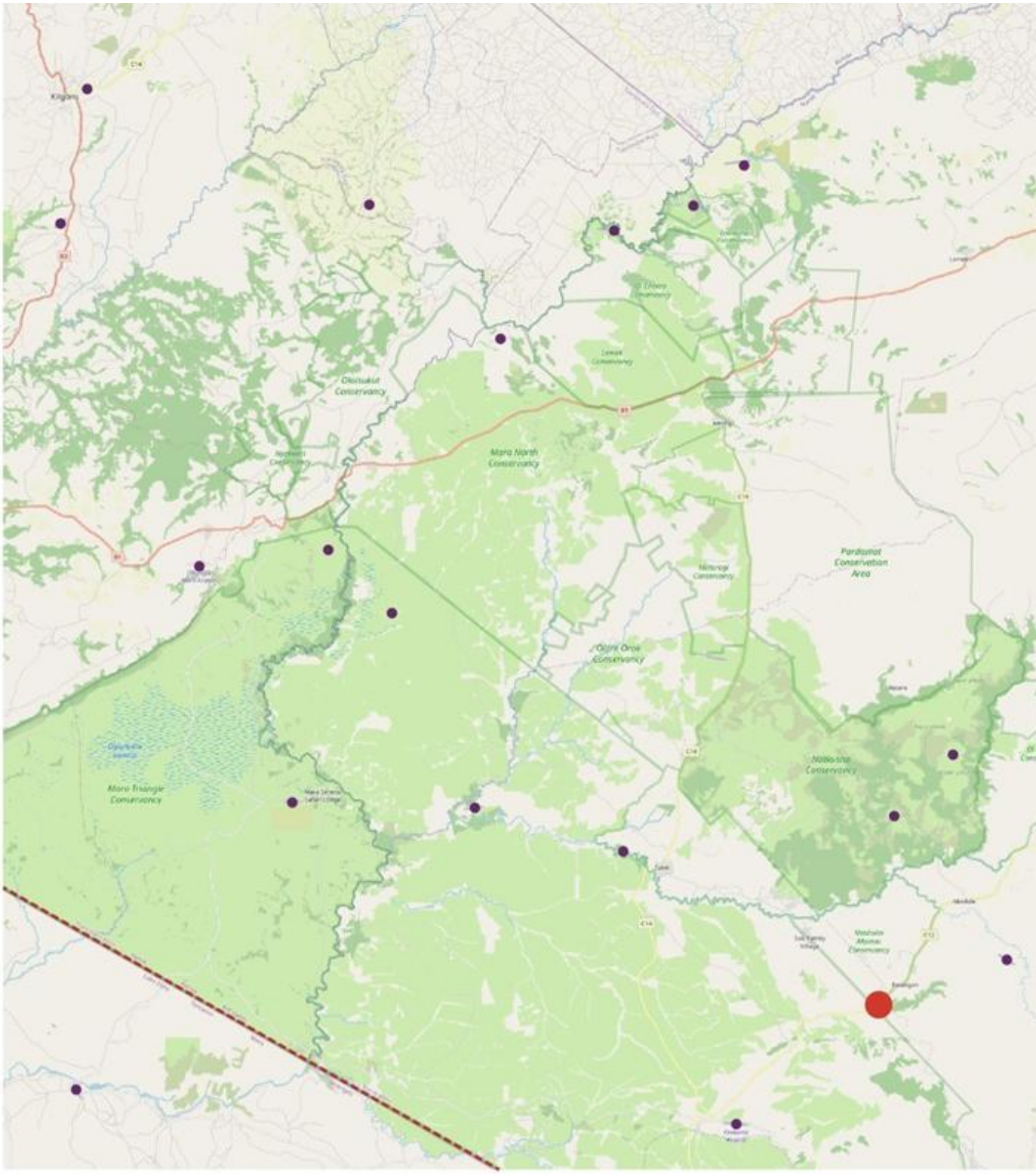
Figure 3.3: Map of Sekenani town, the main gate and the wildlife reserve. Map by Author, Image retrieved from Google maps.



Figure 3.4: Image of the Sekenani gate into the Maasai mara wildlife reserve. Image retrieved from www.masaimara.ke/sekenani-gate/https://masaimara.ke/sekenani-gate/



Figure 3.5: Image of a lineup of tourist cars going into the Maasai mara through the Sekenani gate (2020) this was before the beads museum was built. The land the beads museum is now on is to the left of the image. Image retrieved from Liontrek Tours & Travel's Facebook page.


Olkinyei Conservancy
Mara North Conservancy
Pardamat Conservation Area
Olare Orok Conservancy
Mara Triangle Conservancy
Kenya – Tanzania border
Rivers and waterways
County divisions
Secondary highway
Primary highway
Road
Airstrips
Sekenani Town
Narok Town

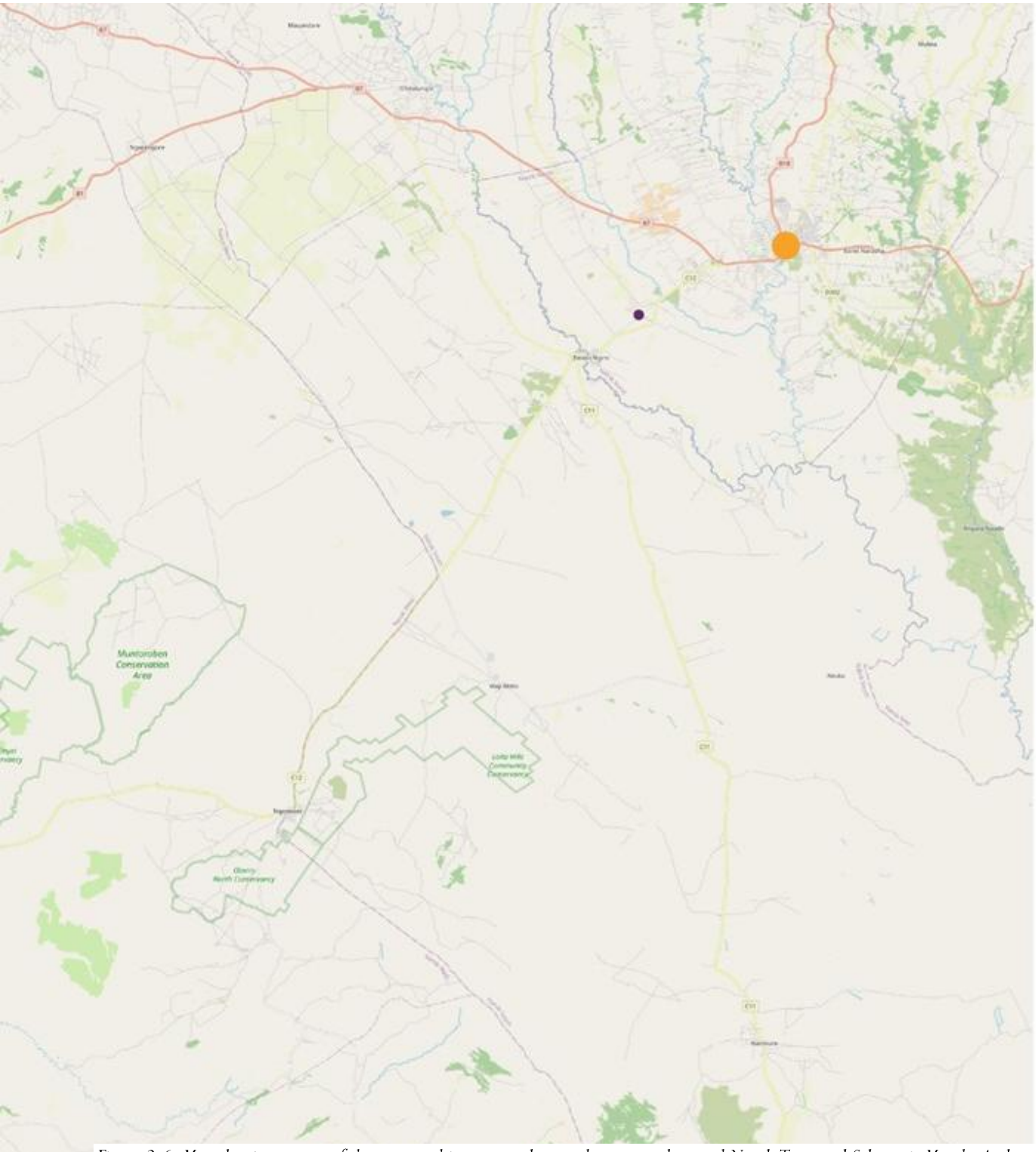


Figure 3.6: Map showing context of the areas and important elements between and around Narok Town and Sekenani. Map by Author.

Conservancy/ Forest

Waterbody

Farmland

Swamp

Landfill

Horticulture greenhouses



Figure 3.7: Image of the Beads Museum in Sekenani. Image by Author

3.2 The Beads Museum

The Beads Museum, part of the Beats of Beads Art Center, is located just outside Sekenani Gate, the main entrance to the Maasai Mara National Reserve. It serves as both a cultural space and an economic empowerment initiative, showcasing an extensive collection of beaded artifacts from East Africa, including clothing, vessels, bowls, and jewelry. The museum highlights the diversity of colors, styles, and tribal identities expressed through beadwork, preserving the craft while offering Maasai women a platform to sustain themselves economically.

The Beats of Beads Trust, a non-profit organization registered in Kenya, was co-founded by Eti Dayan, an Israeli anthropologist who has dedicated her work to documenting and preserving Maasai culture, particularly the art of beadwork. Alongside her co-founder, she established the trust to provide opportunities for Maasai women who have been left behind in the region's shifting economy. Maasai women, many of whom do not speak English or Swahili struggle to find sustainable livelihoods. Beading, a tradition passed from mother to daughter, remains one of the few sources of income available to them.

Before the Beads Museum and Art Center, many Maasai women sold their jewelry by running after tourist vehicles, attempting to make sales through car windows under the scorching sun. This informal economy offered them minimal returns. The Art Center was established to change this reality by providing a safe, structured workspace where women receive high-quality materials, skill-building workshops, and fair marketing channels.[83]

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[83] "Women Empowerment | Beats Of Beads Trust I Maasai-Mara."



Figure 3.8: Image of the land leased by the beads museum in February 2022. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.9: Image of the land being fenced in March of 2022. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.10: Image after Sharon Gatt completed the design and the construction started. June 22. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.11: Image of construction, roofing and walls are complete. August 2022 Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.12: Image of the final touches to the museum, painting of the walls and floors. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.13: Image after museum is complete. The café and shop are now being constructed. Sept 22. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones

With better materials and quality control, their beadwork can reach wider audiences, including international markets. The center ensures that the income generated directly benefits the women, improving financial independence and enabling them to pay for food, school fees, and household expenses.

Beyond its economic role, the Beads Museum serves as an interactive cultural space. Visitors can participate in beading workshops, learn about Maasai history and traditions through guided tours, and purchase jewelry at fair, fixed prices. The center includes the museum, a cafe, clean washrooms, and guest accommodations, creating a comfortable space for engagement between the Maasai women and visitors. The museum's location, just 50 meters from Sekenani Gate makes it an accessible stop for those entering or exiting the Maasai Mara.[84] By creating a space of economic empowerment and cultural preservation, the Beads Museum and the Beats of Beads Trust have created a model that allows Maasai women to retain their traditions while adapting to modern economic challenges. Instead of being left behind, they now have a place where their craft is valued, their voices are heard, and their economic independence is strengthened.

Since its founding, the Beats of Beads Trust has made great progress in empowering Maasai women. In 2022, the trust secured land near Sekenani Gate, completed architectural designs, and began constructing the Beads Museum, workspace, shop, and cafe. By the end of the year, the museum was fully built, equipped with a water system, lighting, and a bio-digester for sustainable waste management. Israeli Architect Sharon Gatt designed the museum incorporating elements of traditional Maasai architecture with modern functionality.[85]

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[84] "Visit Us | Beats Of Beads Trust | Narok County."
[85] "Milestones | Beats Of Beads Trust I Sekenani."



Figure 3.14: Image after flooring of the cafeteria is paved. October 2022. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.15: Image of women building their working and storage space. October 2022. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.16: Exhibition was built and complete. November 2022 Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.17: The beats of beads museum is now open and the space has come alive. February 2023. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.18: Guest rooms are now built and ready to host. July 2023. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.19: Interior image of the guest rooms. Queen beds to the right, entry to bathroom on the left. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones

According to the Beats of Beads webpage, the construction of the museum started in June 2022 and by July of 2022 the construction and roofing was complete. The Museum was built using a concrete foundation, concrete masonry blocks for the walls and a wood roof structure with corrugated metal above that. In August the interior plaster was completed and so was the water tower. The Museum structure itself wasn't built by the women as the materials used require skilled labor and specialized tools, but they did help with constructing the structure in their working and storage space in October of 2022. That was the same time the floors were completed. By the end of the year Dr. Idit Toledano, the curator, and Mr. Moshe Esh, the designer, had built the exhibition. In 2023, the museum officially opened, attracting local and international visitors, while training sessions for museum guides and artists helped expand its impact. With increasing visitor engagement, the center has become a thriving cultural and economic hub, providing a safe and productive space for women to work, learn, and showcase their artistry. By the end of 2023 the museum was complete, the guest rooms were complete, the Art-center is now an active place with lots of visitors coming to admire the artifacts in the museum, or to chat with the women.



Figure 3.20: "Cutting grass and cleaning the compound are signs that one of our goals: The women will feel at home in the compound - is now done. Image retrieved from www.beatsofbeadstrust.org/milestones



Figure 3.21: Diagram showing the Beads Museum in plan. It highlights the program and important spaces around it. Diagram by Author.



Figure 3.22: Interior image of the Beads Museum and exhibit. Image by Author



Figure 3.23: Image of the washroom at the Beads Museum. Image by Author



Figure 3.24: Image of the seating and architecture of the café. Image by Author



Figure 3.25: Image of the Karibu café, entrance to the museum and door to the kitchen. Image by Author



Figure 3.26: Image of landscape behind the beads museum. Image by Author.

3.3 Site and Context Analysis

The town across the museum includes a post office, several guest inns, small local restaurants, clothing stores, a fueling station, a cyber café, hairstyling shops, and curio shops selling traditional Maasai crafts. Directly adjacent to the museum are the Sekenani Primary School and Sekenani Secondary School, both of which educate the growing student population of the area. Further northeast, is the Straight Up Missions School that also provides educational services and a boarding school option, contributing to the region's emerging academic infrastructure.

The presence of these schools also offers a practical advantage for infrastructure development, as they are reliable sources of electricity, which can be extended to the project site. The beads museum is mostly solar powered however, when more than usual amounts of power need to be used, they connect to the local power grid. Water supply to the bead's museum comes through a nearby school but originates about a kilometer away from a borehole/ spring. Additionally, the Beads Museum incorporates rainwater harvesting, collecting runoff from its corrugated metal sheet roofs to sustain operations. The combination of borehole supply and sustainable water collection provides a reliable access to water year-round.

The movement around the site is busy. The main road has vehicles traveling in both directions, including private cars, tourist vans, and public transport heading to and from the Maasai Mara. Motorcycles weave through the streets, serving as one of the most common modes of transport for short and long distances. The Maasai's pastoralist lifestyle is evident in the presence of herders guiding their cattle across roads and into grazing corridors, maintaining the deep-rooted connection between the Maasai and their livestock. Meanwhile, pedestrians move in all directions,

engaging in trade, attending school, or commuting between homes and workplaces.

The surrounding landscape of the site is characterized by rolling hills, open lands, and scattered acacia trees, forming part of the larger Maasai Mara ecosystem. These natural features define settlement patterns and daily movement, as homes, roads, and grazing lands are shaped by the terrain. Seasonal rivers and small water channels run through parts of the area, providing essential water sources for livestock and limited agricultural activities. The hills in the distance serve as landmarks, helping navigate movement.

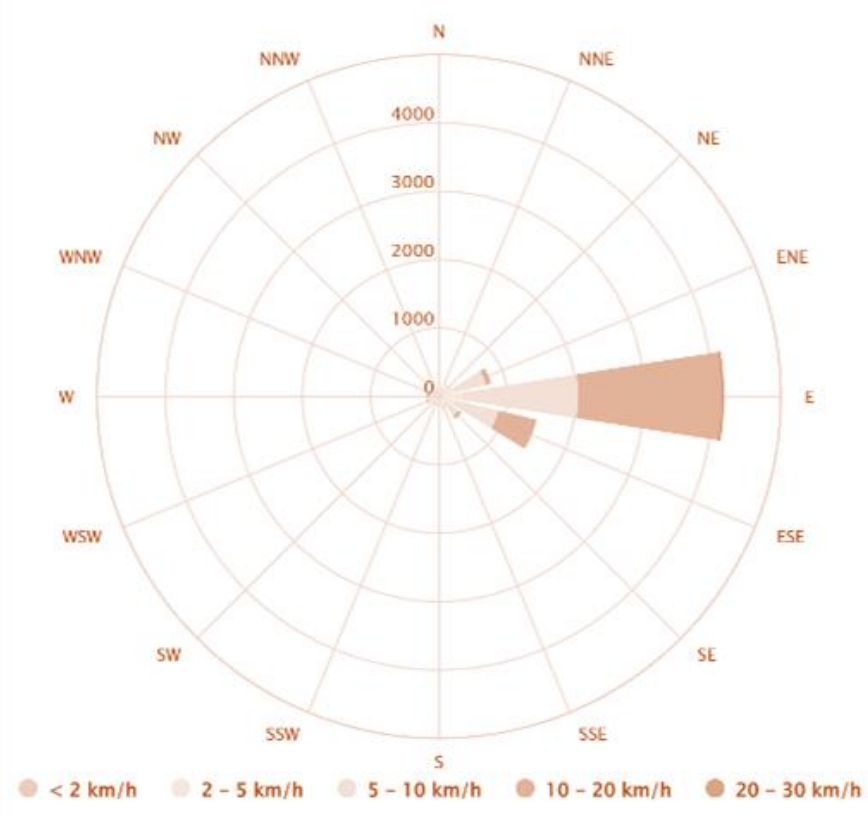


Figure 3.27: Windrose highlighting the amount and direction of wind in relation to the site. Diagram by Author

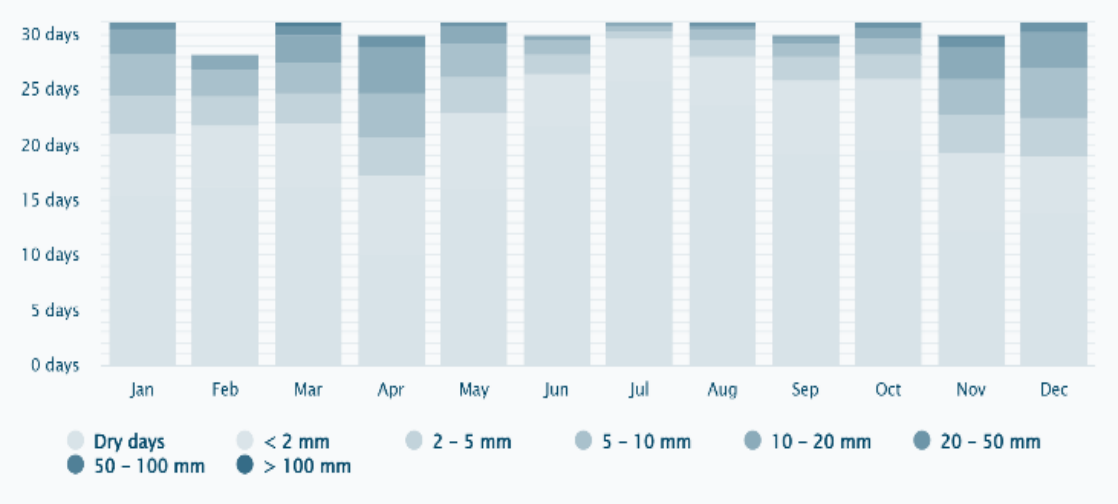


Figure 3.28: Chart highlighting average precipitation throughout the year on the site. Diagram by Author

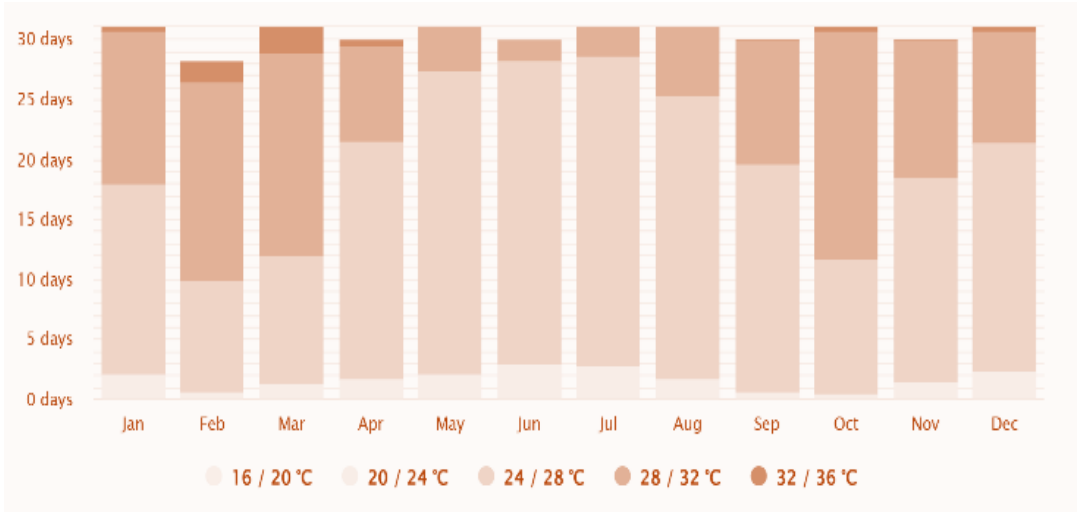
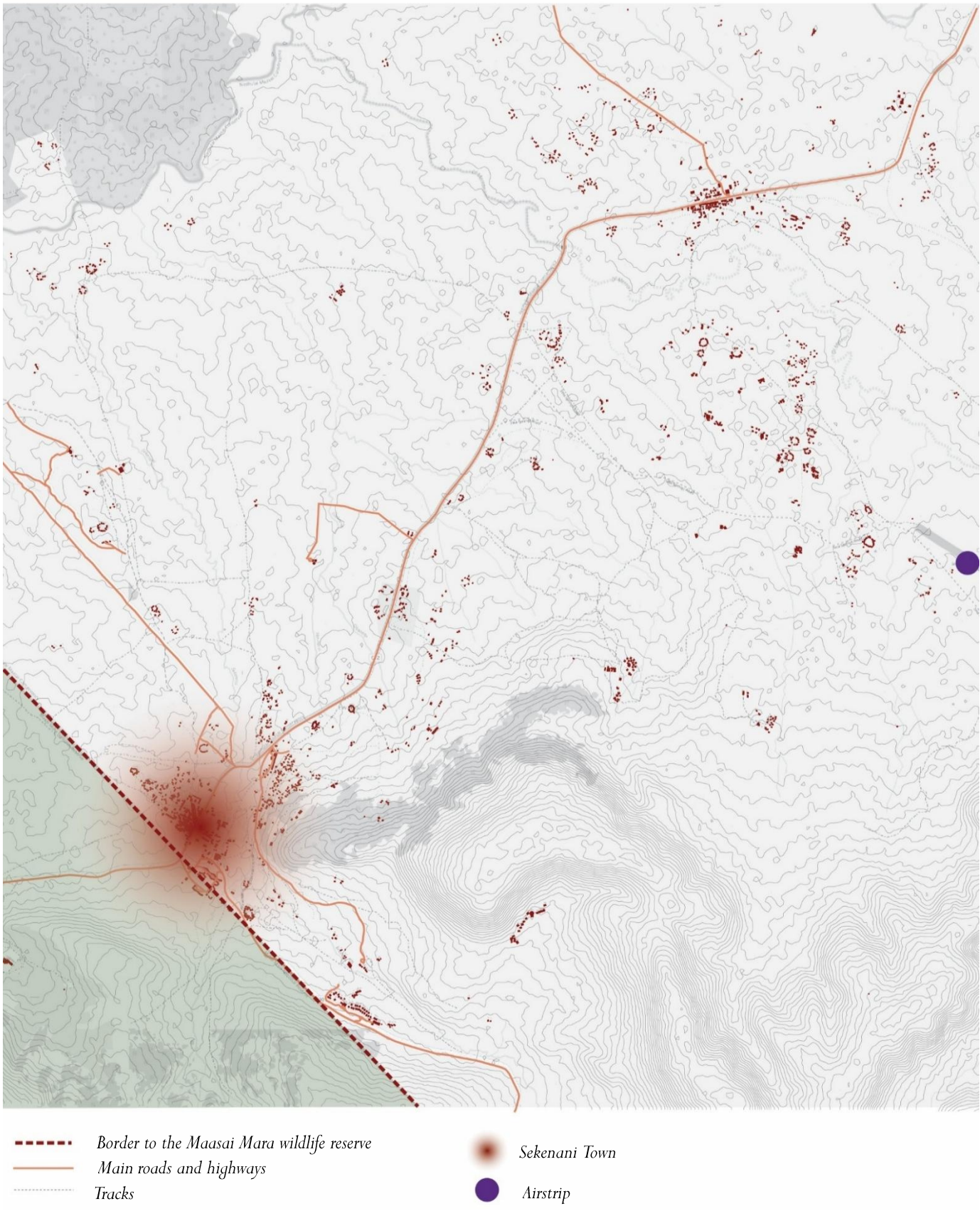


Figure 3.29: Chart highlighting average temperatures throughout the year on the site. Diagram by Author


Border to the Maasai Mara wildlife reserve
Main roads and highways
Tracks
Sekenani Town
Airstrip

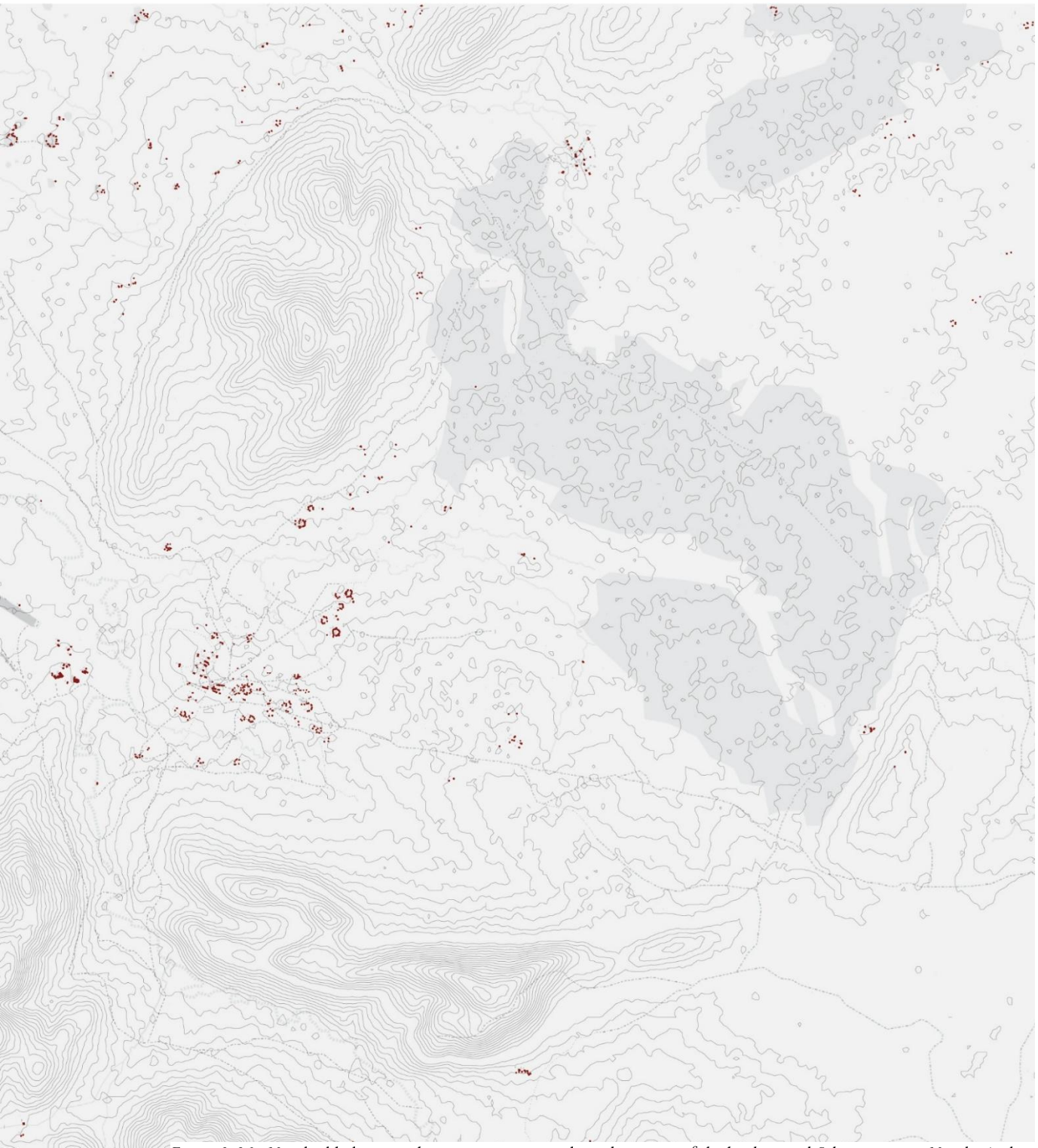


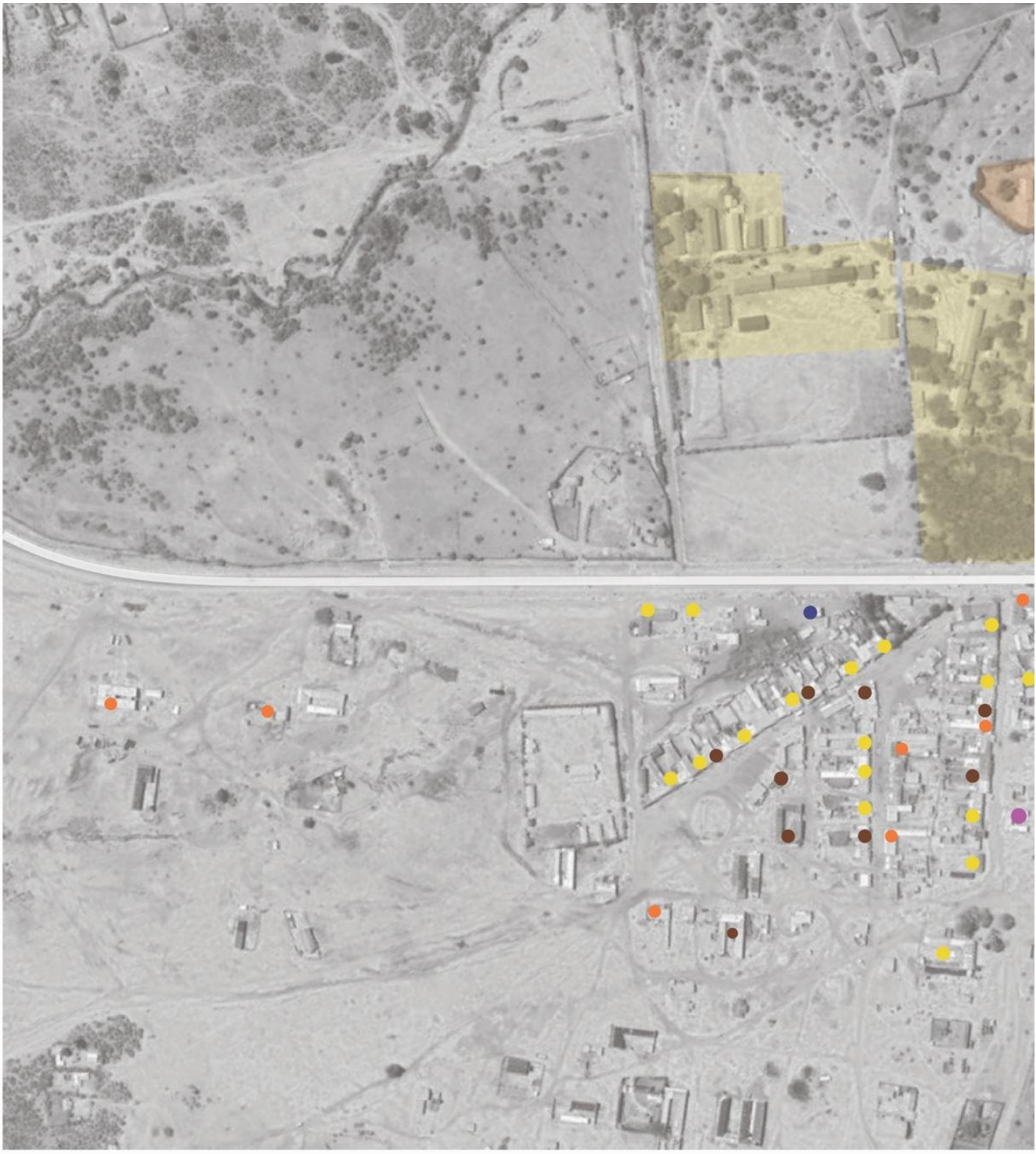
Figure 3.30: Map highlighting settlements, airstrips, tracks and contours of the land around Sekenani town. Map by Author

Maasai Mara wildlife reserve

Forests

Buildings and settlements

Landscape contours highlighting hills


Sekenani primary and secondary schools
Beads museum
Health center
Maasai Mara wildlife reserve

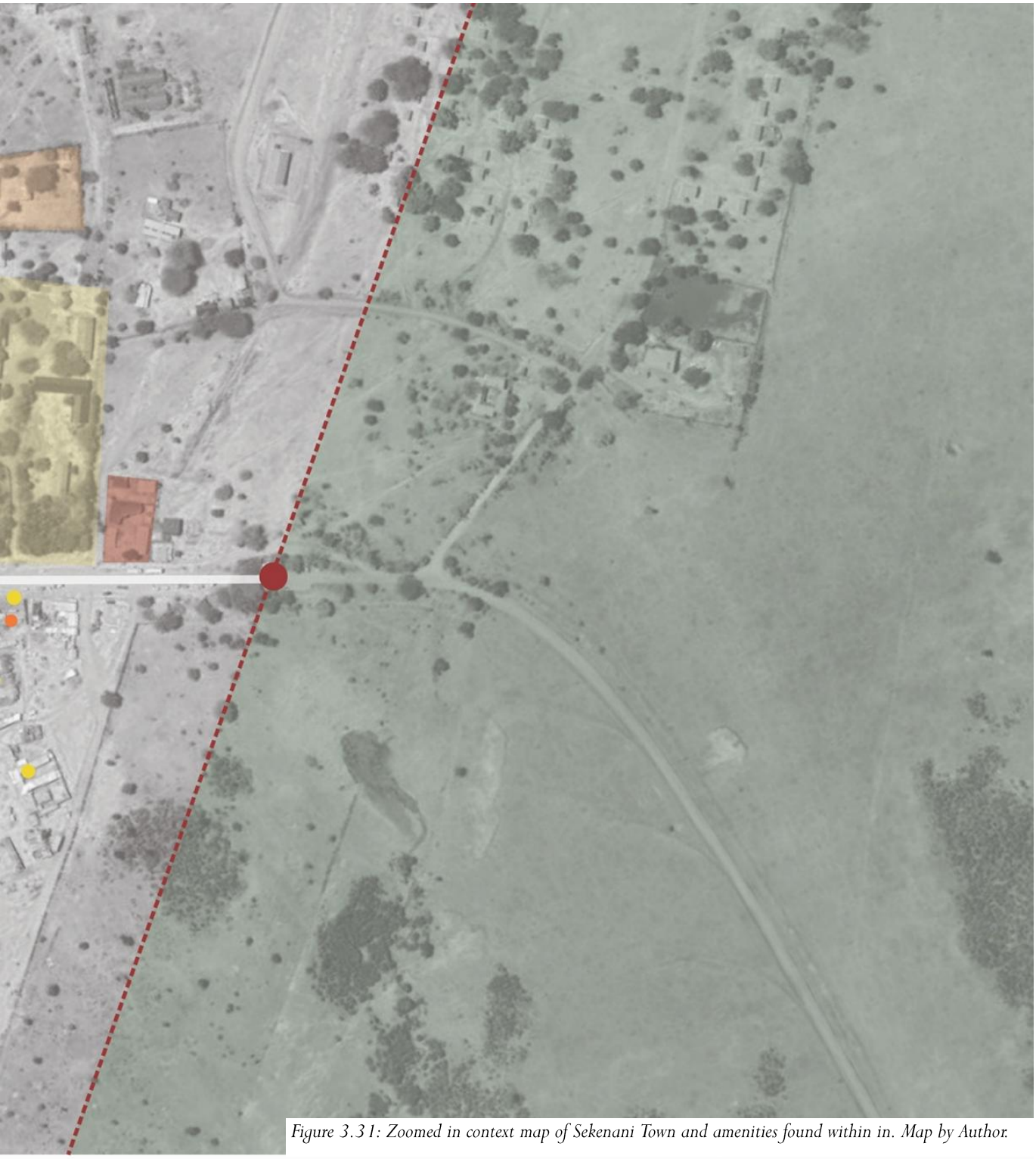
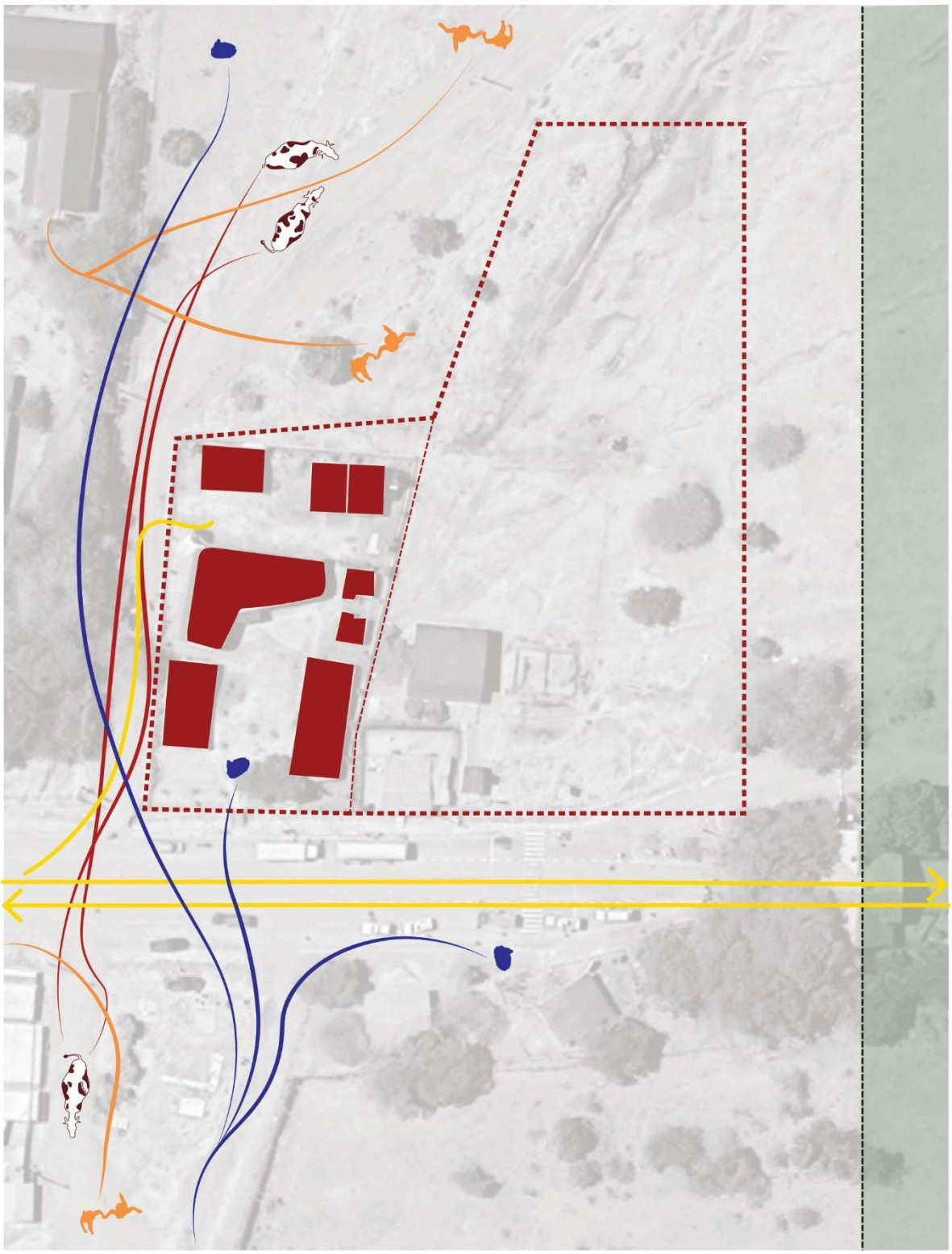


Figure 3.31: Zoomed in context map of Sekenani Town and amenities found within in. Map by Author.

- *Shops- Grocery, Salons, Clothing*
- *Hostel rooms*
- *Cyber Cafe*
- *Restaurants*
- *Gas fuelling station*
- *Entry gate into the wildlife reserve.*



Movement of cars, trucks, tourist vehicles

Movement of people

Movement of Maasai students

Movement of cattle

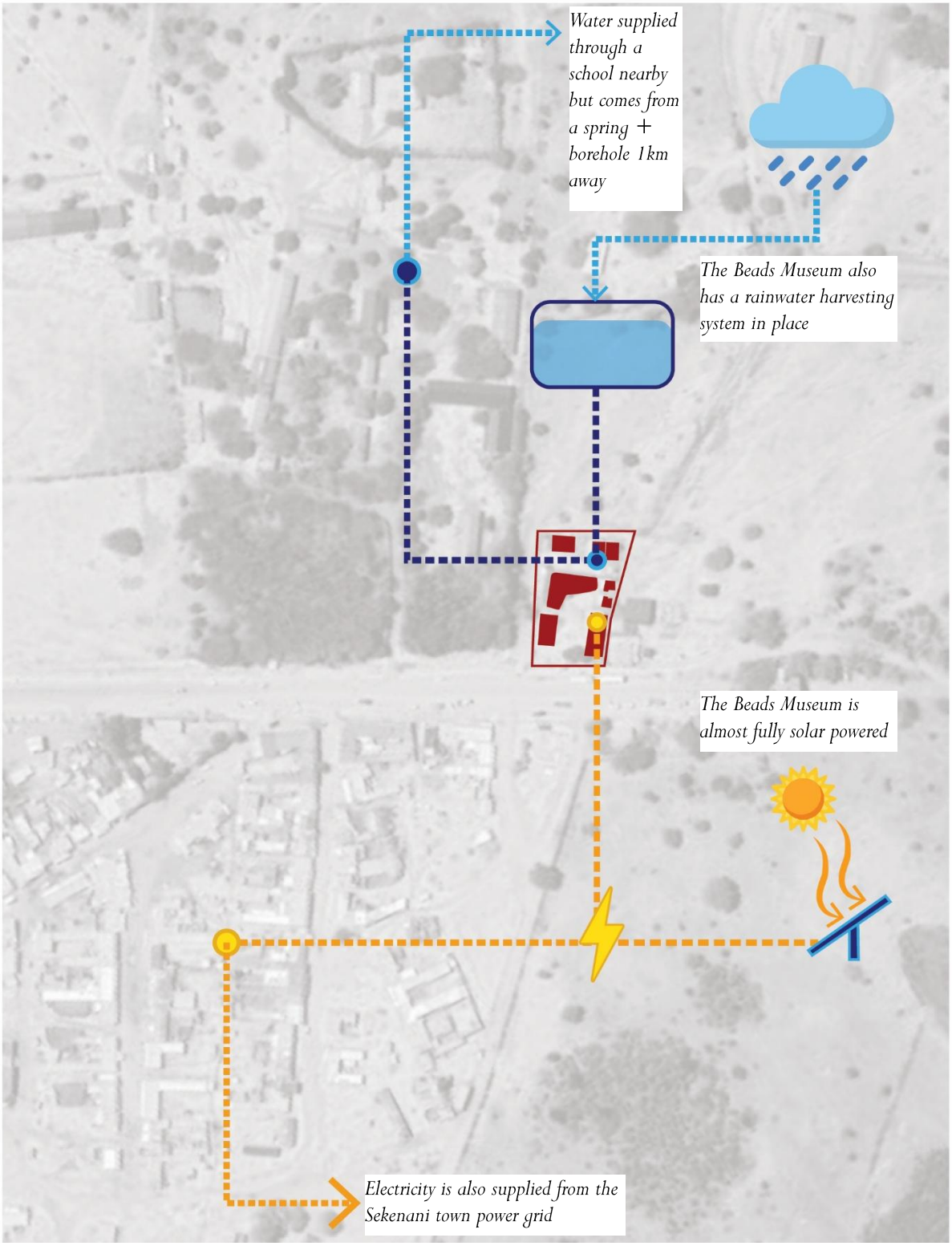
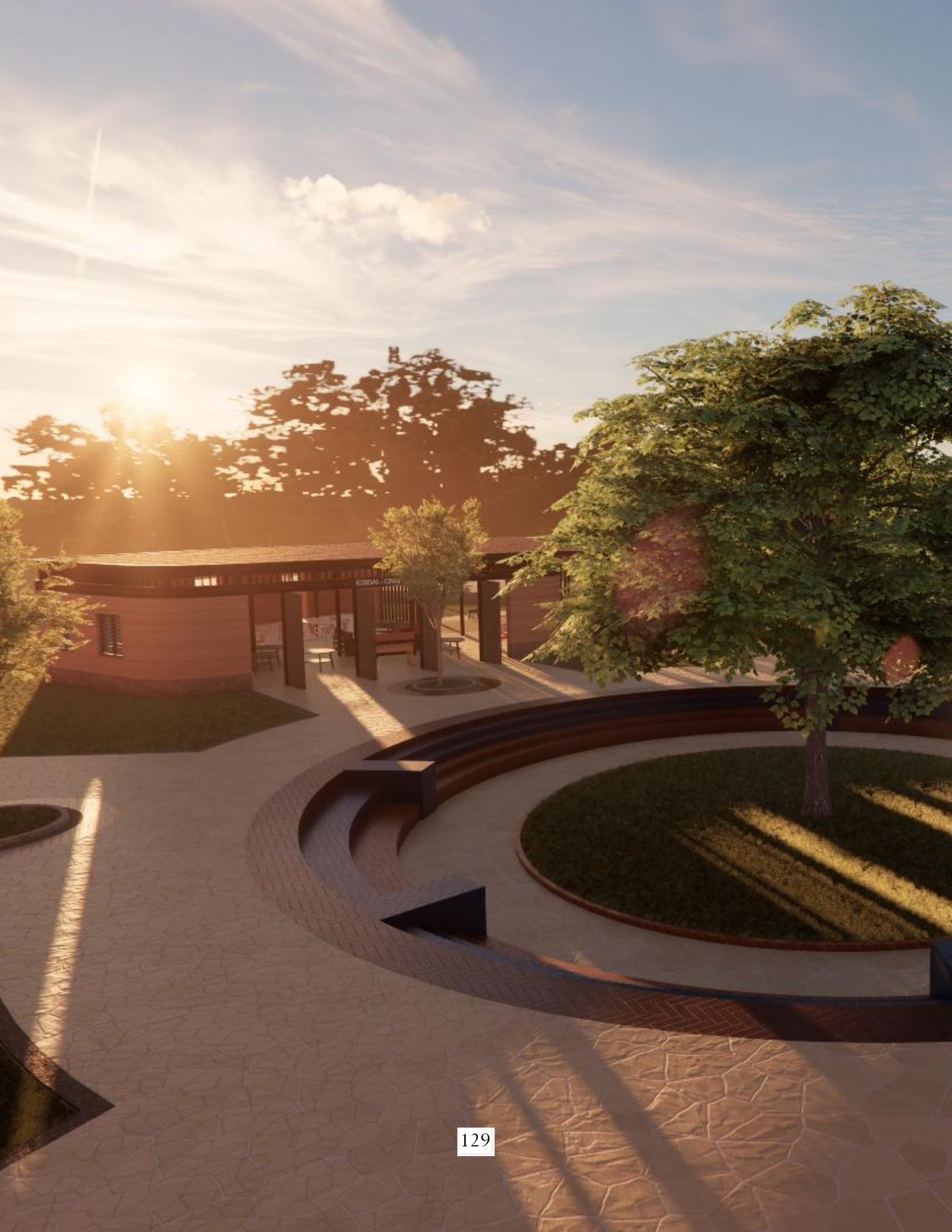


Figure 3.32: To the left - Diagram showing movement around the site, the beads museum and the proposed addition to the site. Diagram by Author

Figure 3.33: Above - Diagram showing where the beads museum as well as the proposed site receives electricity and water from. Diagram by Author



Part 4

Design Intervention



Figure 4.1: Previous page – Render of design project. The sunken courtyard at the Sekenani Womens Empowerment Center

Figure 4.2: Empowerment of Maasai girls. Image retrieved from https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/community-education-workshops-for-maasai/

4.1 Design Concept

The concept for this project emerges from the heart of Maasai womanhood, a journey of strength, adaptation, memory, and tradition. This is not just a building or physical structure; it is a cultural narrative in spatial form, a vessel for both preservation and transformation. An important aspect of the design process is the philosophy of "designing with" rather than "designing for" ensuring that Maasai women are not positioned as passive beneficiaries of the project, but as active and involved contributors throughout the process from initial planning to design development and, ideally, even construction. Every major design decision was informed by their stories, needs, and aspirations. Their insights shaped the spatial layout, the program, and the spirit of the project.

The title *From Thorny Branches to Resilient Roots* encapsulates the essence of this transformation. "Thorny branches" evoke both the physical materials of the past, acacia fencing, temporary shelters, and the constraints historically faced by Maasai women: limited resources, social restrictions, and external pressures. But from these same origins grow resilient roots, systems of knowledge, community strength, and cultural identity. The architecture mirrors this shift, beginning with familiar vernacular forms and evolving into spaces that support collective empowerment, economic opportunity, and healing.

The project is rooted in three overlapping challenges I encountered during my research. First, the disappearance of traditional Maasai architecture and culture, a process largely shaped and maintained by women for generations, is accelerating due to modernization, climate change, land privatization, and

tourism. Second, shifting gender dynamics have increasingly limited women's presence in public and economic spaces, in contrast to their historical roles as builders, caregivers, and cultural custodians. Third, the narratives told through tourism tend to romanticize a fixed version of Maasai identity, often overlooking the lived realities and evolving roles of Maasai women today.

One thing that can't be escaped is the fact that transformation is something that is vividly happening not only architecturally, but socially, economically, and environmentally. The Maasai community, like many others in East Africa, is navigating a rapid period of change in the last few decades, particularly since the 1980's. In an ideal world, cultural traditions could remain untouched and whole. But in the reality we live in, preservation must happen within change, not outside of it. This thesis accepts the inevitability of transformation and focuses on ensuring that Maasai women are not left behind in the process. Architecture becomes a way to adapt carefully and intentionally while holding on to the core values and ways of life. It is a tool for cultural continuity in a shifting world.

The center also shifts the gaze from tourist storytelling to local authorship. It gives Maasai women the space to lead their own narratives, not as performers of culture, but as teachers, makers, and decision-makers. My time in Sekenani left a lasting impact on me. I cherish the stories I was told, the moments of laughter while beading, and the generosity with which I was welcomed. That kind of connection, rooted in presence, not performance, is what I hope the center can hold space for.

This project builds on the foundation laid by the Beads Museum in Sekenani. While the museum preserves and celebrates traditional beadwork and memory, it is primarily oriented toward the past. This center acts as a superaddition; a space that complements rather than replaces the museum. It looks to the present and future, expanding the museum's presence by creating spaces for making, learning, resting, and leading. The program is shaped directly by conversations with Maasai women, and includes craft workshops, classrooms, gathering areas, and places for healing and rest. Each space is designed to respond to their lived needs and aspirations — economically, emotionally, and culturally. Spatially, the concept is grounded in the radial logic of the traditional *Enkang* settlement, with a central sunken courtyard at its heart. Fractal patterns repeat across the site at different scales, from building layout to planting schemes, referencing Maasai vernacular organization systems rooted in ideas of protection and continuity.

This project also speaks to the risks of losing vernacular architecture as modern materials and forms become more common, often influenced by Eurocentric ideals of permanence and progress. Even within Maasai communities, there is a growing desire for concrete, symmetry, and modern aesthetics as signs of success. In the process, traditional forms and meanings are being replaced. This loss is not just material, it is cultural. The goal here is not to resist change, but to offer an alternative: architecture that evolves while still holding cultural memory. The center is not static. It is flexible, open-ended, and able to grow with the community. Some spaces can be adapted for varying levels of privacy or expanded as needed. Just as traditional Maasai settlements shifted in response to climate and family needs, this center is designed to evolve, just like the culture it supports.



Figure 4.3: Francis Kere's Lions Startup Academy project in Turukana Kenya. The buildings are designed to resemble ant hills found in the region. Image retrieved from https://www.archdaily.com/964238/startup-lions-campus-kere-architecture

Across Africa, there is a growing movement in architecture that focuses on empowering communities through design, prioritizing sustainability, cultural relevance, and local participation. These projects recognize that architecture is not just about form or function, but about the people and their cultural identity. Architects are rethinking what it means to build in response to social, environmental, and cultural contexts and his thesis aligns with that approach. There are three projects in particular helped shape the thinking behind this work. They did not serve as templates, but as inspirational precedents guiding the values, priorities, and relationships I hoped to reflect through my own design.

The first is Francis Kéré's Gando Primary School. Francis Kéré is a Burkinabé architect known for pioneering community-driven, climate-responsive architecture that uses local materials and empowers the people who build and inhabit his projects.[86] He stands for socially engaged design, where architecture is not just a physical product but a tool for education, sustainability, and collective agency.[87] The Gando Primary School is a powerful example of architecture that is grounded in community. Built in his home village using locally sourced clay and involving residents in every step of the construction, the project blends vernacular building knowledge with modern innovation. The raised, ventilated roof system offers a passive cooling solution tailored to the local climate, demonstrating how climate-responsive design doesn't require high-tech solutions. What inspired me most is that the school wasn't just made for the community, it was made with them.

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[86] "Kéré | About Us."
[87] "Kéré | Home."

The second project is the Katiou Library by Albert Faus. Albert Faus is a Spanish architect based in West Africa whose work focuses on environmentally sensitive, low-tech architecture that embraces local craftsmanship, traditional techniques, and community needs. The Katiou Library in Burkina Faso, is a thoughtful example of how traditional knowledge can meet modern function. Built using compressed earth blocks and local materials, the library blends environmental performance with cultural expression. The perimeter walls double as bookshelves, optimizing space, while a gabled corrugated metal roof with translucent sections ensures natural light and ventilation, protecting the interior from heat and seasonal storms.

The third project is The Women's Opportunity Center by Sharon Davis, an American architect known for designing socially impactful, sustainable architecture that empowers communities. The women's opportunity center reimagines the layout of a traditional Rwandan village to create a network of pavilions for training, collaboration, and economic opportunity. The architecture is open and accessible, creating spaces for healing and empowerment. What stood out to me most about this project was how the architecture itself played a role in social change, it wasn't just a backdrop for activities, but part of the empowerment. That influenced how I approached the design of the Empowerment Center. I didn't want it to just function as a workspace or classroom; I wanted it to also hold space for care, connection, and leadership.

Gando Primary School – Kéré Architecture

Project date: 2001
Size: 310 Sqm
Geographical context: Burkina Faso, Rural
Materials: Roof Cladding - Metal |Roof Structure- Concrete, Earth, Metal | Wall – Earth | Foundation - Concrete

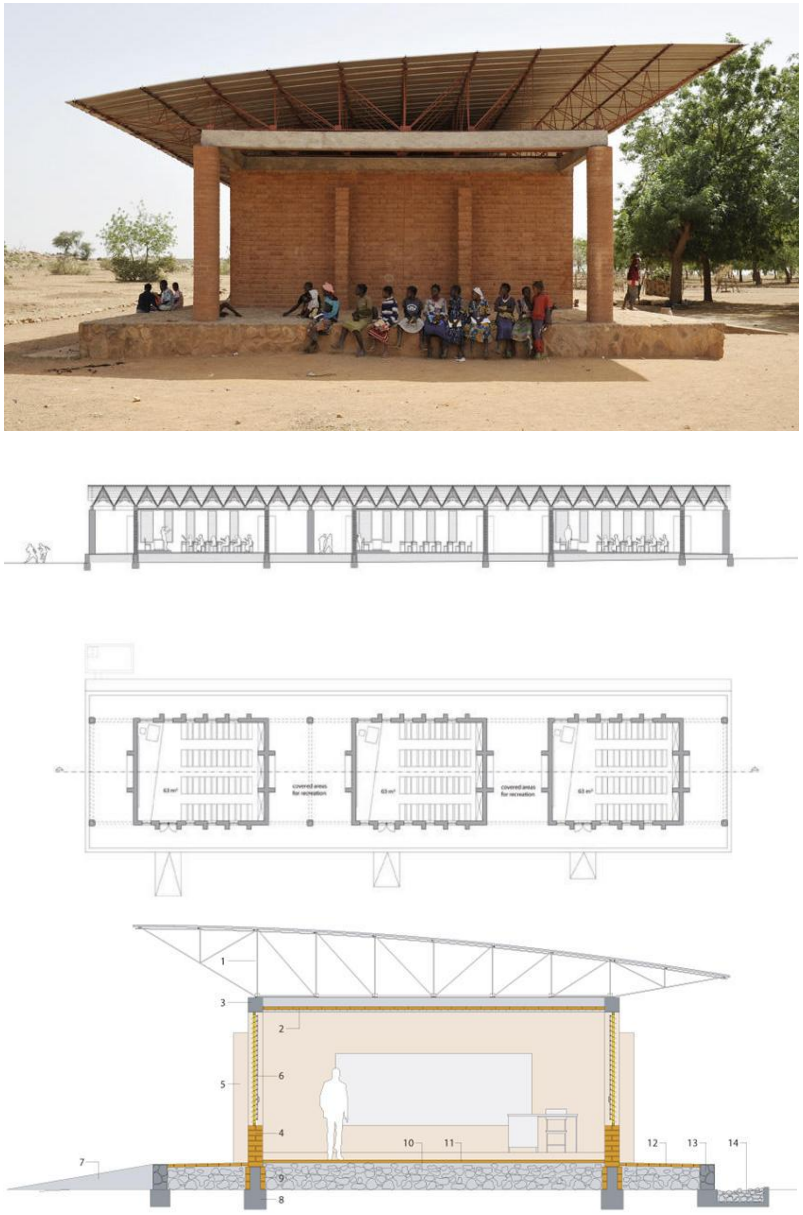
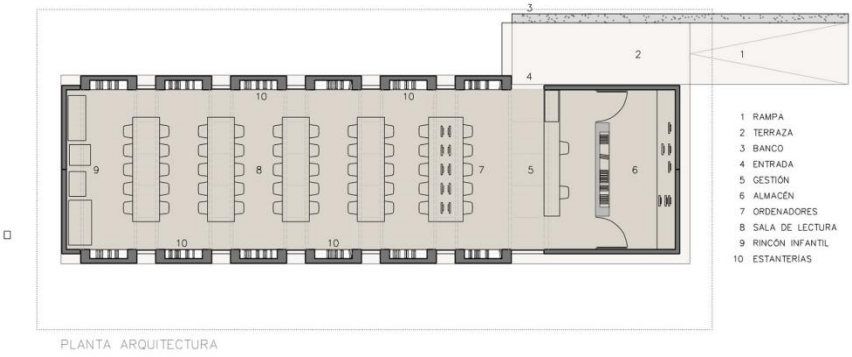


Figure series 4.4,5,6: Images and architectural drawings of Gando Primary School by Kéré Architecture. Images retrieved from https://www.archdaily.com

Katiou Library – Albert Faus

Project date: 2014
Size: 122 Sqm
Geographical context: Burkina Faso, Rural
Materials: Roof Cladding – Metal, Plastic | Roof Structure- Concrete, Metal | Wall – Earth | Foundation - Concrete





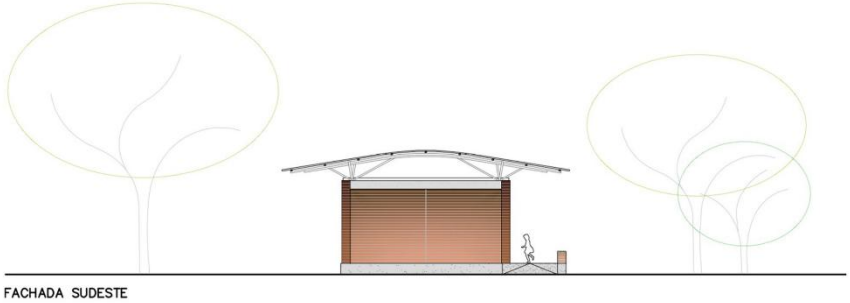


Figure series 4.7,8,9: Images and architectural drawings of Katiou Library by Albert Faus. Images retrieved from https://www.archdaily.com

Women's Opportunity Center – Sharon Davis Center

Project date: 2013
Size: 2200 Sqm
Geographical context: Rwanda, Rural
Materials: Roof Cladding – Metal | Roof Structure- Metal | Wall – Earth | Foundation - Concrete



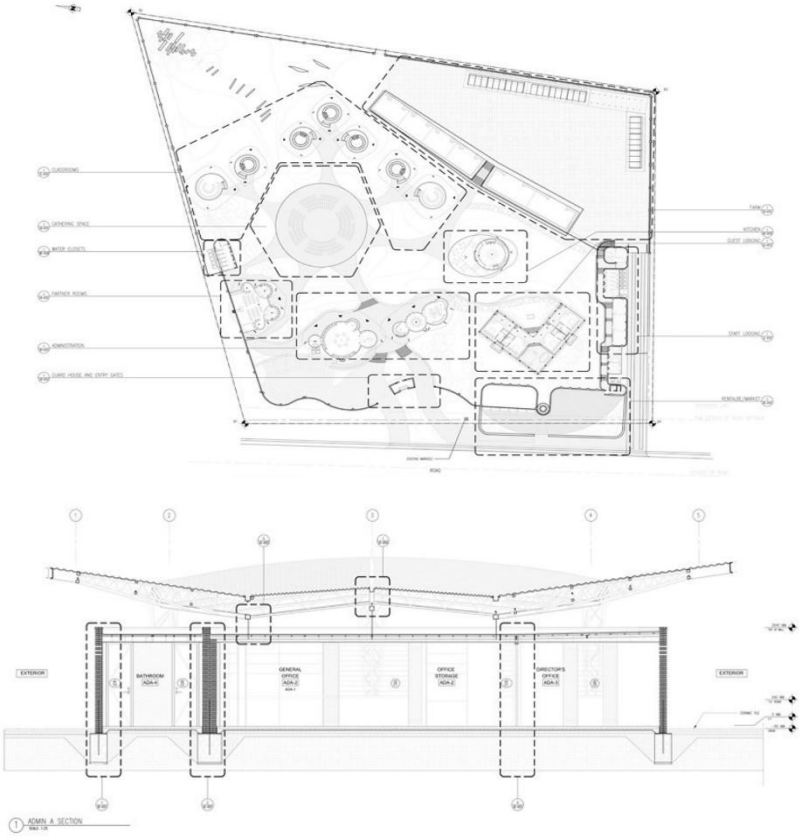


Figure series 4.10,11,12: Images and architectural drawings of Women's Opportunity Center by Sharon Davis Center. Images retrieved from https://www.archdaily.com



Figure 4.13: Partial plan of the Sekenani Women's Empowerment Center design proposal. Drawing by Author

4.2 Design Project

Empowerment, as defined by the World Bank, is "the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes".[88] Naila Kabeer, social economist and professor at the London School of Economics similarly describes it as "the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them."[89] While definitions vary, what's widely agreed upon is that empowerment is multidimensional, contextual, and process-based.[90]

In this thesis, empowerment is understood spatially as the creation of environments that enable agency, spaces where women can gather, learn, earn, care for each other, and lead. Empowerment through architecture involves not only access to physical resources, but also the freedom to move, the right to participate, and the ability to shape one's environment with dignity and autonomy.[91]

The site for the Maasai Women's Empowerment Center is located adjacent to the Beads Museum at the Sekenani Gate of the Maasai Mara. This location holds both cultural and ecological significance and sits at the threshold between two worlds; the tourist-oriented front-facing edge of the Mara and the everyday lived experience of the Maasai women who reside and work nearby. This in-between condition shaped how I approached the site: not just as a plot of land to build on, but as a point of intersection between memory, visibility, and opportunity.

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[88] Narayan-Parker, *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction*.
[89] Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment."
[90] Moswete and Lacey, "'Women Cannot Lead.'"
[91] Bishop and Bowman, "Still Learning."

The layout of the center responds to the land. The orientation of the buildings is aligned to take advantage of prevailing winds for natural cross-ventilation, while the placement of walls, courtyards, and shaded spaces helps to manage heat gain and provide comfort without relying on artificial systems. The central courtyard, which acts as the heart of the center, is positioned to capture breeze and light while remaining protected and private, a quiet, open space that connects all the programmatic zones. Surrounding the central courtyard and closest to the front of the site are the public-facing spaces, those that connect both tourists and the Maasai community. These include the craft area and workshop, a curio shop, a small café, and washrooms.

To the left of the site, a garden path guides one through the historical and cultural journey of the Maasai. It begins with their mythological origin, which tells of the Maasai people climbing out of a valley, represented here by the sunken central courtyard. From there, the path traces their migration down the Nile, their eventual settlement in present-day Kenya and Tanzania, and then moves through the complex period of colonial disruption and cultural change. The journey ends in a productive agricultural garden, symbolizing the current phase of adaptation and resilience as the community navigates today's challenges.

Towards the back of the site, in a more private zone reserved for Maasai women and their children, are spaces dedicated to wellbeing, growth, and care. These include a library, a health and wellness space, a medicinal garden, classrooms, a playground, and an open field for sports and games like football. There's also a communal water tap system, where women can fill containers, wash clothes, or access clean water for daily use. This area is intentionally more secluded, a safe and nurturing environment focused on the women's needs.

The site also presented an opportunity to create a spatial dialogue with the Beads Museum, a direct path from the central courtyard connects the two, encouraging movement and connection between memory and ongoing activity. While the buildings share a similar form in plane and both organized around a central core, they differ intentionally in their materiality and elevation. The Beads Museum is built primarily from concrete, styled to resemble adobe, giving it a textured, traditional look.

In contrast, this project takes a more grounded and land-responsive approach. The decision to use locally sourced earth and stone was directly influenced by the site, reducing the need for transportation and ensuring the materials blend into the natural surroundings. The rammed earth walls echo the tones and textures of the landscape, while the planted areas and gardens reintroduce indigenous vegetation that provides shade, improves soil quality, and supports the local microclimate. This difference in material expression allows the new center to complement the museum, not by replicating it, but by extending its story into the present.

In a realistic scenario, the project could follow a phased, low-cost model similar to the Beads Museum — potentially relying on donations, small grants, and income from craft sales, while prioritizing local materials and community labor to make it more feasible and sustainable over time.

Participatory construction methods are a key strategy in this project, not only to reflect the values of collaboration and cultural continuity, but also as a practical way to reduce costs and increase community ownership. Rather than relying entirely on external contractors, the design process invites the Maasai women to be involved in hands-on construction. This approach, seen successfully in Francis Kéré's Gando Primary School, has been proven to lower building costs by reducing labor expenses and sourcing materials locally. More importantly, it supports capacity building, knowledge is exchanged on-site, as traditional techniques and modern construction methods are learned together. This collaborative method turns the construction phase into a space of empowerment, where women and community members are not just building walls, they're building skills, networks, and a deeper connection to the space itself.

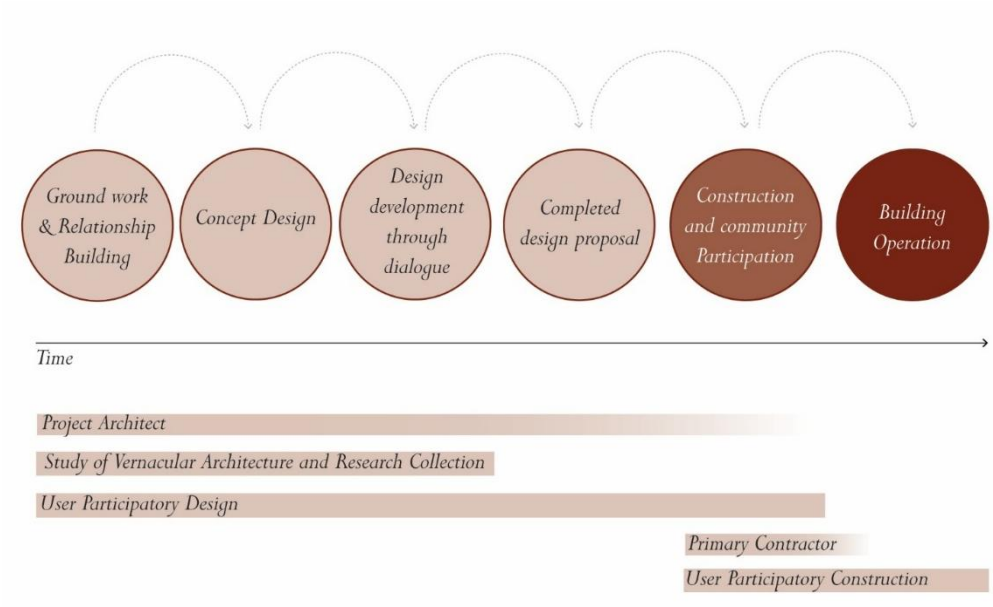


Figure 4.14: Participatory architectural process timeline showing the stages from relationship building to building operation. It highlights the evolving roles of the architect, community, and contractor. Diagram by Author

Recent activity at the Beads Museum highlights the growing need for expanded space and facilities to support women's empowerment efforts in Sekenani. A recent donation of laptops by UNHCR Ethiopia marks the beginning of long-awaited computer classes for local women and youth. However, there is currently no dedicated space at the museum to host these sessions, a gap that the proposed Empowerment Center is designed to fill, through its library and computer lab facilities. Additionally, seminars like the International Women's Day leadership workshop, which brought together over twenty women for a full day of discussion and learning, are currently held in an informal café setting that struggle to accommodate everyone comfortably. The Empowerment Center would provide a properly equipped multipurpose hall to support such gatherings, creating a functional environment for workshops, public discussions, and future conferences. The desire expressed by the women to learn English further reinforces the importance of the center's classroom and education spaces, which are specifically designed to host literacy and language programs. In many ways, the design responds directly to these emerging needs, building on the foundation already laid by the Beads Museum and extending its reach into the future.

Empowerment is not a singular outcome but a continuous process. For women, especially in marginalized communities, it means having the tools, knowledge, and confidence to make decisions and access opportunities. Among the Maasai women I spoke with, empowerment came up as both a desire and a necessity, to speak, earn, heal, and lead on their own terms. This project responds to that need by supporting various forms of empowerment, from education and economic independence to emotional wellbeing, cultural expression, and political voice. It is understanding that empowerment is not one-dimensional, but something shaped through overlapping aspects of daily life.



Figure 4.15: Facebook post from the Beads Museum showcasing their seminar on leadership and governance hosted by Beats of Beads Trust in collaboration with Catalyste+. Image retrieved from the Beads Museum Facebook, Posted March 2024.



Figure 4.16: Facebook post from the Beads Museum showcasing the donation of six laptops by UNHCR Ethiopia to Beats of Beads Trust, supporting the launch of a long-anticipated community computer class. Image retrieved from the Beads Museum Facebook, Posted March 2024.

Multiple spaces throughout the complex are intentionally designed to support oral knowledge-sharing and skill transmission traditions central to Maasai life. The sunken courtyard, located under the shade of a large tree, acts as a gathering space for storytelling, blessings, and intergenerational dialogue. The Historical Journey Garden, particularly its winding path, offers opportunities for guided narratives tracing the Maasai's mythic and historical migration. The builder's yard serves as a hands-on learning site where women can engage in construction techniques such as rammed earth, thatching, and rope-tied timber connections, some skills they already use when building their own homes. Classrooms and the craft workshop operate flexibly, doubling as spaces for formal instruction and live demonstrations of beadwork, weaving, and oral history. In this way, architecture becomes not just a shelter for activities, but an active educational tool that fosters mentorship, cultural transmission, and everyday learning.

In addition to learning within these spaces, women also play an active role in shaping them. Participatory construction is a key aspect of the project's approach, allowing Maasai women to be involved not only as users but as co-builders. From preparing rammed earth mixtures and weaving thatch panels, to tying timber joints with sisal rope, women bring their existing knowledge into the formal construction process. This engagement not only reduces reliance on external contractors and lowers building costs, but more importantly, strengthens ownership, and skill-building. It transforms the act of construction into a moment of empowerment, reinforcing that these spaces are theirs from the ground up.

Empowerment Diagram

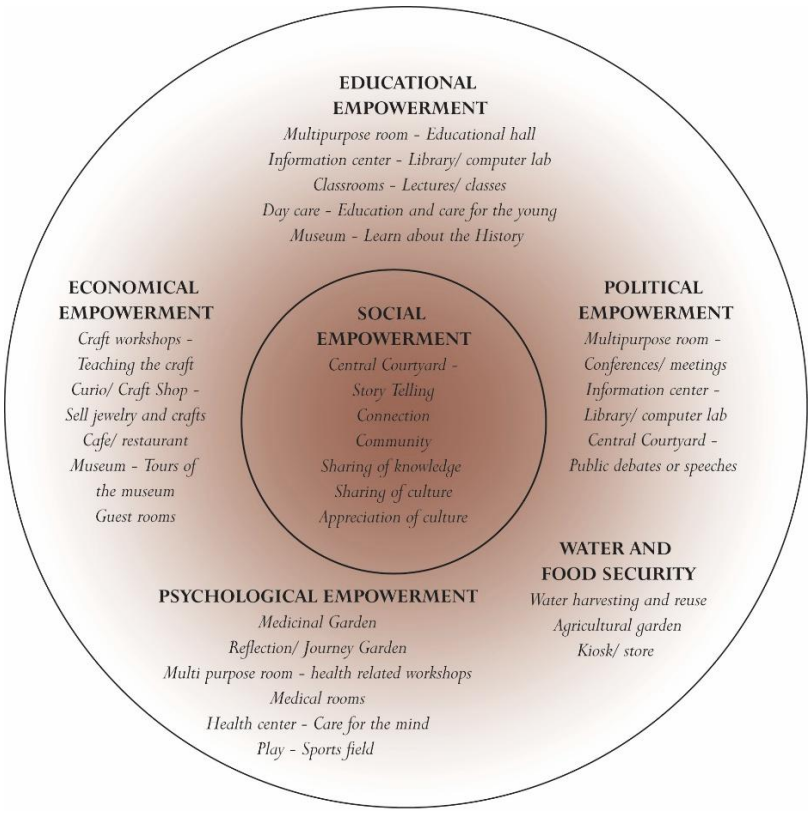


Figure 4.17: Diagram showing all the programs included in the design proposal and what category of empowerment they fall under. Diagram by Author

This diagram illustrates the empowerment framework guiding the design of the Maasai Women's Empowerment Center. At its core is the central courtyard, representing social empowerment through storytelling, connection, and the sharing of knowledge and culture. Surrounding this heart are five key areas of empowerment identified through conversations with the women in Sekenani: Educational, Economic, Political, Psychological, and Food and Water Security. Each area includes spaces tailored to real needs, from classrooms and craft workshop spaces to healing gardens and water systems. Together, they form a holistic and culturally grounded design strategy that supports Maasai women across all aspects of life.

Parti

Total site area – 9970 meters^2
Beads Museum site area: 2230 meters^2
Women's Empowerment Center 7740 meters^2

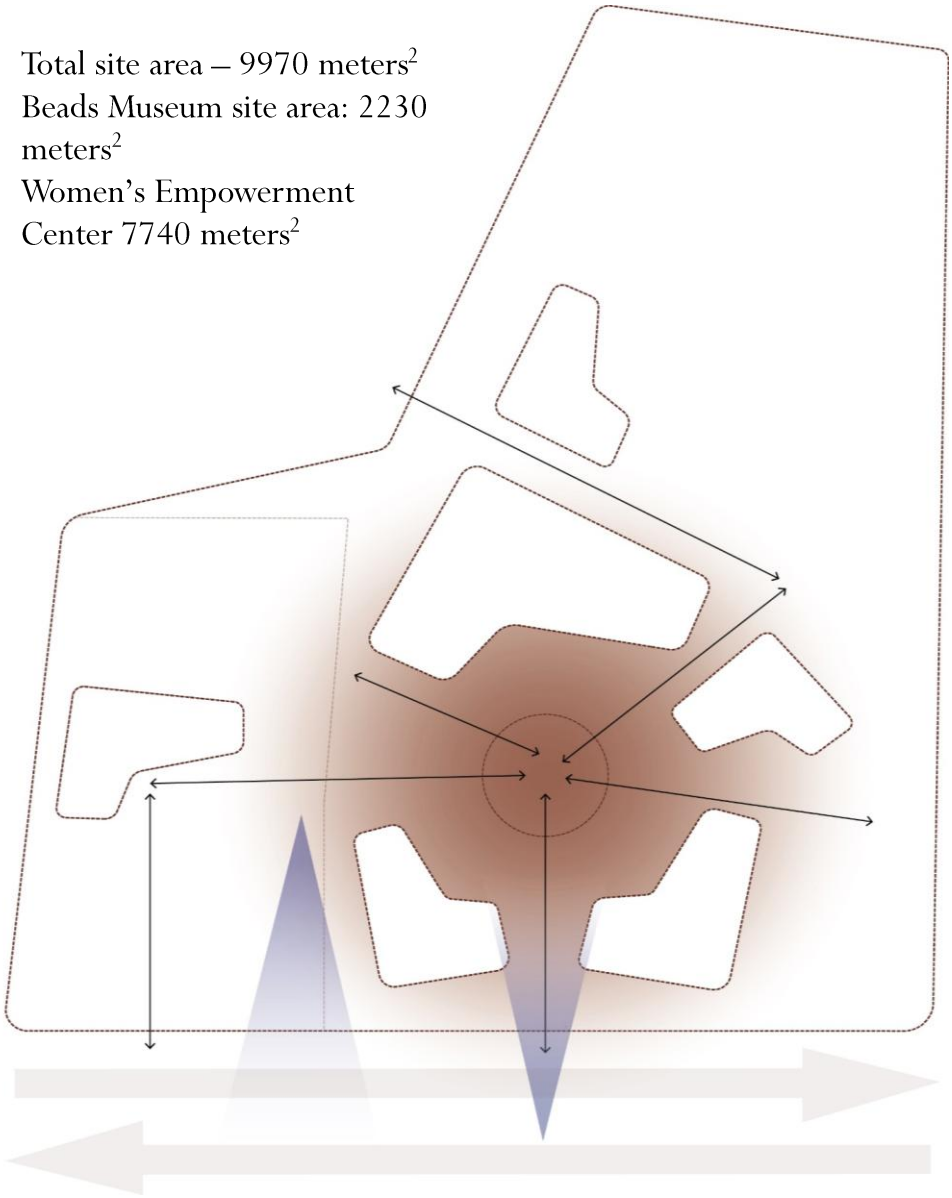


Figure 4.18: Parti diagram illustrating the spatial organization of the site, divided into the Beads Museum and the Sekenani Women's Empowerment Center. Diagram by Author

The building forms are the same at different scales even at the scale of the site itself. The central courtyard is the center and most important part of the project, the program is arranged around it like that of a Maasai Village. The idea of looking in from the outside and being on the inside looking out is shown.

Site Plan

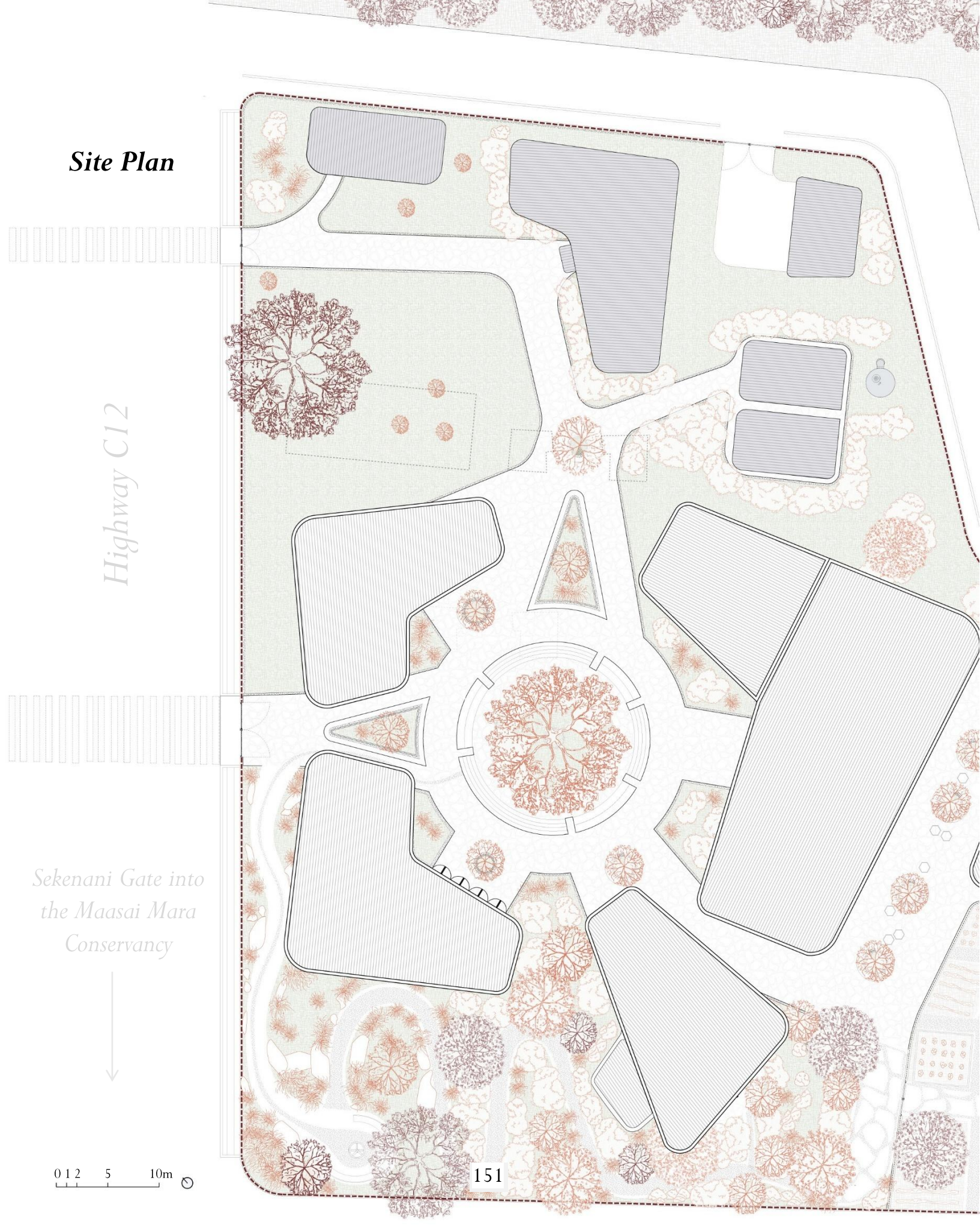
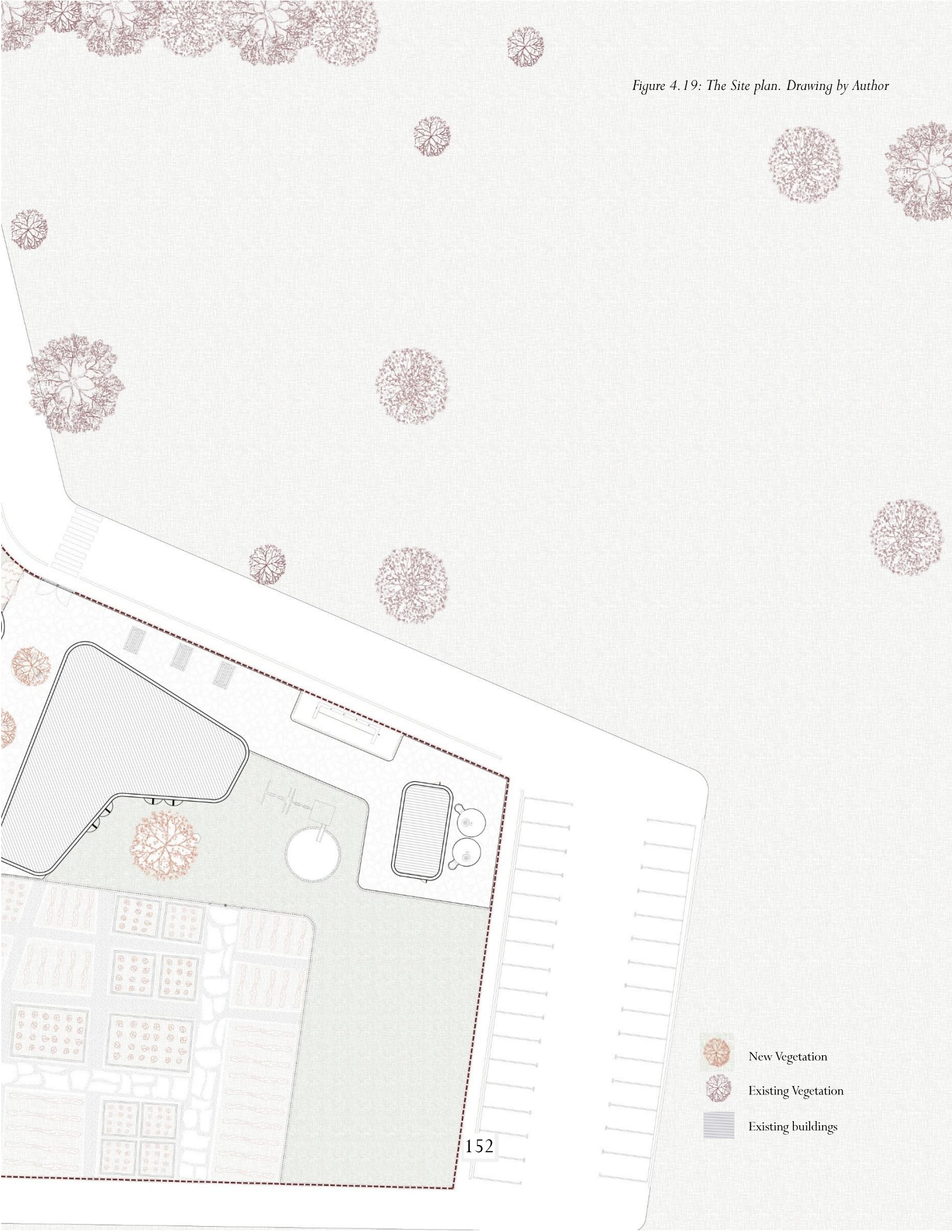

Highway C12
Sekenani Gate into the Maasai Mara Conservancy
0 1 2 5 10m

Figure 4.19: The Site plan. Drawing by Author



Building Elevations

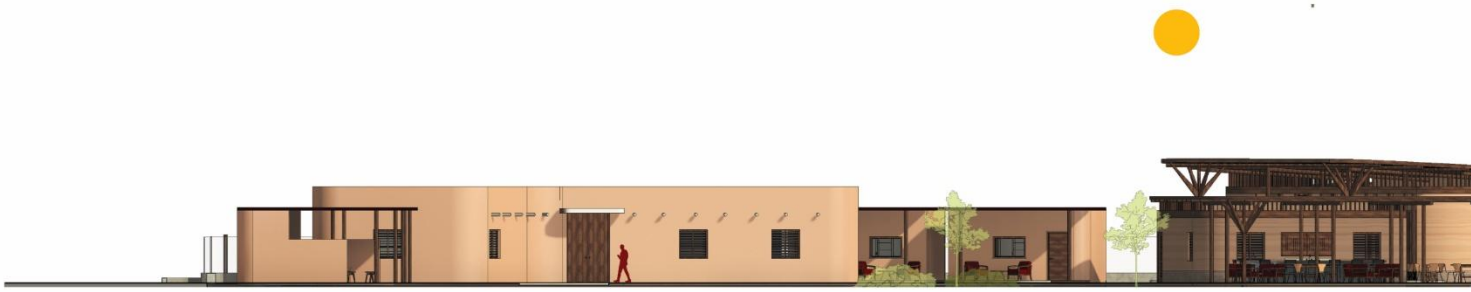


Figure 4.20: North-West Elevation. Drawing by Author



Figure 4.21: South-West Elevation. Drawing by Author



Figure 4.22: North-East Elevation. Drawing by Author

The buildings sit lightly in the landscape, remaining single-story and never rising above the existing tree line.



Their material palette; rammed earth, wood, and thatch blends naturally with the landscape, allowing the architecture to feel rooted, and in harmony with its surroundings.

Floor Plan

Building form

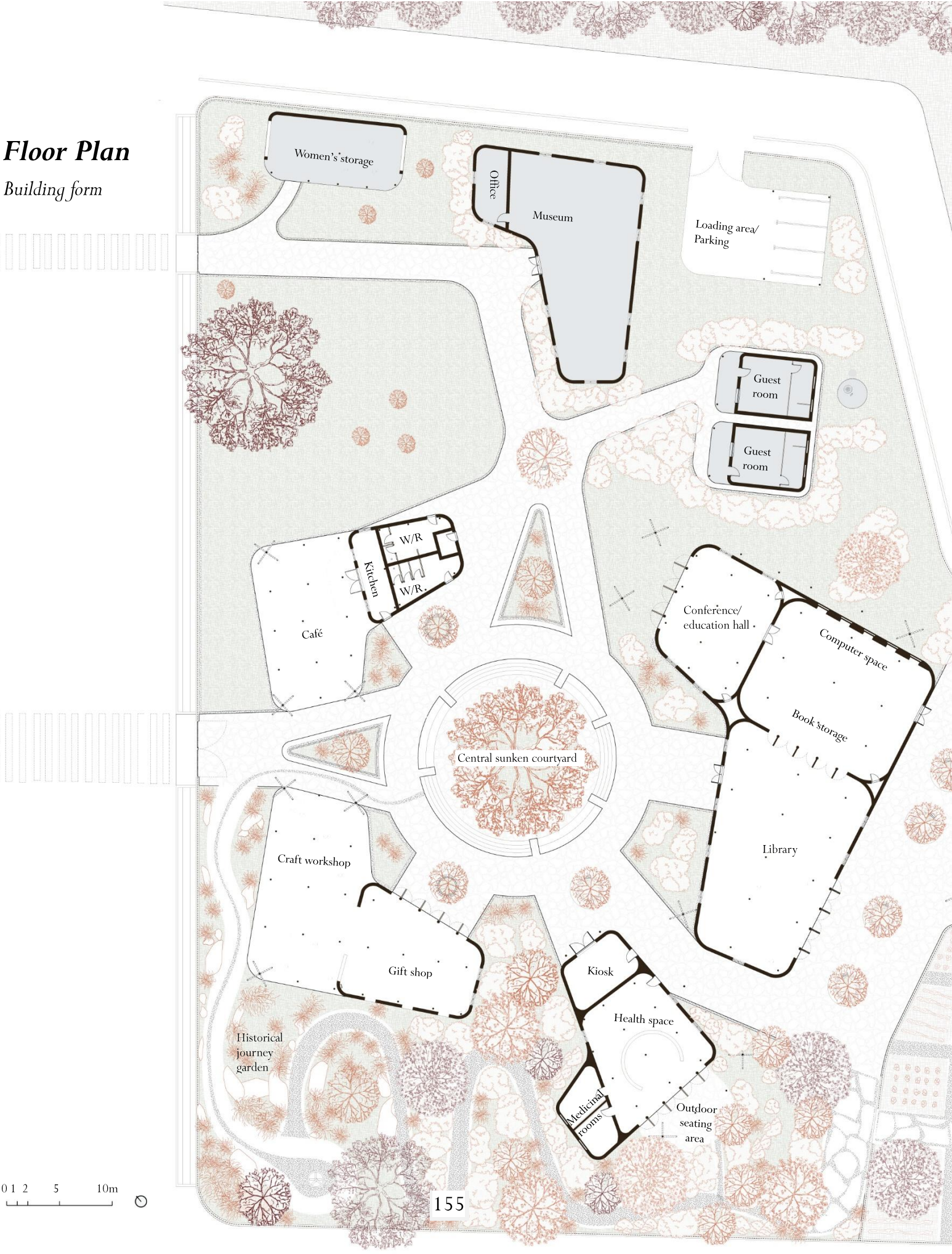


Figure 4.23: Floor plan highlighting program and building forms. Drawing by Author



Floor Plan

Privacy Diagram

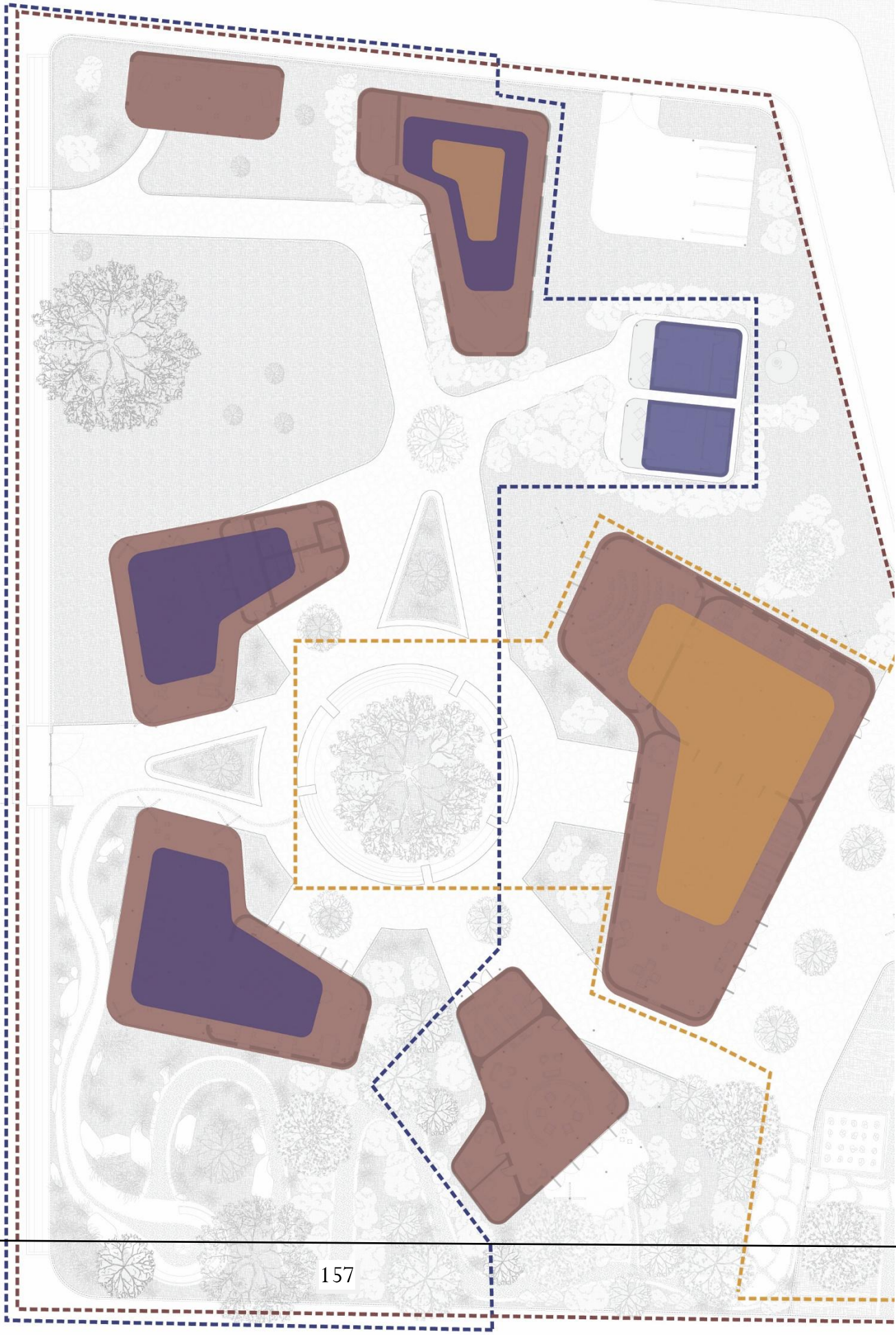
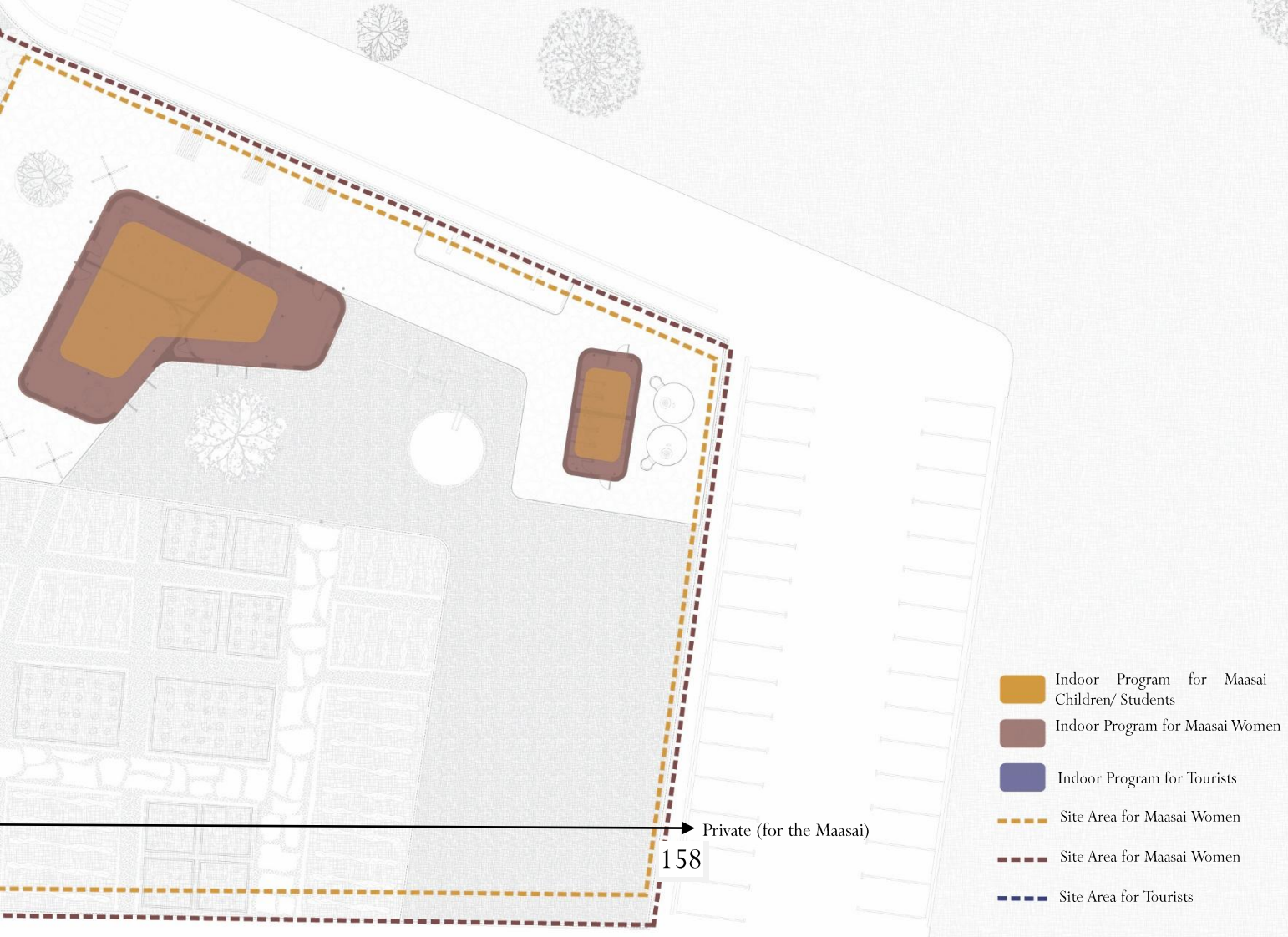


Figure 4.24: Floor plan diagram highlighting building and site programs dedicated to the different user groups. Diagram by Author



Floor Plan

Circulation Diagram

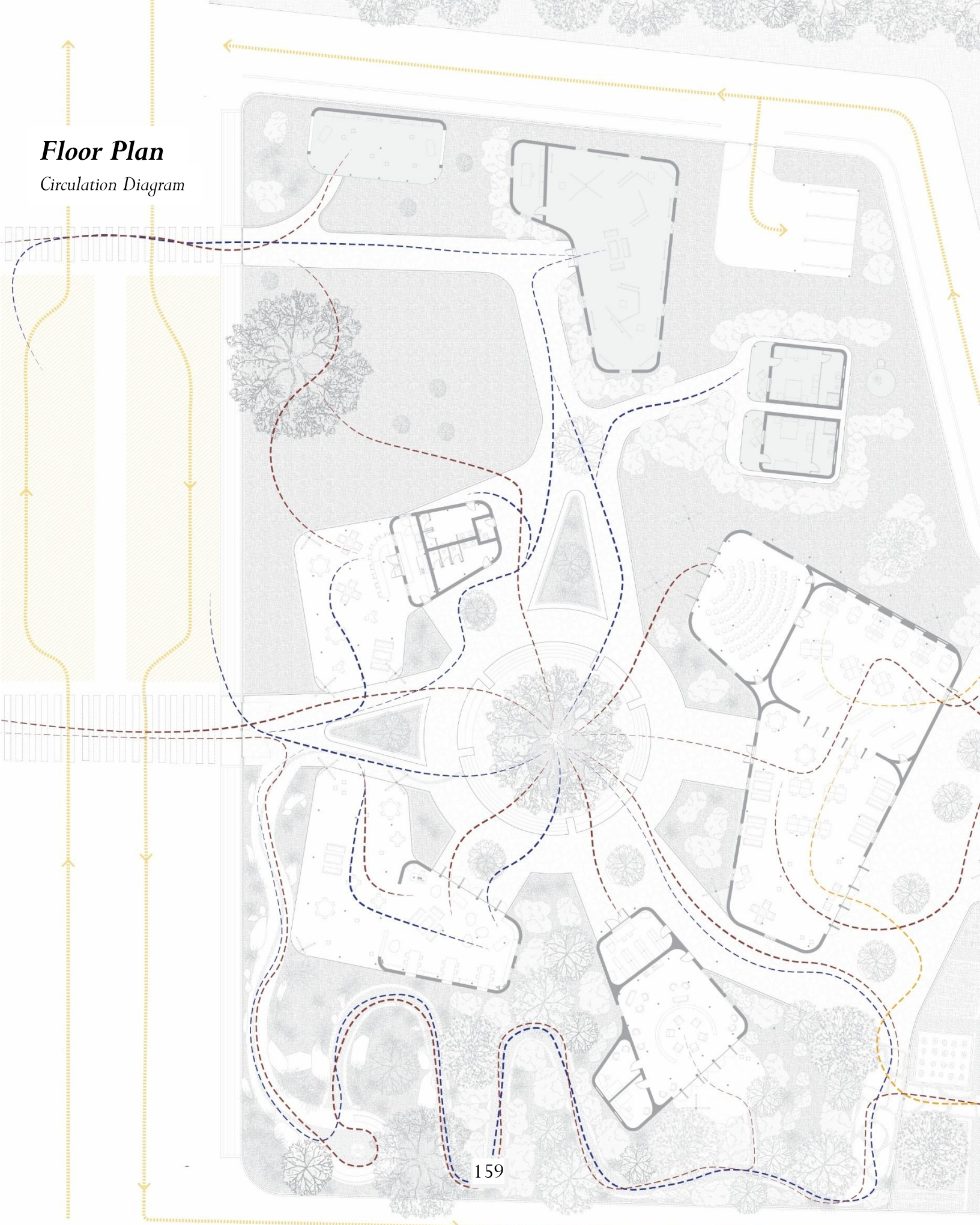
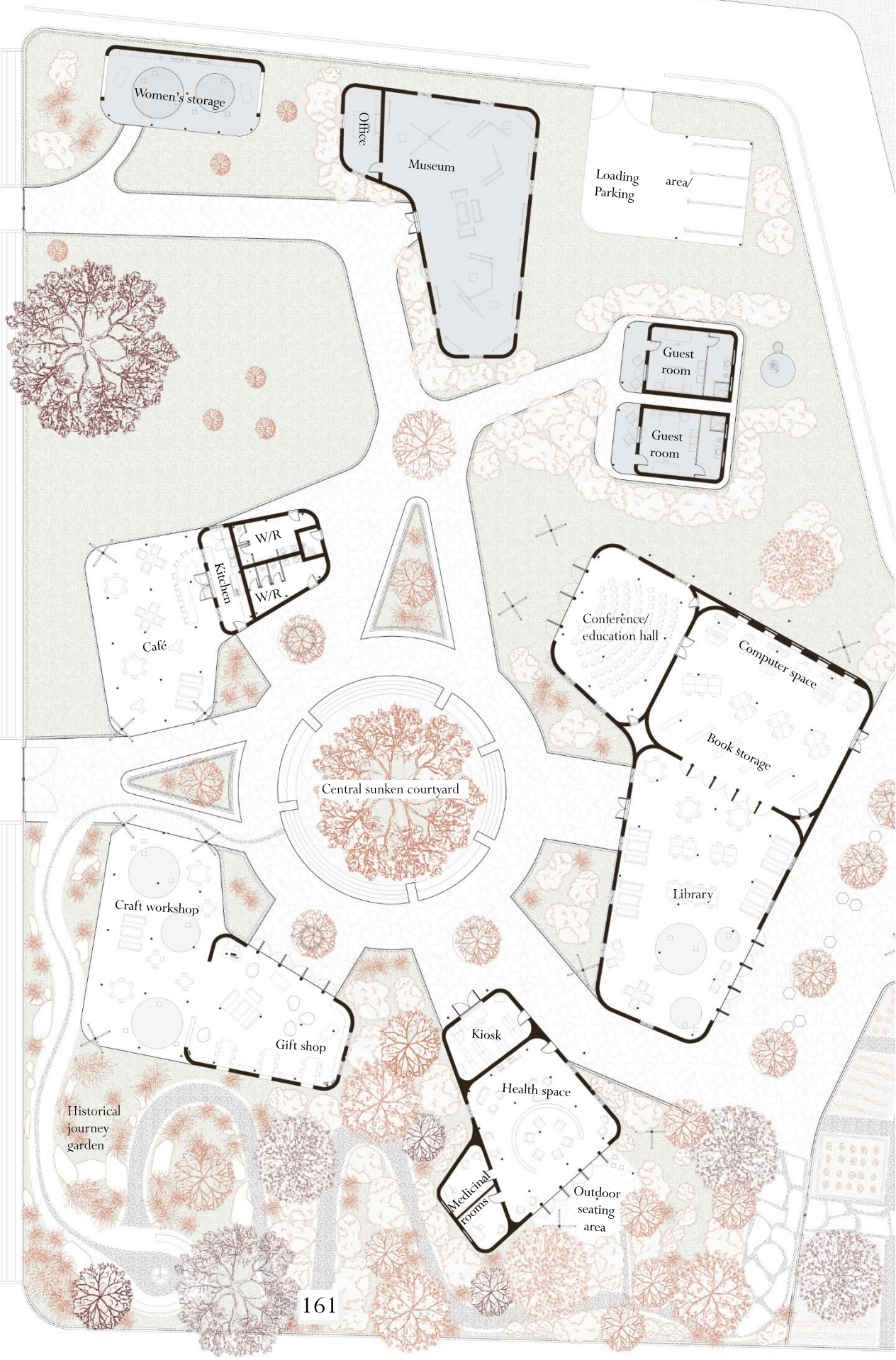


Figure 4.25: Floor plan diagram highlighting circulation and movement patterns of the different user groups. Diagram by Author



Floor Plan

Furniture Diagram



0 1 2 5 10m

Figure 4.26: Floor plan highlighting program and furniture layout. Drawing by Author



Building Sections

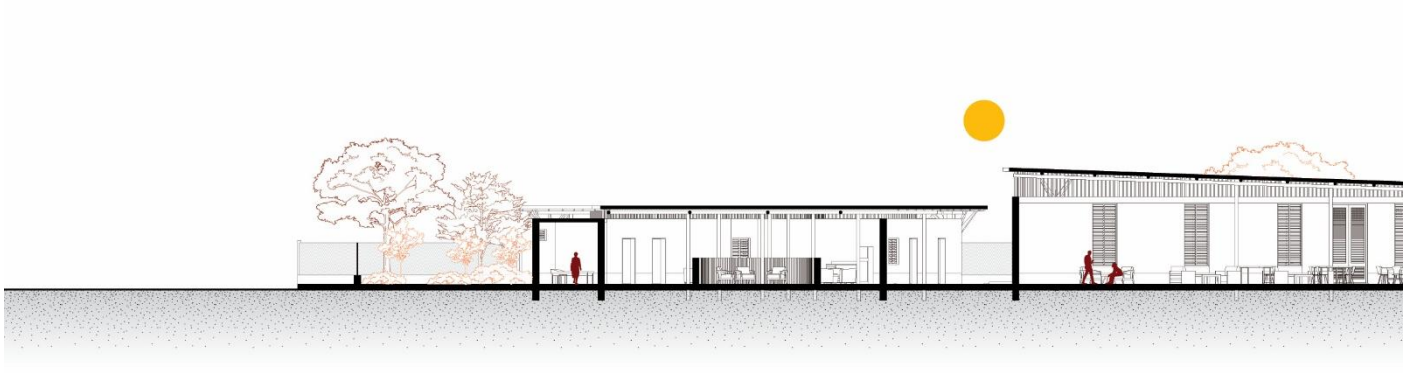


Figure 4.27: Section AA. Drawing by Author

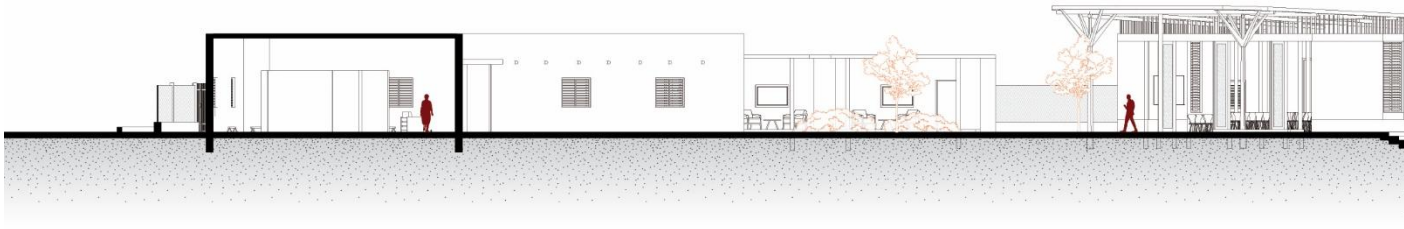


Figure 4.28 Section BB. Drawing by Author

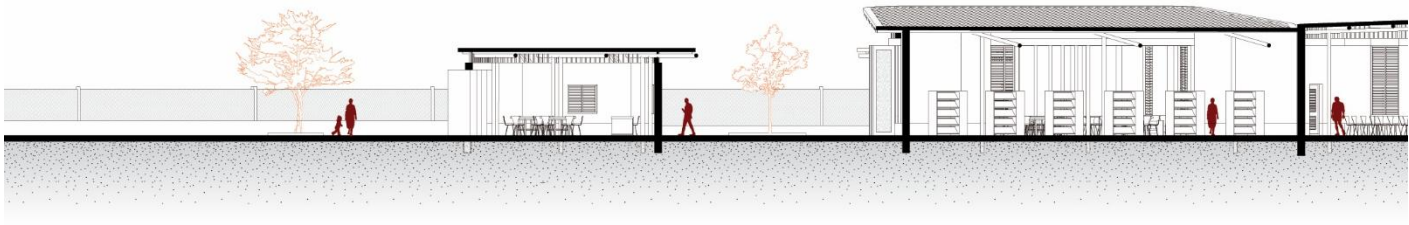


Figure 4.29: Section CC. Drawing by Author


A
C
B
C
B
A
0 1 2 5 10m

The Central Courtyard

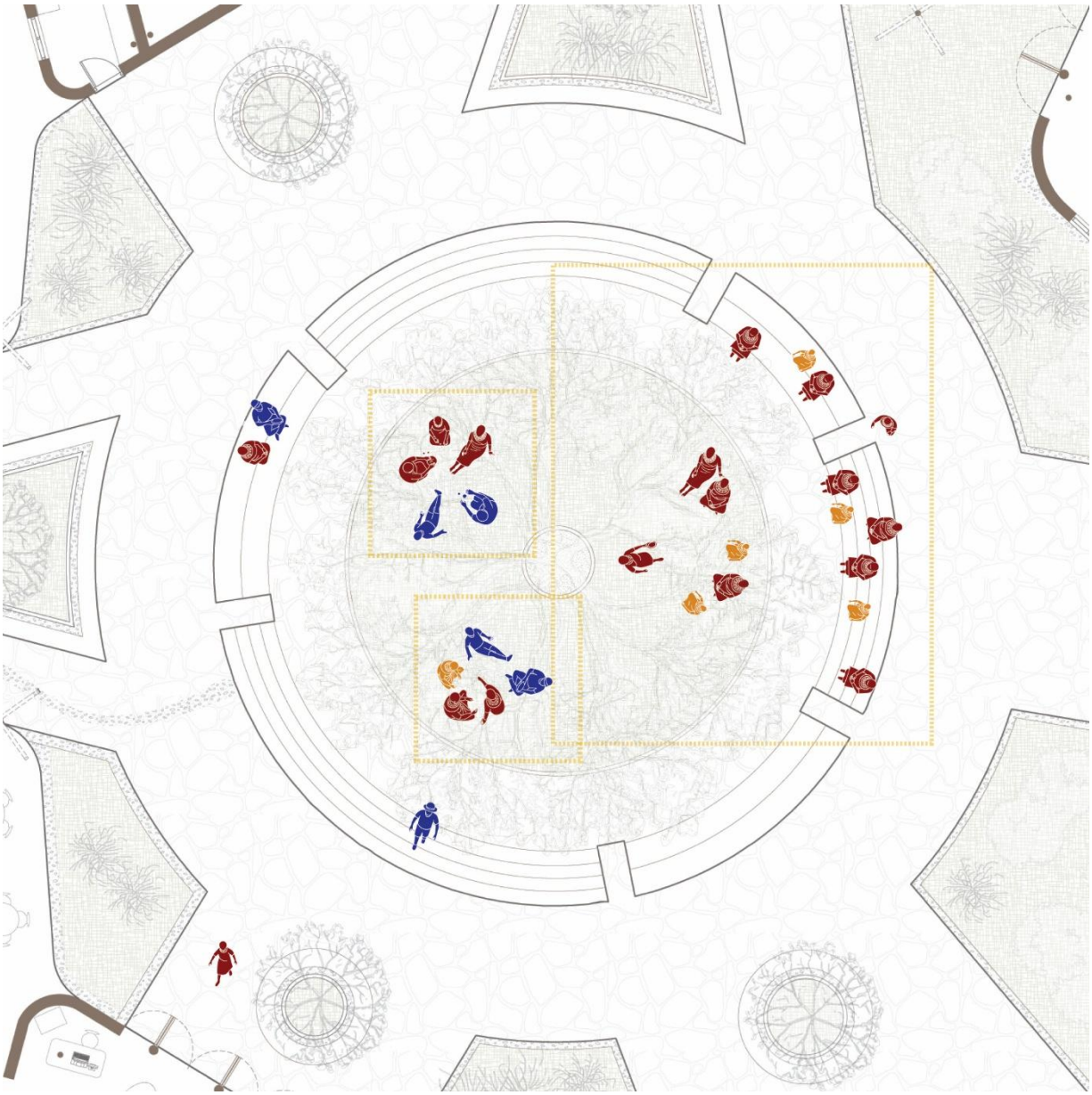
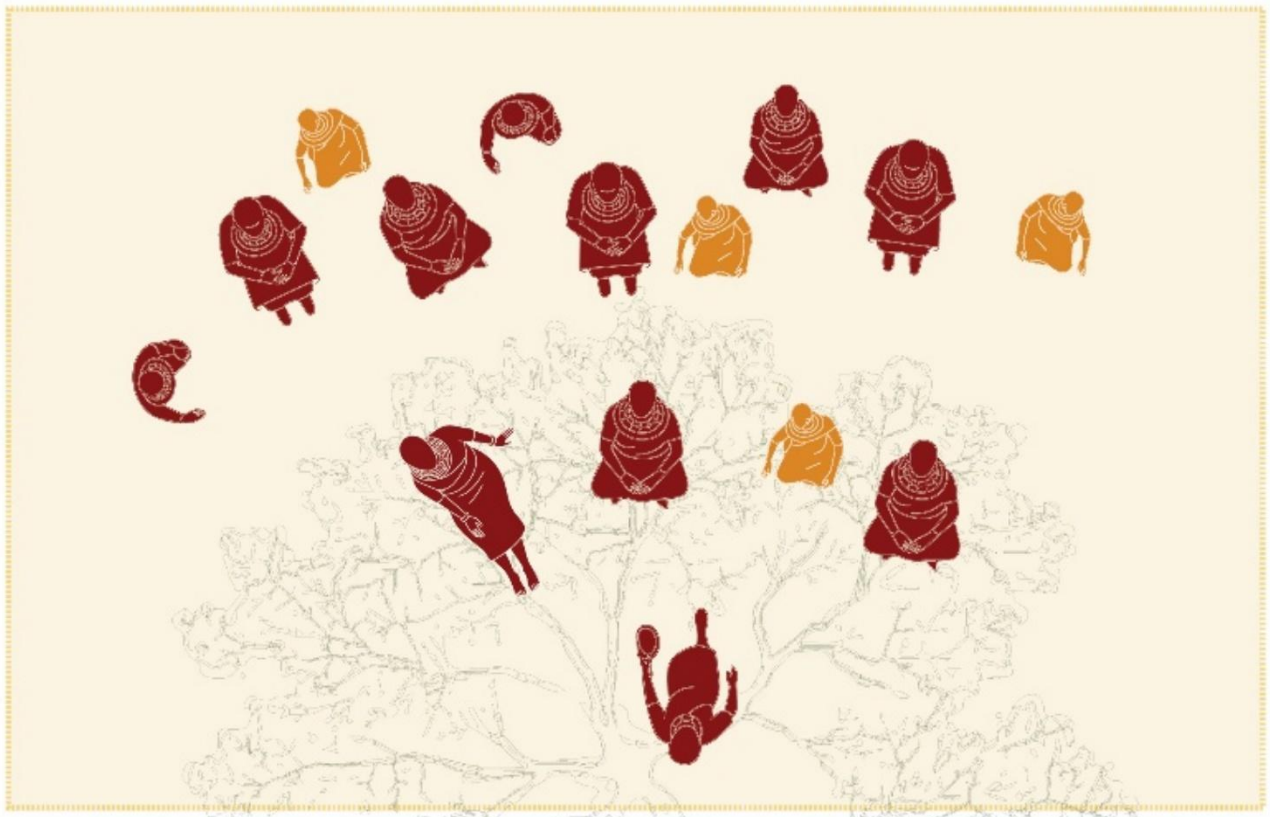
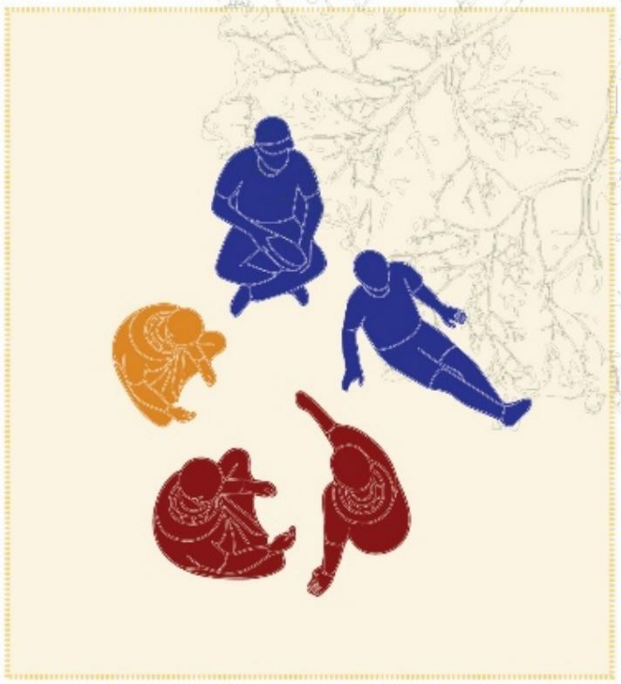


Figure 4.30: Zoomed in diagram of the Central sunken courtyard highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author

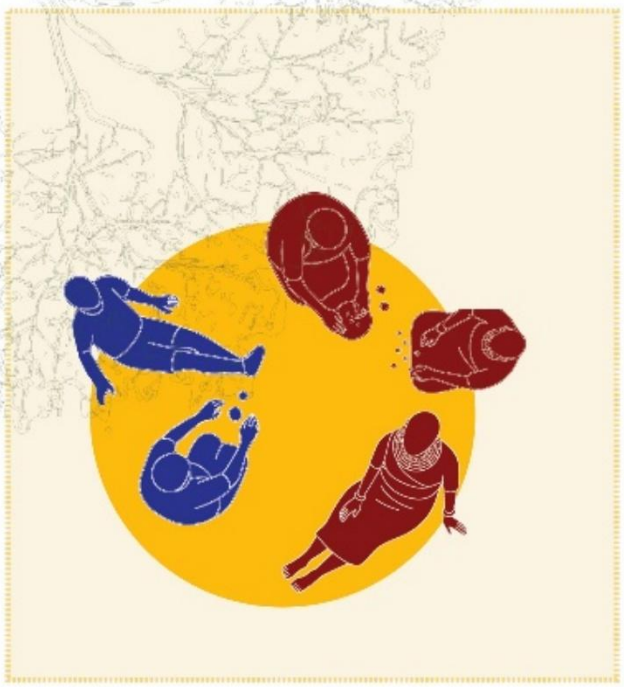
The central sunken courtyard functions as a space of social empowerment, where Maasai women can bead in the shade, share stories and knowledge, and engage with visitors. It serves as a communal heart, fostering interaction, rest, and cultural exchange.



Community gatherings and meetings held under the central tree



Exchange of knowledge, culture and experiences



Resting & beading under the central tree

Figure 4.31: Zoomed in diagrams of the Central sunken courtyard highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author



Figure 4.32: Exterior render of sunken courtyard and central space. Image by Author





Figure 4.33: Exterior render of library building. Image by Author

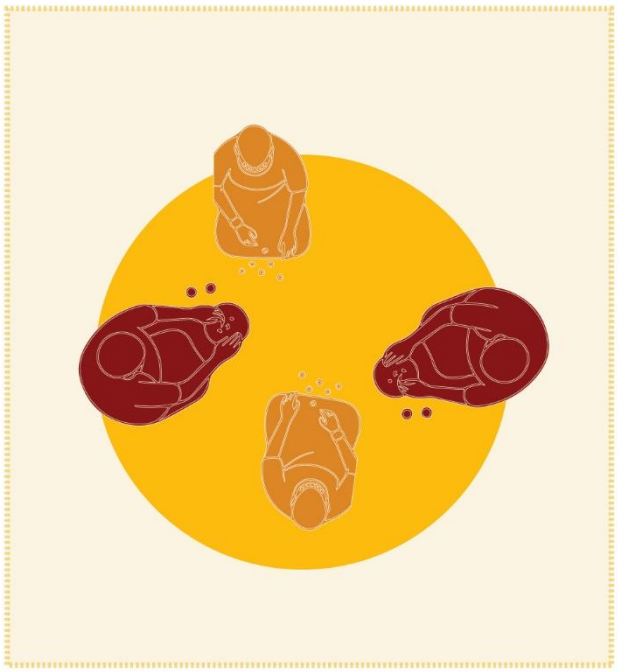

OPATINI - LIBRARY

The Craft & Workspace

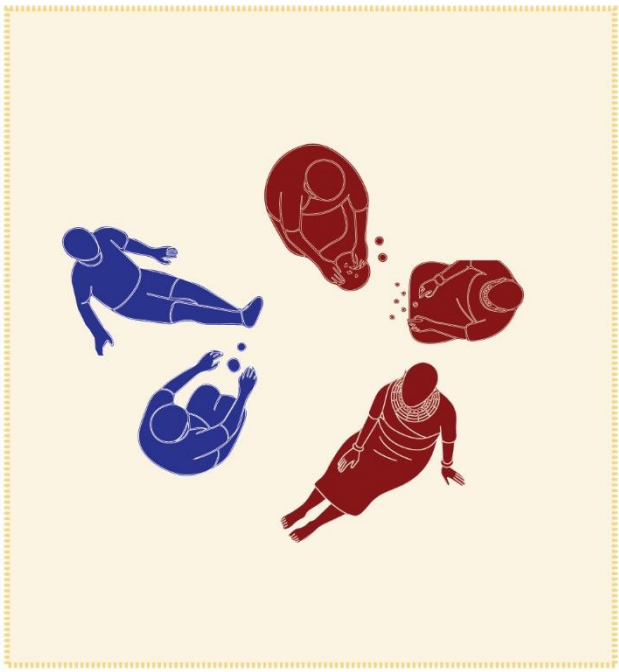


Figure 4.34: Zoomed in diagram of the craft and workspace highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author

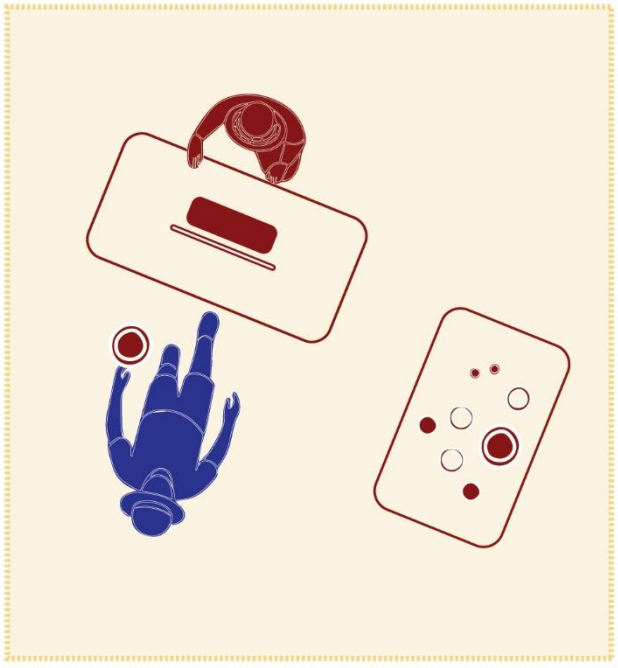
In the craft and workspace, Maasai women share their artistry through workshops with visitors. This is also where they store and sort their beads. The adjoining shop offers a way for tourists to carry a piece of that connection home, while supporting the women's livelihoods.



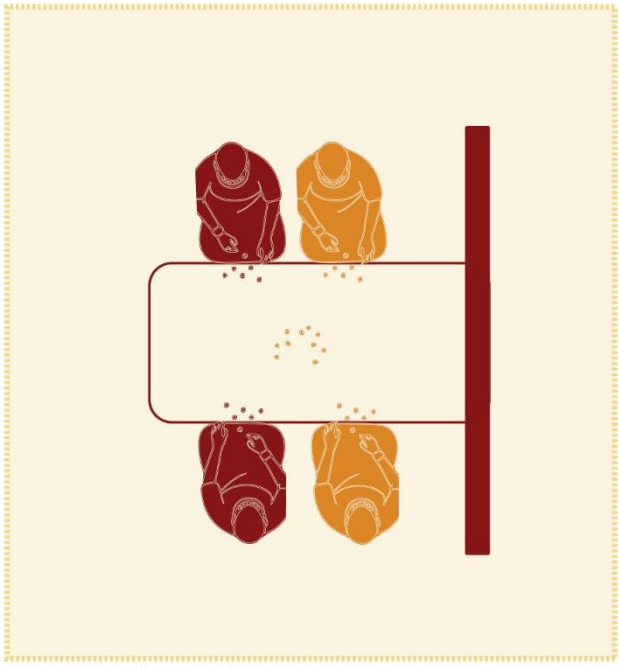
Teaching beading to younger generations



Teaching beading to visitors and tourists



Gift shop where visitors and tourists can buy crafts and jewelry made by the women



Bead sorting and jewelry making space for the women

Figure 4.35: Zoomed in diagrams of the craft and workspace highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author



Figure 4.36: Exterior render of crafting and workshop space. Image by Author





Figure 4.37: Interior render of crafting space and bead sorting and storage area. Image by Author



The Café & Kitchen

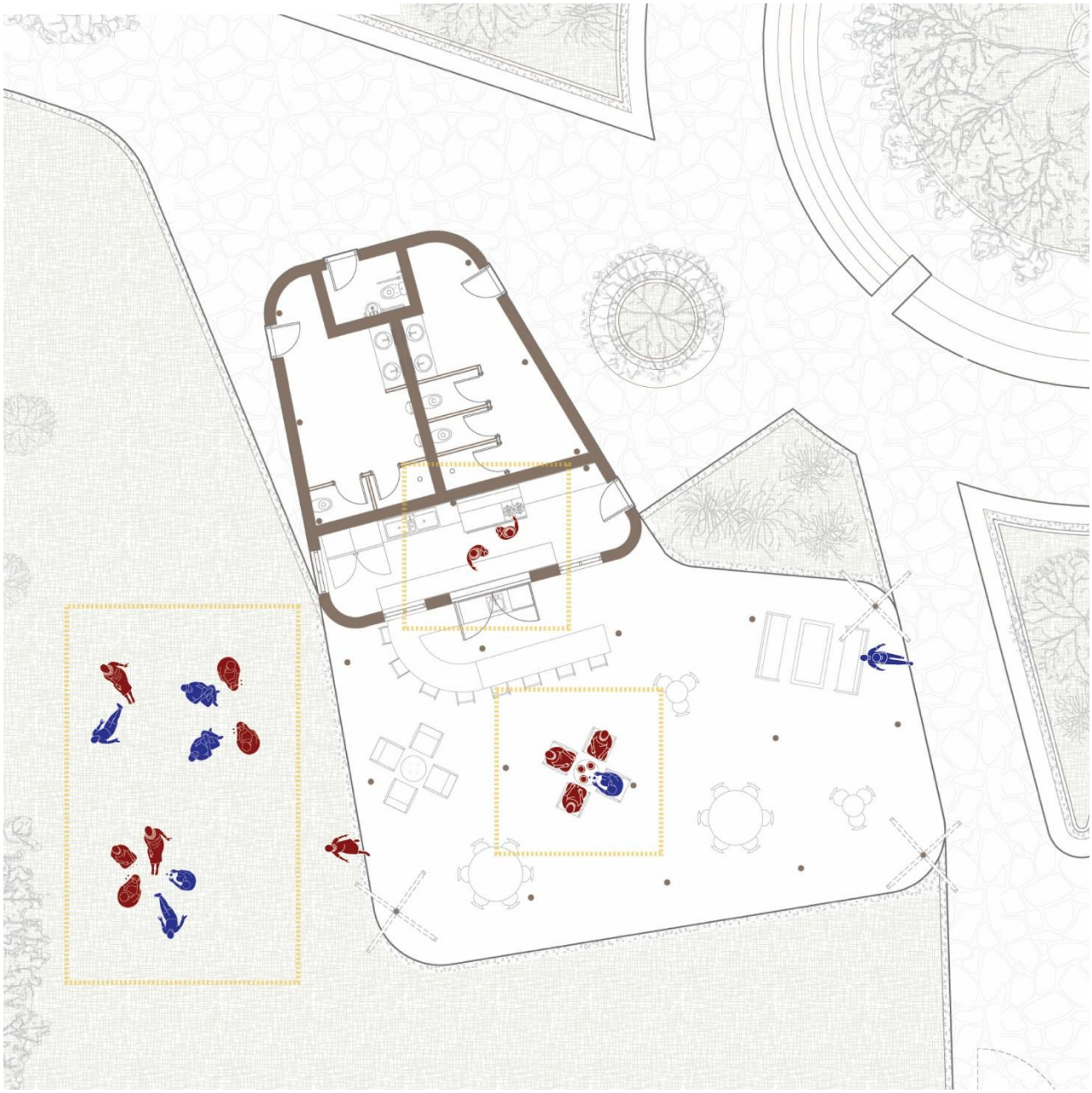
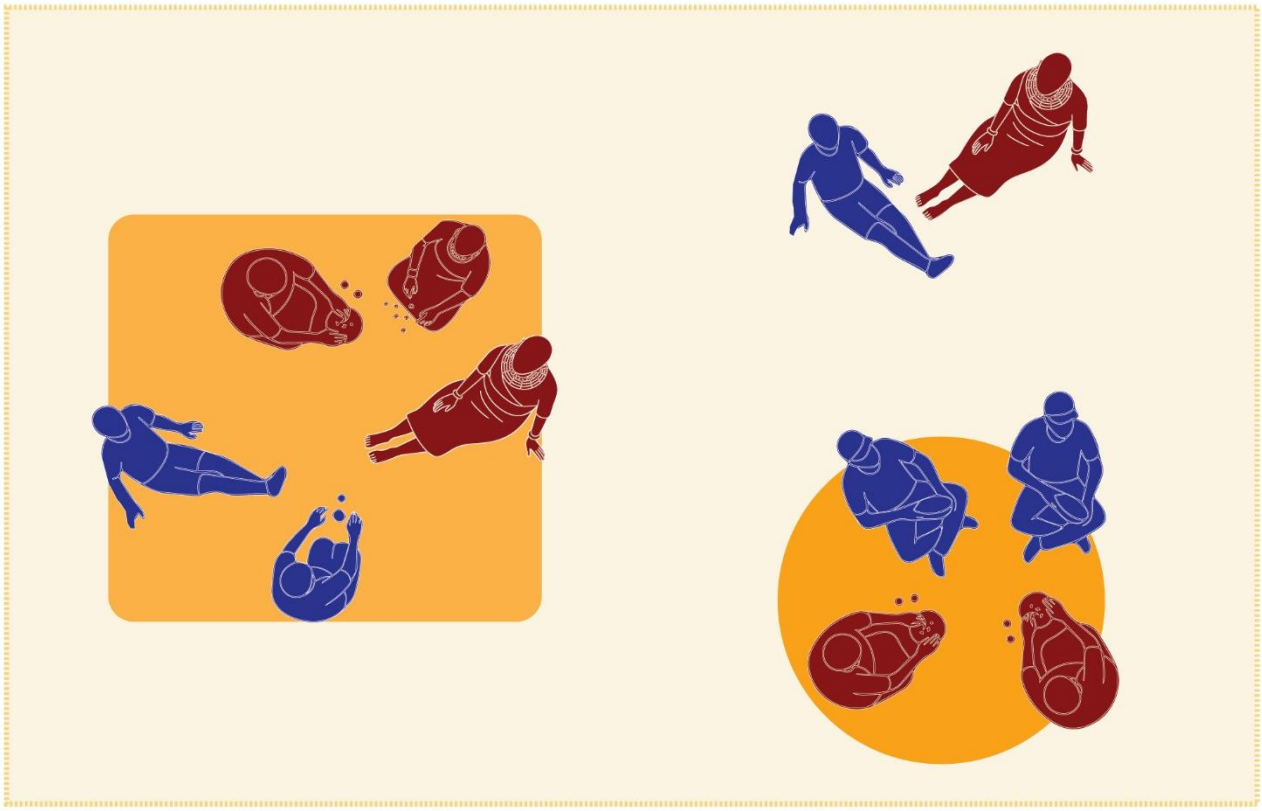
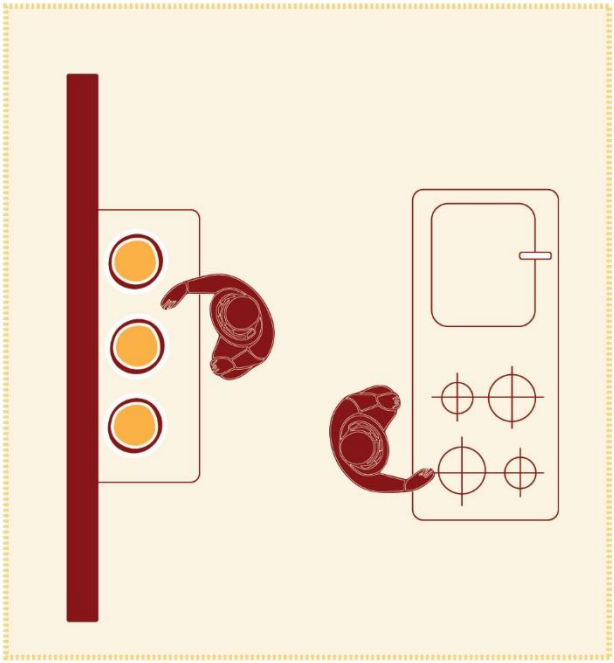


Figure 4.38: Zoomed in diagram of the Kitchen and Café area highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author.

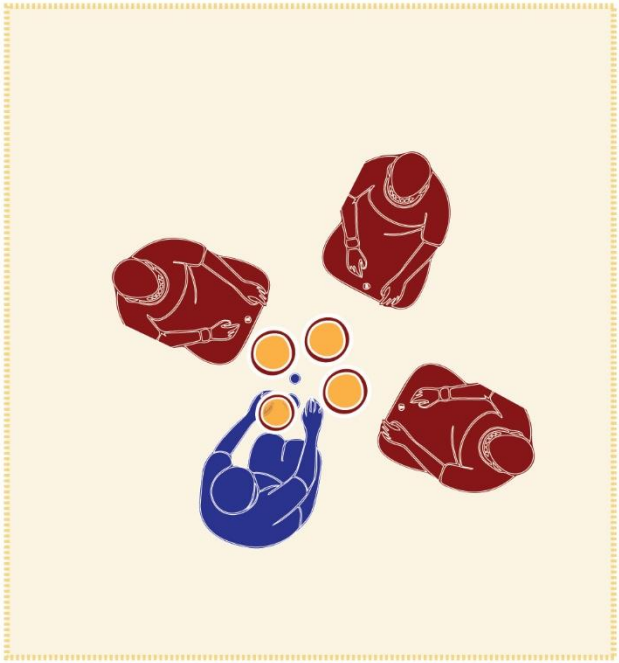
The café and kitchen provide a space where both visitors and community members can enjoy traditional meals. It offers moments of rest, nourishment, and cultural exchange through food and drink. There are also washrooms that are tailored to the Maasais traditional washroom vs a more modern washroom.



Space of gathering, resting, beading, exchanges of knowledge, culture and experiences



Kitchen where Maasai women and visitors can buy food



Shared culinary knowledge and culture through food

Figure 4.39: Zoomed in diagrams of the Kitchen and Café area highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by



Figure 4.40: Exterior render of entrance. Image by Author

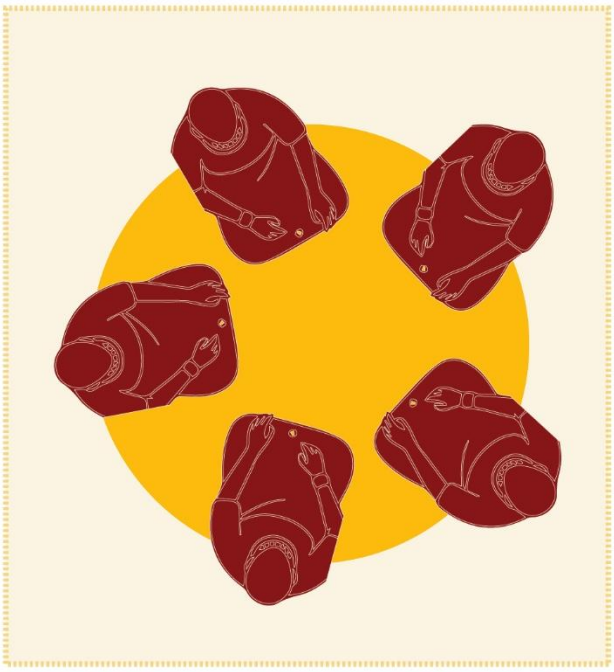


The Health/ Wellness space & medicinal garden



Figure 4.41: Zoomed in diagram of the Health/ wellness area highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author

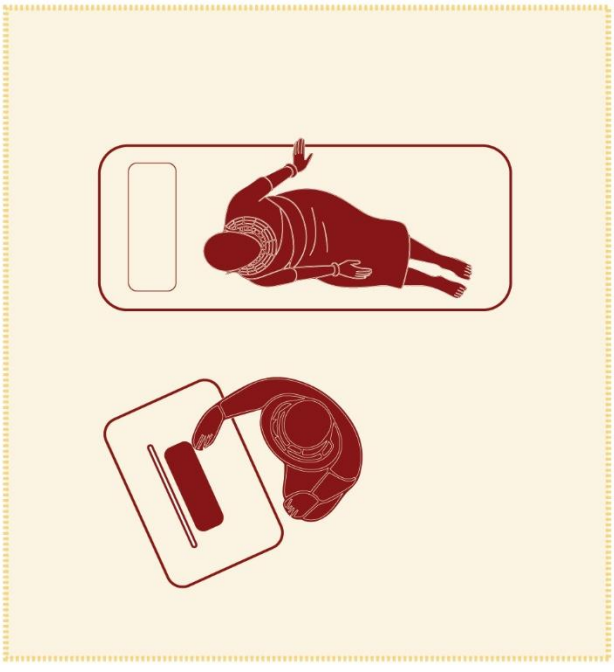
The health and wellness space, paired with a medicinal garden, supports physical and emotional well-being. Rooted in traditional knowledge, the garden offers healing herbs, while the space provides a quiet refuge for rest, care, and also 2 medicinal/ first aid equipped rooms.



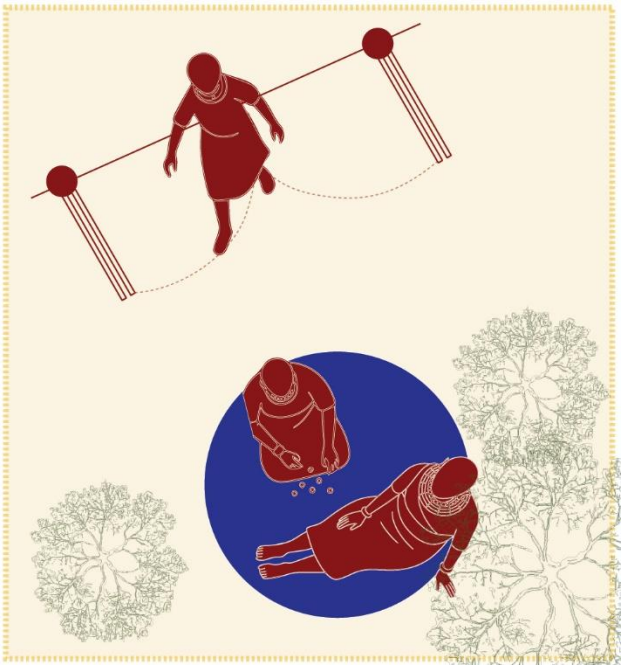
Safe spaces for women to express their emotions and comfort each other through talking.



Kiosk that provides access to things the Maasai women need on a daily bases on site.



Medicinal rooms where Maasai women have access to first aid and medical check ups



Outdoor space for women to comfort each other or reflect, surrounded by the medicinal garden.

Figure 4.42: Zoomed in diagrams of the Health/ wellness area highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author



Figure 4.43: Exterior render of main pathways for the Maasai women and children. The back side of the library is shown. Image by Author



The Library & Computer Lab & Meeting Hall

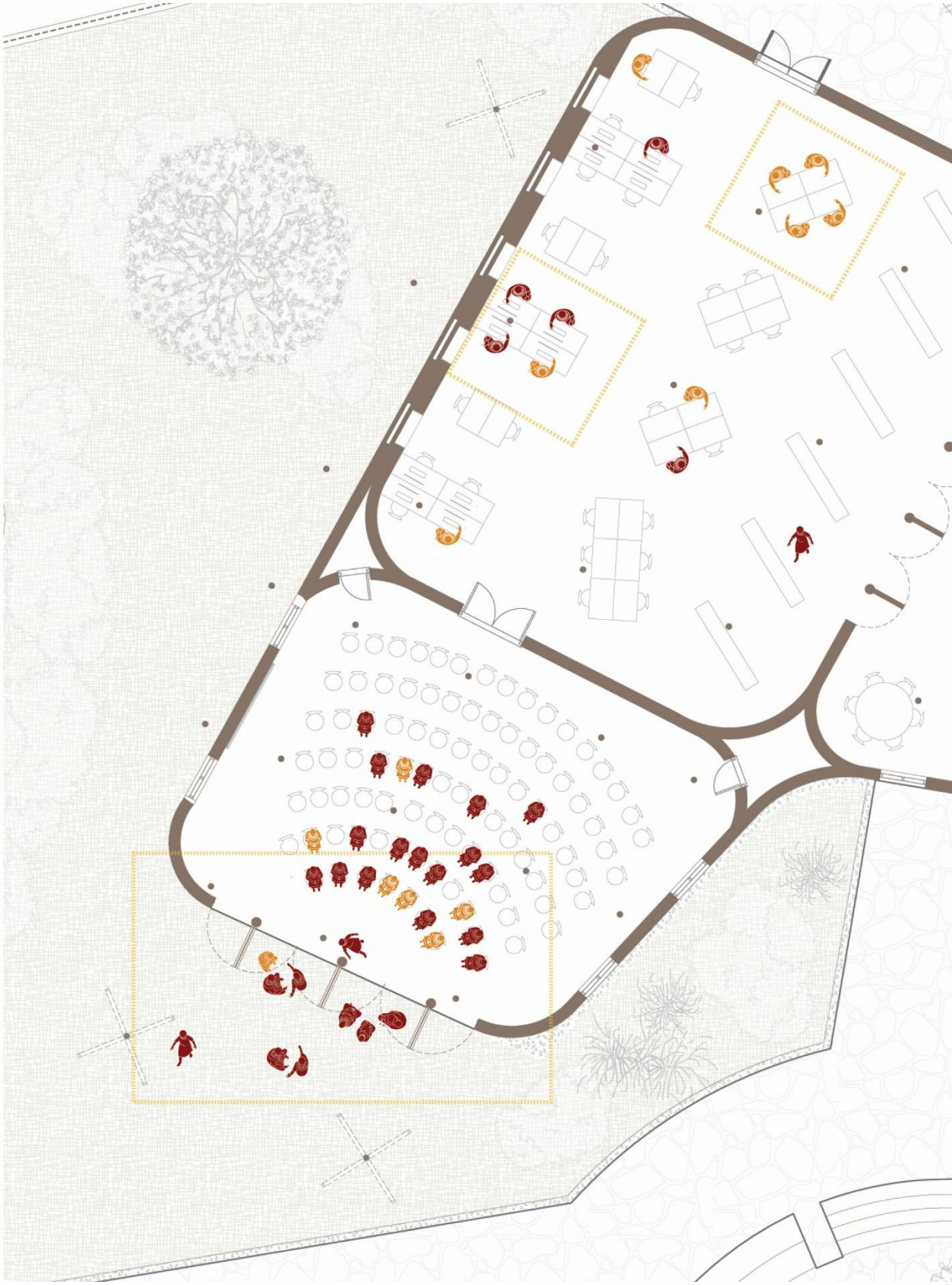
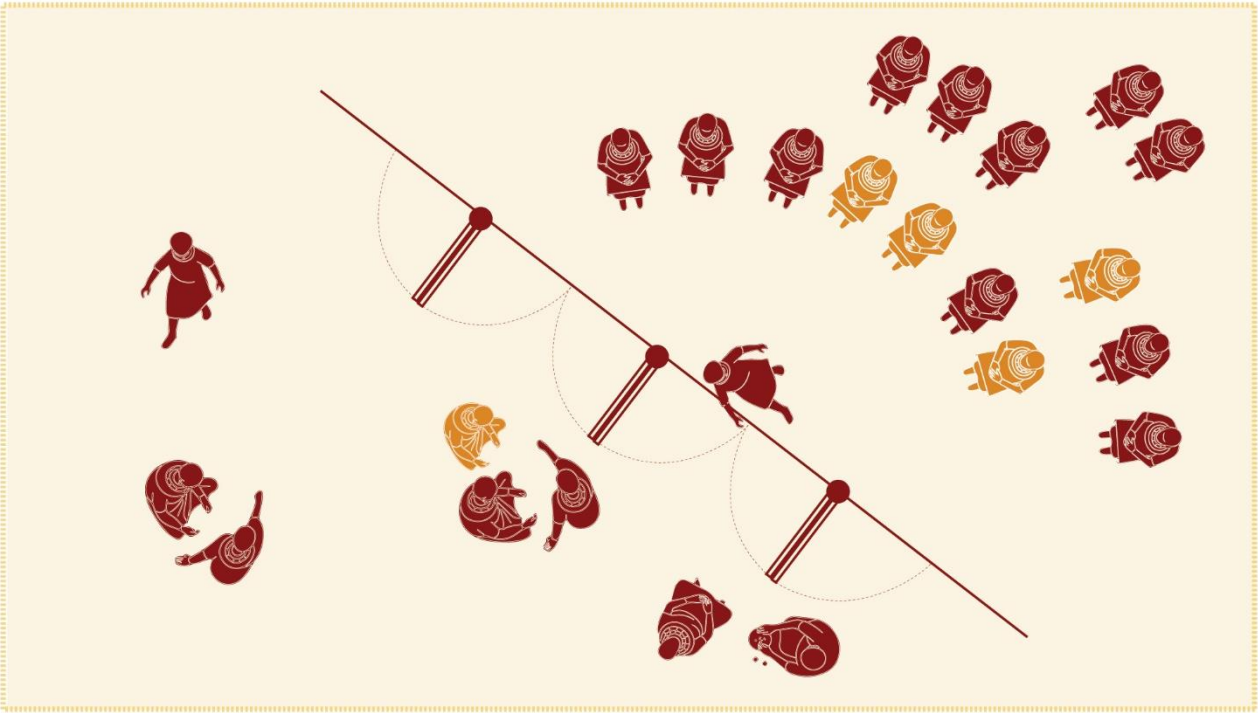


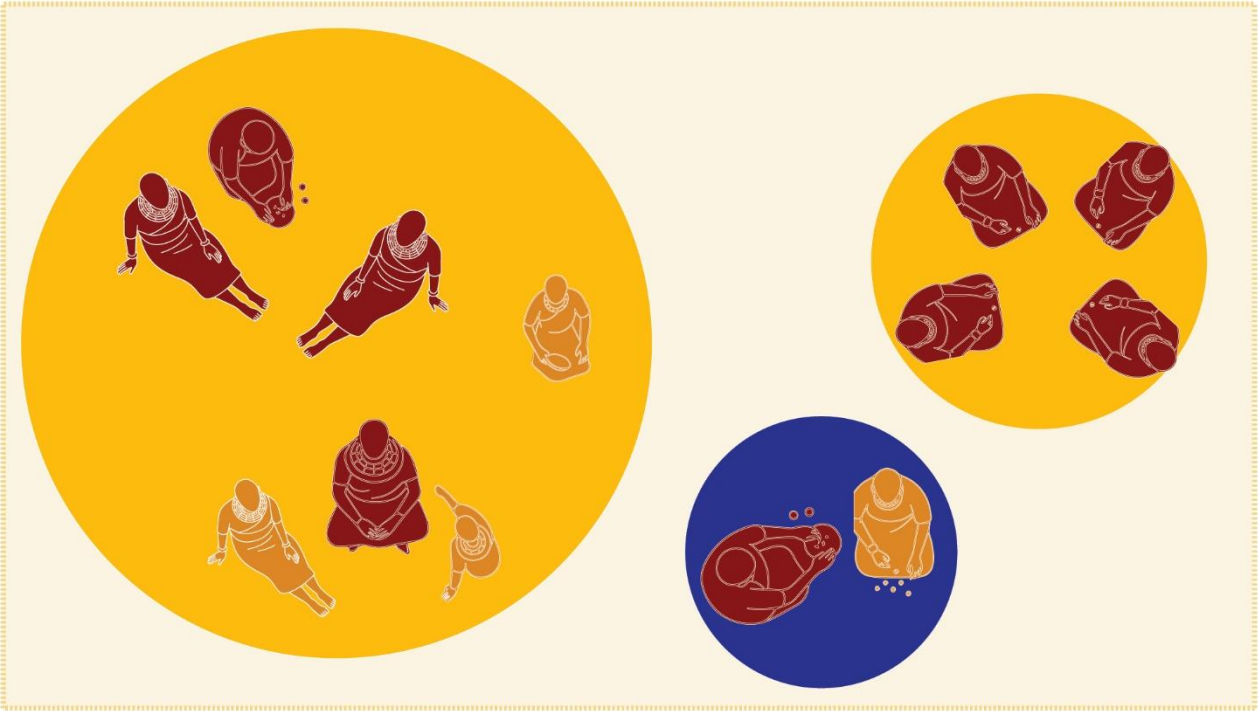


Figure 4.44: Zoomed in diagram of the Library area highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author

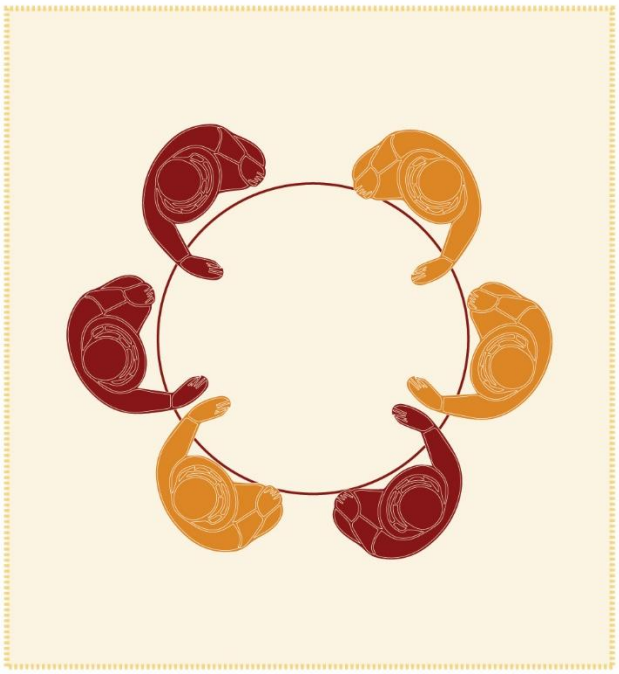
This integrated learning hub includes a library preserving books on Maasai culture, architecture, and vernacular traditions; a computer lab providing digital access and training; and a flexible hall for meetings, education, and community events. Together, these spaces foster knowledge-sharing across generations, blending tradition with modern learning.



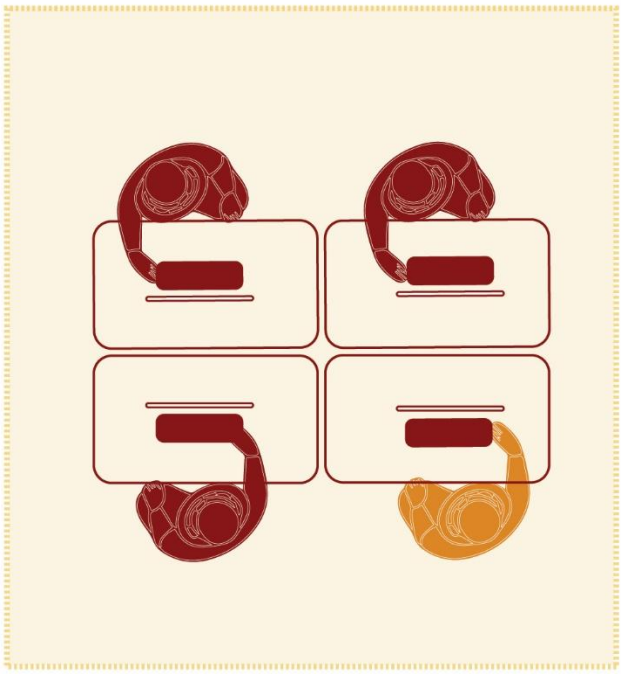
The conference/ education hall opens up to an outdoor space where larger meetings can be held if necessary. There is a circular configuration as this is how traditional community meetings are held.



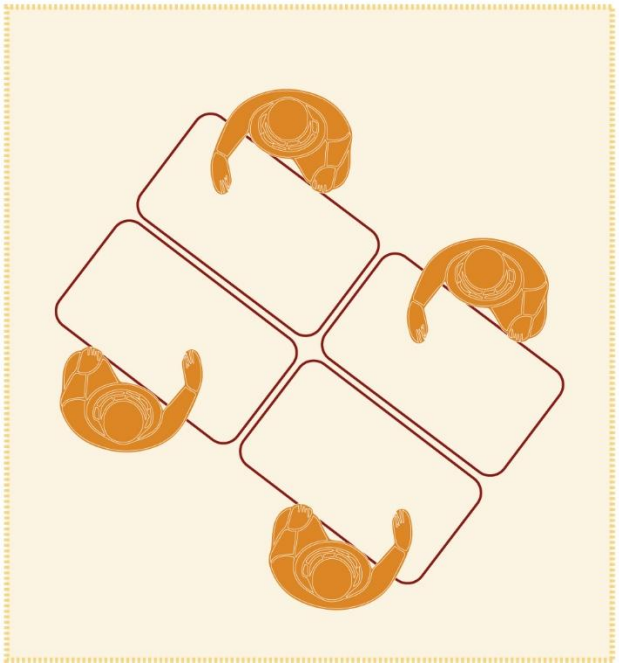
The library includes an area where women, children and students can sit and read books, learn through conversation and pass down knowledge through generations. This is a private indoor space where they can bead as well.



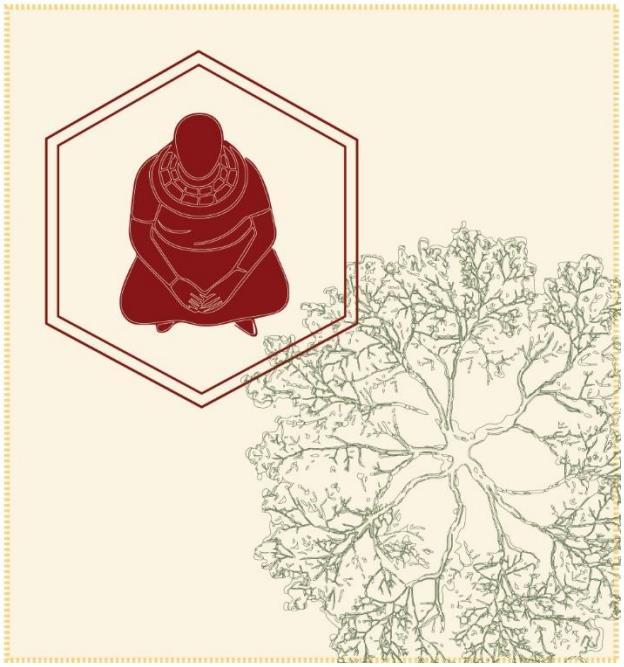
Spaces for shared communication and learning



Computer lab where women and students have access to the Internet and can learn how to use computers



Spaces for students to collaborate or work individually



Outdoor seating so the women can read or learn outdoors

Figure 4.45: Zoomed in diagrams of the Library area highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author



Figure 4.46: Interior render of computer library seating area. Image by Author





Figure 4.47: Interior render of computer lab and library. Image by Author





Figure 4.48: Interior render of educational/ meeting/ conference hall. Image by Author



The Classrooms & Daycare

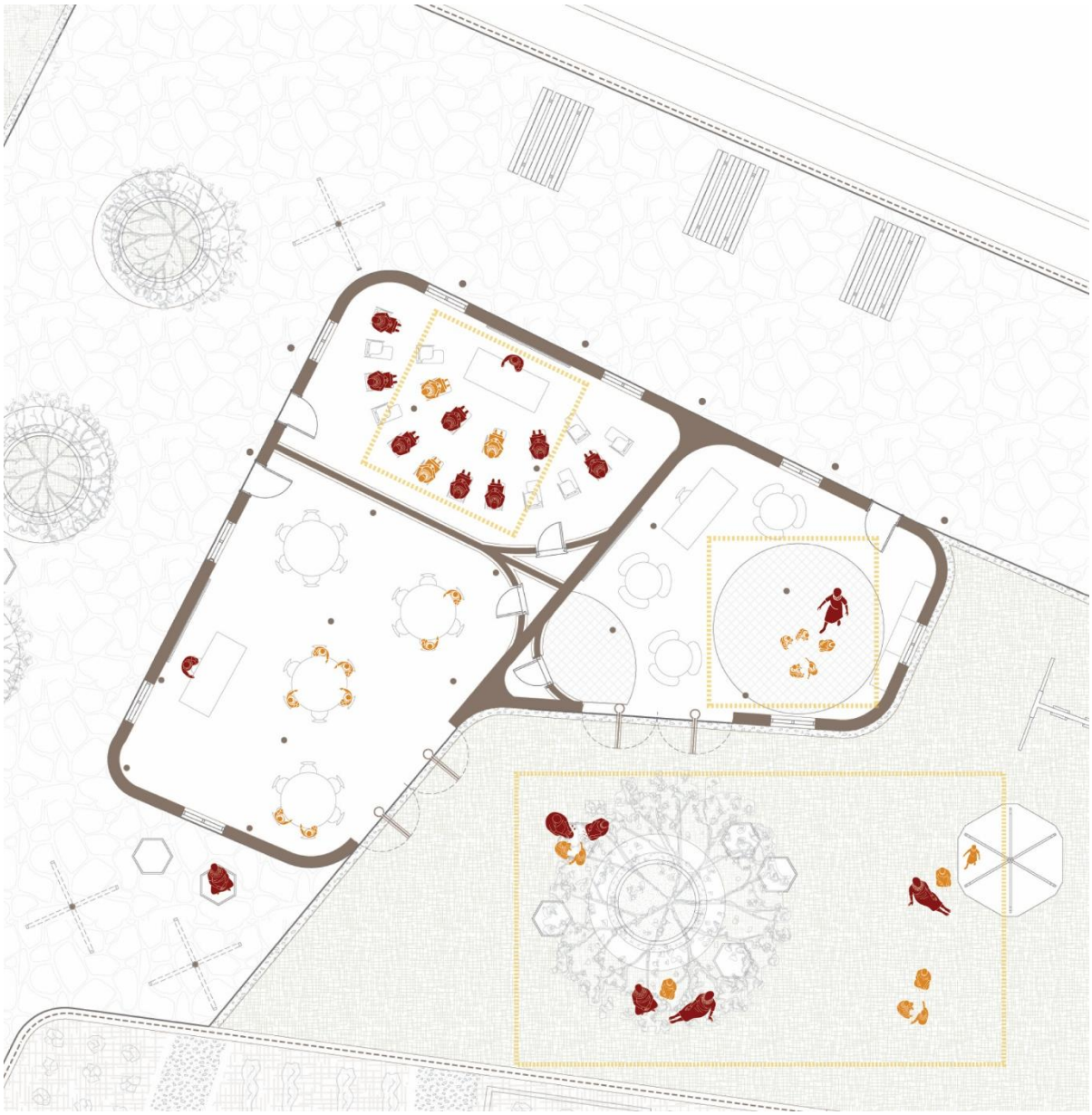
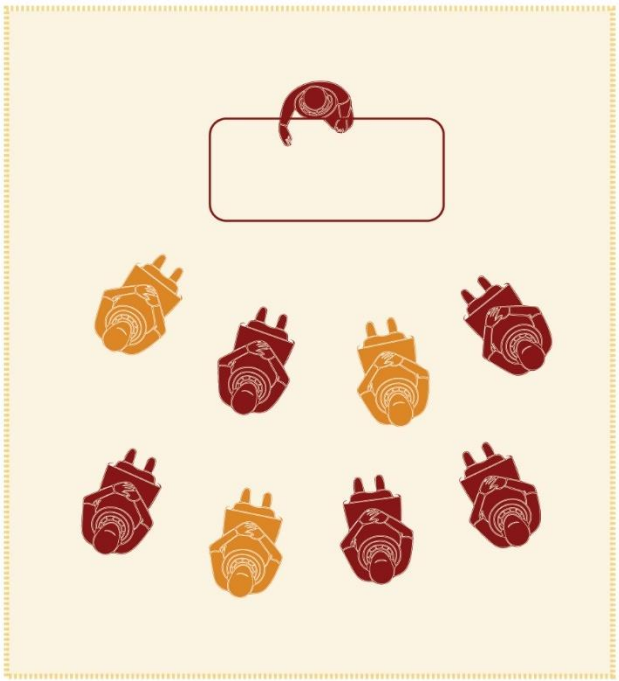


Figure 4.49: Zoomed in diagram of the classroom area highlighting the movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author

Designed to support learning from an early age, this cluster includes classrooms for smaller workshops and meetings, classes and education, a daycare for young children, and a play area that encourages joy, play, and belonging. These spaces ensure that women can engage fully while their children are nurtured nearby



Outdoor resting and play spaces for the women, students and children.



Classrooms that support learning of all ages



Daycare for Maasai children to learn and play in a safe space while their mothers are busy.

Figure 4.50: Zoomed in diagrams of the classroom area highlighting the movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author



Figure 4.51: Interior render of classroom. Image by Author





Figure 4.52: Exterior render of play area, sports field and the community water taps. Image by Author

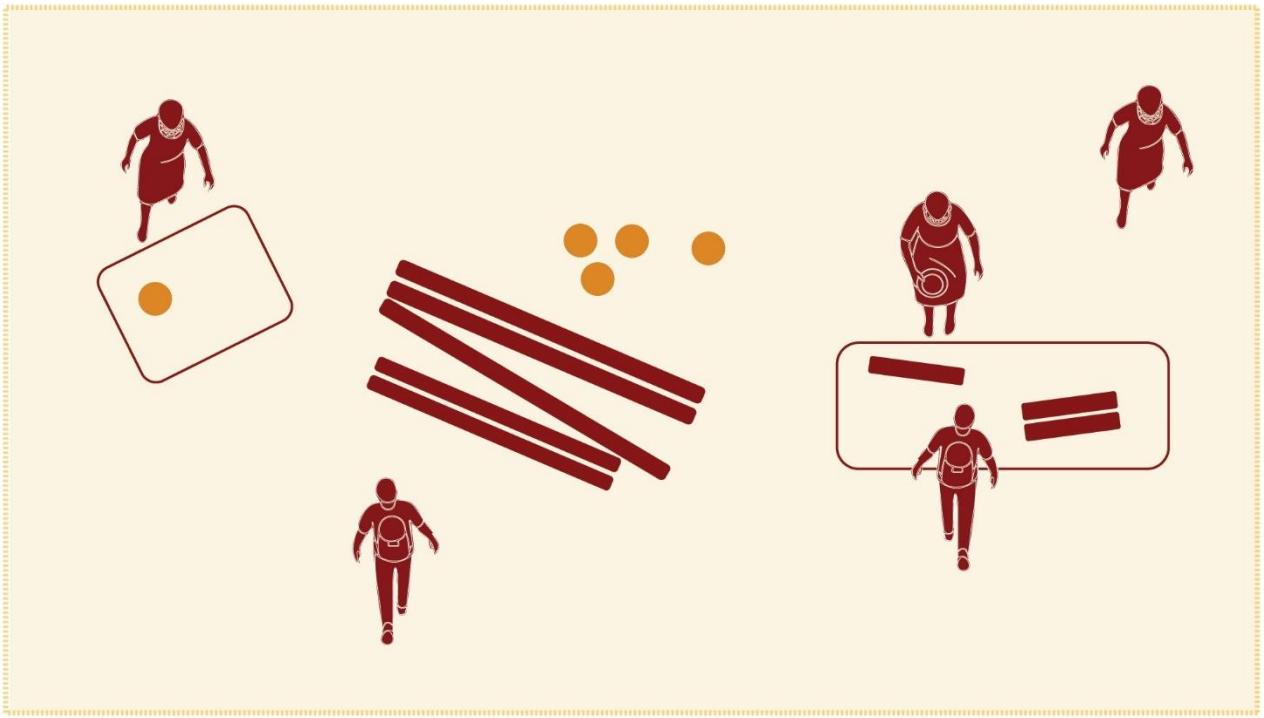


The Sports Field



Figure 4.53: Zoomed in diagram of the builders/ sport field highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author

Initially serving as a builder's field during construction, this space offers women hands-on learning in rammed earth and other related construction techniques. It is a space for them to learn new skills and play a larger part in the construction. After completion, it transforms into a small sports field, a place for play, movement, and recreation for the whole community.



Before construction is complete the space is used as a builder's field. The women are taught new construction skills that they can apply to the construction of building.



After construction the field is used by the women, students and children to play sports like football or team building/ community strengthening activities.

Figure 4.54: Zoomed in diagram of the builders/ sport field highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author

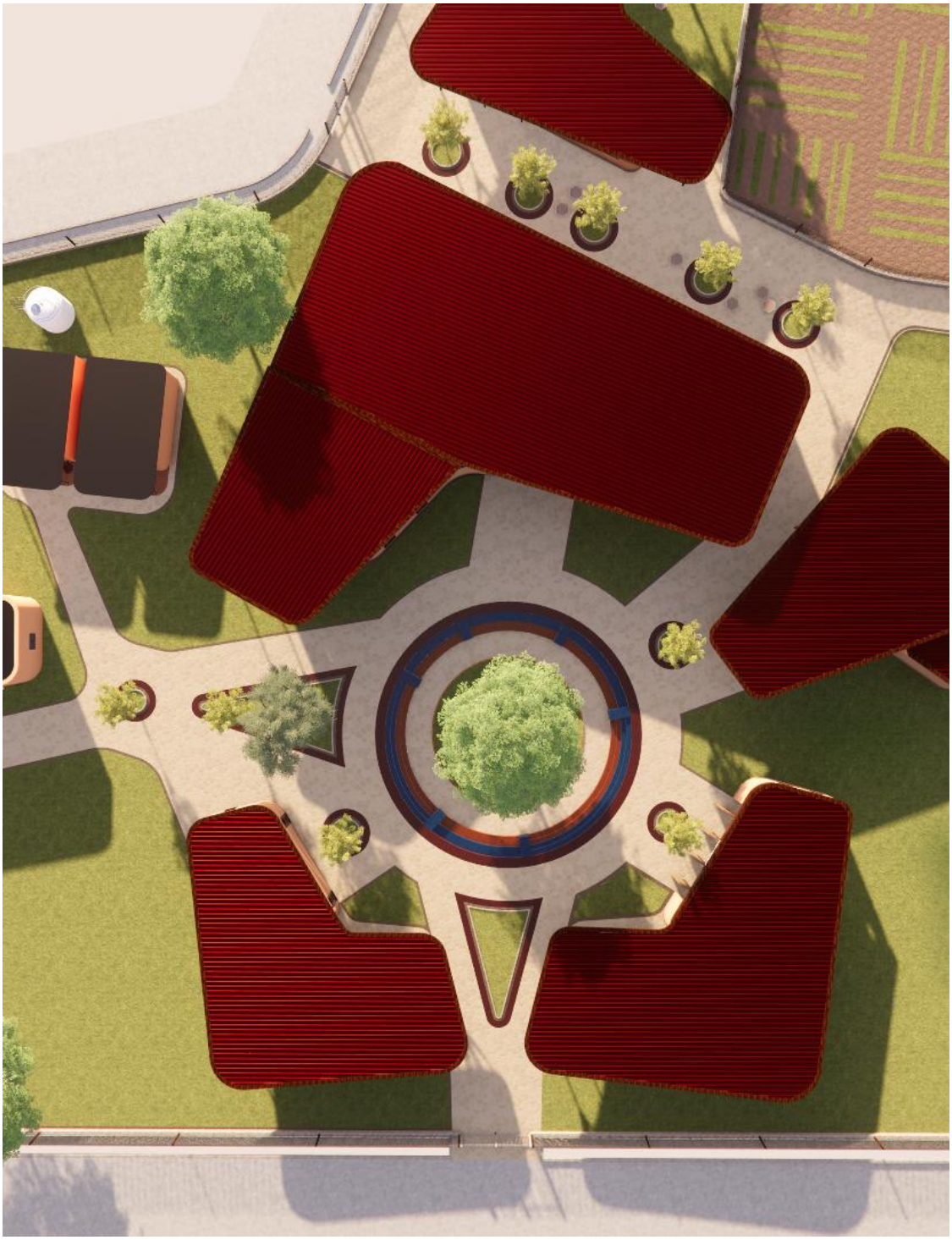


Figure 4.55: Rendered plan of the central space, inspired by the circular form and triangular and circular elements of a Maasai woman's necklace. The layout reflects connection, community, and cultural continuity, placing women at the heart of the design. Image by Author



Figure 4.56: An image of a Maasai woman's necklace showing the circular elements and form as well as the triangular ones. Image retrieved from https://matlovesm.click/product_details/103211304.html

The Gardens

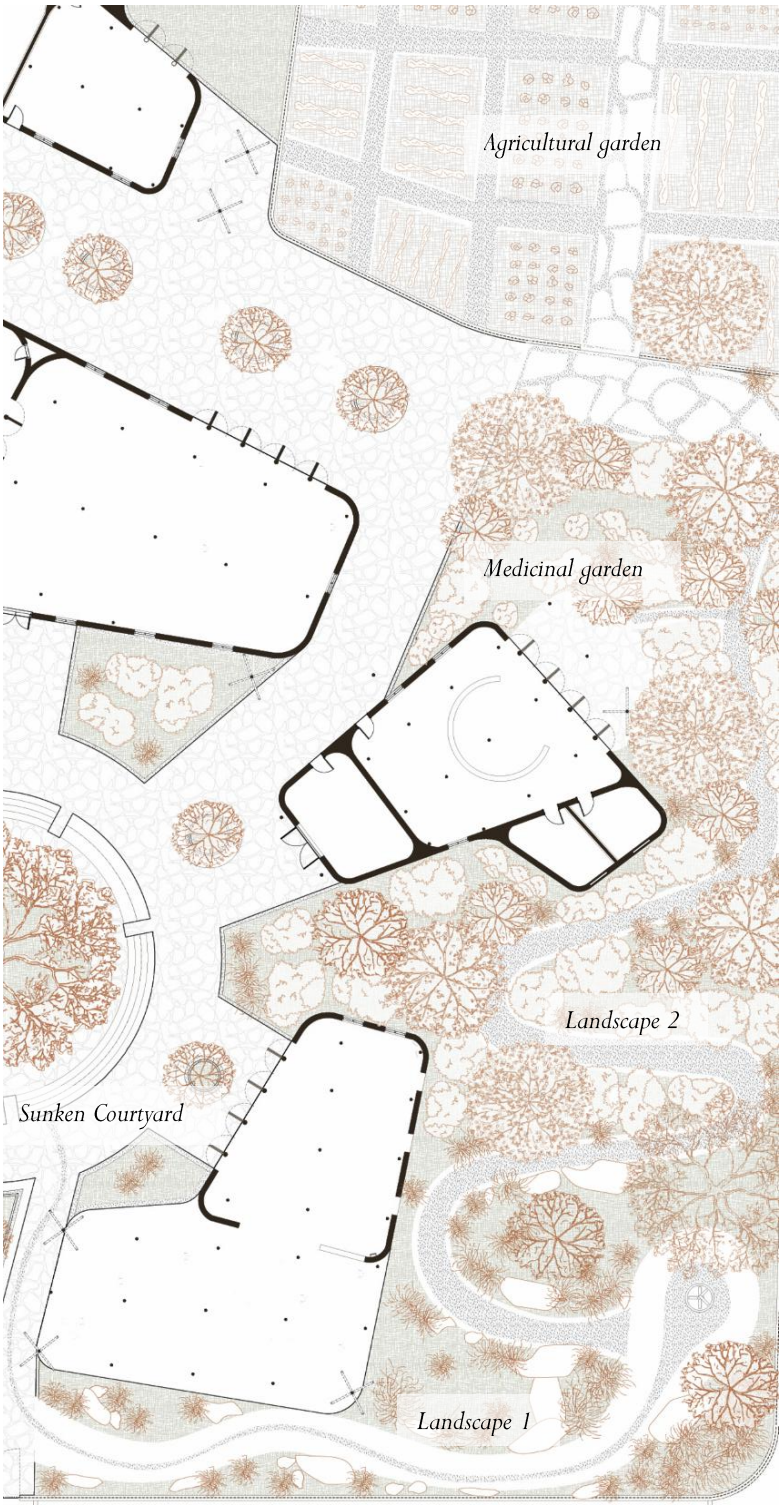


Figure 4.57: Zoomed in diagram of the historical journey garden and agricultural garden. Drawing by Author

The Agricultural Garden

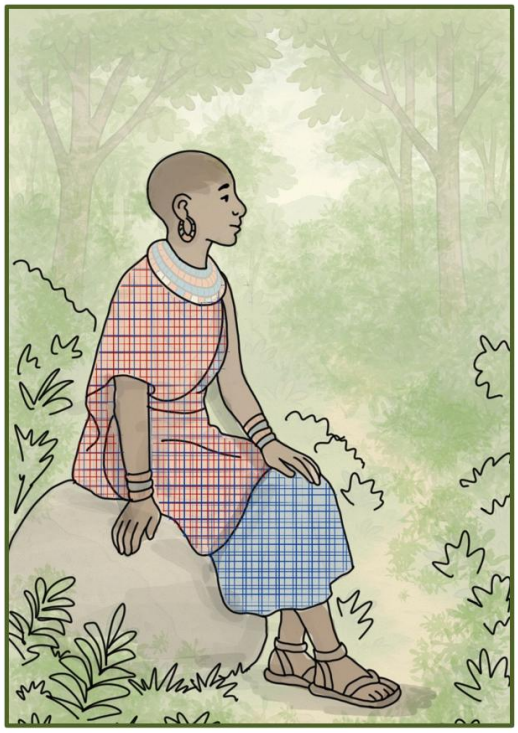


Figure 4.58: Zoomed in diagram of the agricultural garden highlighting movement and activity in the space. Drawing by Author

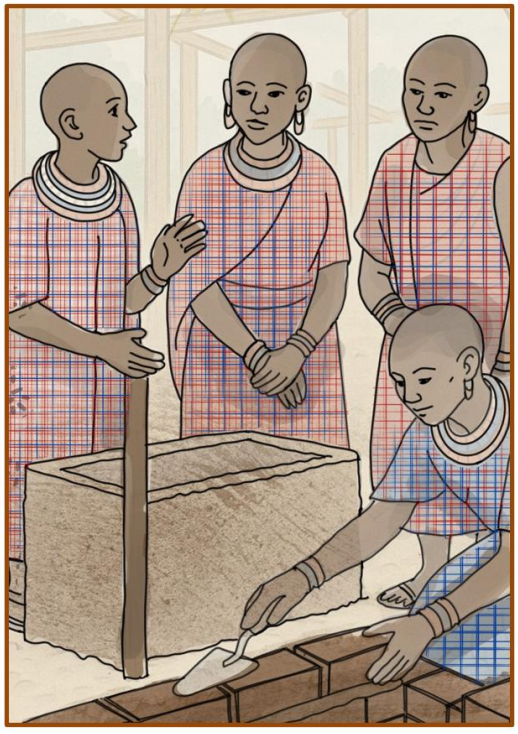


Figure 4.59: Experiential drawings of the gardens and builder's yard. Drawing by Author









The Journey Garden is a narrative landscape that traces the historical and symbolic journey of the Maasai people. It begins at the sunken courtyard, which represents the Maasai myth of origin, emerging from a valley gifted by the divine figure Enkai. From there, visitors follow a dry stone river, symbolizing the Maasai's migration along the Nile through dry, arid, and rocky terrains. As the path continues, it leads to a resting space, marking the Maasai's arrival and settlement in present-day Kenya and Tanzania. This transition point is a moment of reflection and arrival.

The journey then moves into a dense, forested area, symbolizing the period of colonial disruption — a time of uncertainty and restriction for the Maasai. The path in this section becomes more meandering and harder to walk on, reflecting the challenges and loss of autonomy during colonization. Finally, the path opens into an agricultural garden, representing the present and the future. Here, stepping stones ease the way forward, symbolizing rootedness, stability, and growth. The women cultivate crops, signifying a new phase of self-sufficiency and adaptation. Beyond the garden lies the builder's field, a space used for hands-on construction learning and later transforming into a playground.

Landscape 1: The Migration Down the Nile



Figure 4.60: Landscape 1: The Migration Down the Nile experiential collage and native plant information. Diagram by Author



Acacia Umbrella Thorn Tree
Enchardalani – used in construction of the home.



Bulbostylis boeckleriana
Eseat –eaten by cattle



Cyperus amauropus Steud
Enkurba Seai – eaten by cattle



Hyparrhenia hirta (L.) Stapf
Orpesi Orasha – used in construction of the roofs



Harpachne schimperi Hochst.
Orioaraan – eaten by livestock



Cyperus vestitus Hochst.
Enkonyou – eaten by livestock



Balanites aegyptiaca
Ng'amurwa – medicinal bark for stomach issues, natural dewormer



Eragrostis braunii Schweinf.
Empiris –eaten by livestock

Landscape 2: Navigating Colonization



Figure 4.61: Landscape 2: Navigating Colonization experiential collage and native plant information. Diagram by Author



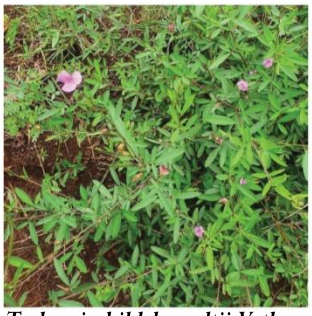
Warburgia ugandensis
Osokonoi – medicinal, used for chest infections and better immune



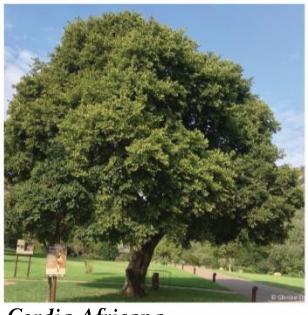
Solanum incanum L. *Entulelei – medicinal, used to treat wounds and skin infection.*



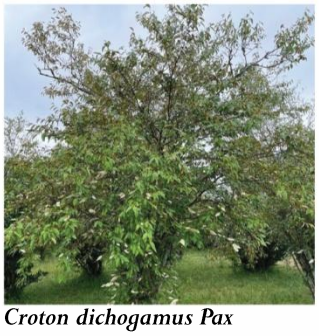
Olea europaea ssp. africana
Olorien – cures malaria, used in ceremonies, medicine for cattle.



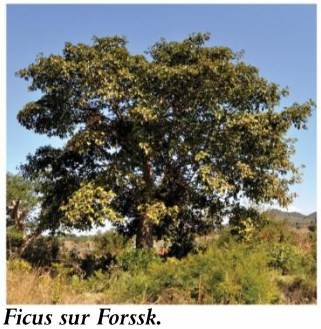
Tephrosia hildebrandtii Vatke
Enchanai Okiken – used as a toothbrush when it grows big



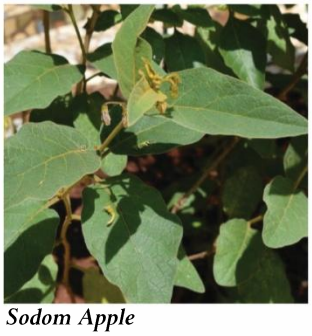
Cordia Africana
Oltung'ani – used to make furniture



Croton dichogamus Pax
Olokidigai– used as toothbrush, leaves used for Maasai beer.



Ficus sur Forssk.
Odapashi Ebenek – no use



Sodom Apple
Ol'gilai – medicinal, used on wounds or snake bites.

Plants in the Medicinal Garden



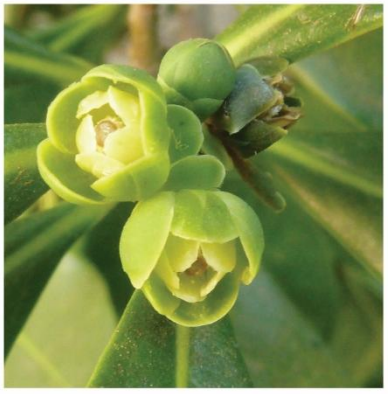
Achyranthes aspera L. *Olekidogo – used for malaria and syphilis*



Carissa edulis (Forssk.) Vahl.
Enkamuriaki – used for venereal disease and back and joint pain



Osteospermum vaillantii Norlindh
Eleleshwa Ekop – used to cure skin disease



Warburgia salutaris (Bertil. f.)
Osokonoi – used for malaria and stomach aches



Jasminum fluminense Vell. *Ormeko Orsage – used for wounds*



Sporobolus stapfianus Gand.
Enkonyoyo – used for malaria and stomach pains



Toddalia asiatica (L.) Lam.
Oleparmunyo – used for the common cold and malaria



Craterostigma plantagineum Hochst.
Enkorika Emotionyi – used for body pains



Evolvulus alsinoides (L.) L. *Leleswa Ekopo – used when your spirit feels bad or unhappy*

Figure 4.62: Information diagram of plants in the medicinal garden. Diagram by Author

Crops in the Agricultural Garden



Collard greens
Sukuma wiki (in Swahili) valued for its iron and nutritious content



Kale
Sukuma wiki (in Swahili) valued for its iron and nutritious content



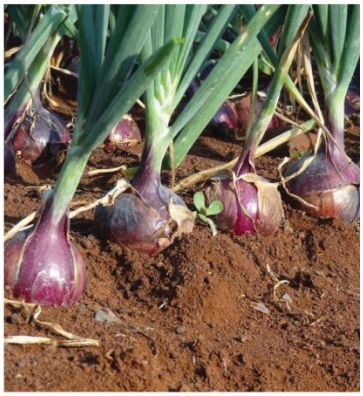
Cabbage
Kabeji (in Swahili) made into a stew and served with staples like ugali or rice



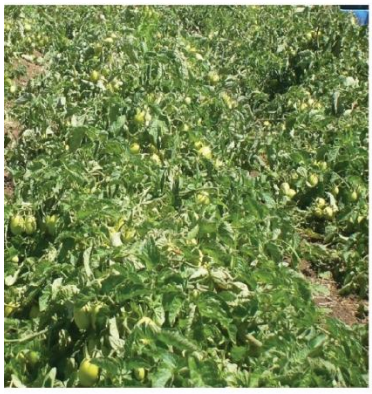
Spinach
Sukuma wiki (in Swahili) valued for its iron and nutritious content



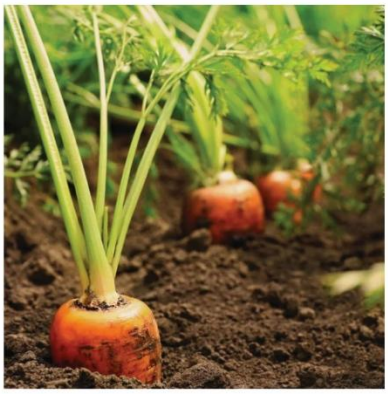
Green pepper
Pilipili hoho (in Swahili) valued for vitamin C and is a flavour enhancer



Onions
Kitungu (in Swahili) flavour base for most dishes and used in some traditional remedies



Tomatoes
Nyanya (in Swahili) form the flavour base of most dishes



Carrots
Karoti (in Swahili) used in stews, valued its high vitamin content



Herbs and Spices
Mimea ya viungo (general term in Swahili) Coriander/ Mint/ Basil

Figure 4.63: Information diagram of plants grown in the agricultural garden and used in modern day Maasai food. Diagram by Author

User Participatory Diagrams



Figure 4.64: Weaving and placing thatch beneath the roof.
Women contribute by weaving and securing thatch along the underside of the roof structure, drawing from traditional techniques used in Maasai homesteads. Drawings by Author

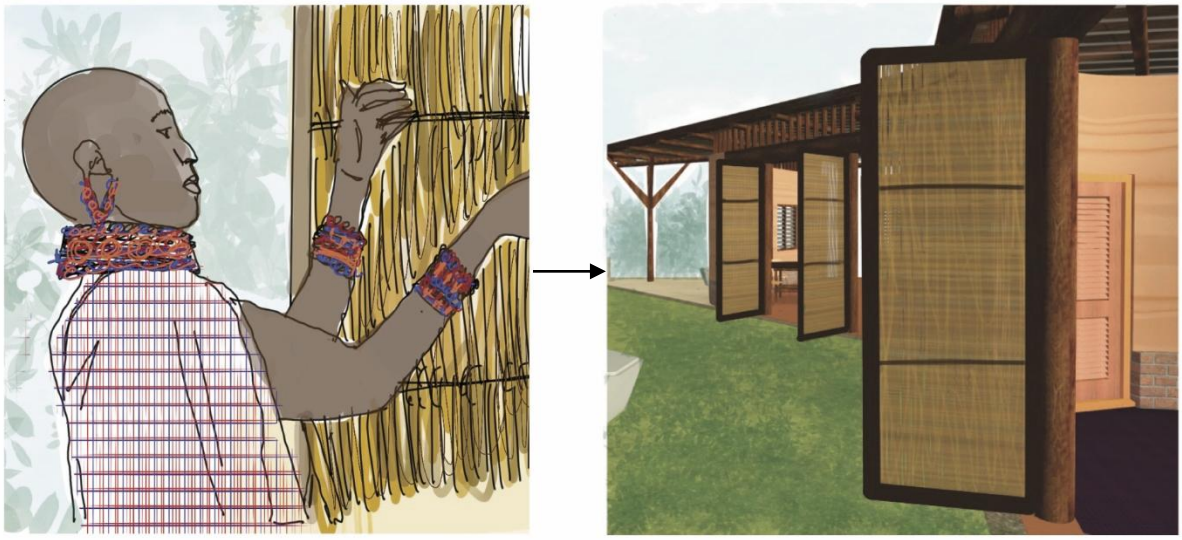


Figure 4.65: Crafting and assembling woven screen doors.
Using familiar weaving methods, women build operable screen doors that open interior spaces to the outdoors, merging functionality with cultural expression. Drawings by Author

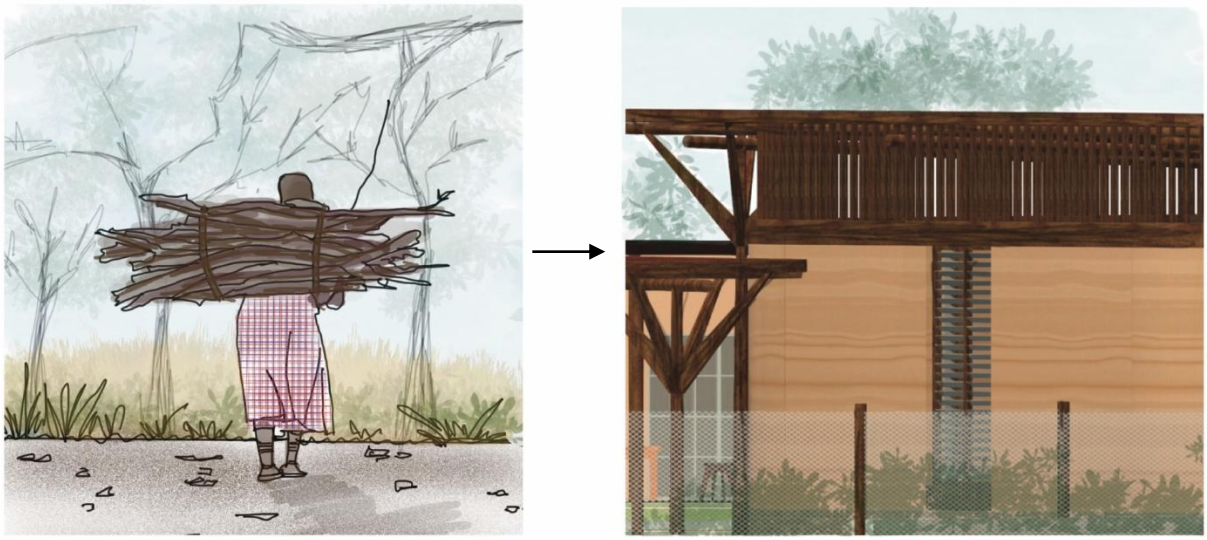


Figure 4.66: Gathering wooden posts for clerestories and boundaries.
Women participate in collecting and preparing natural wooden elements that form the clerestory structure and boundary walls, echoing their role in sourcing materials for vernacular housing. Drawings by Author

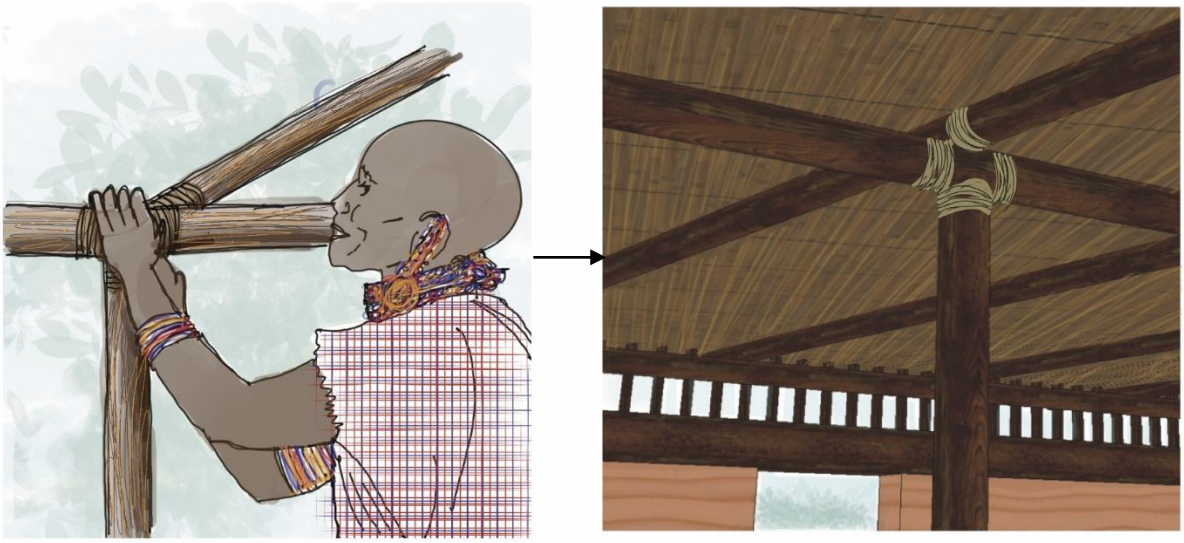


Figure 4.67: Binding wooden frames with rope.
The wooden structural framework is assembled using rope ties, a method inspired by how Maasai women build their own homes, encouraging hands-on engagement and knowledge-sharing in the construction process. Drawings by Author

Exploded Axonometric

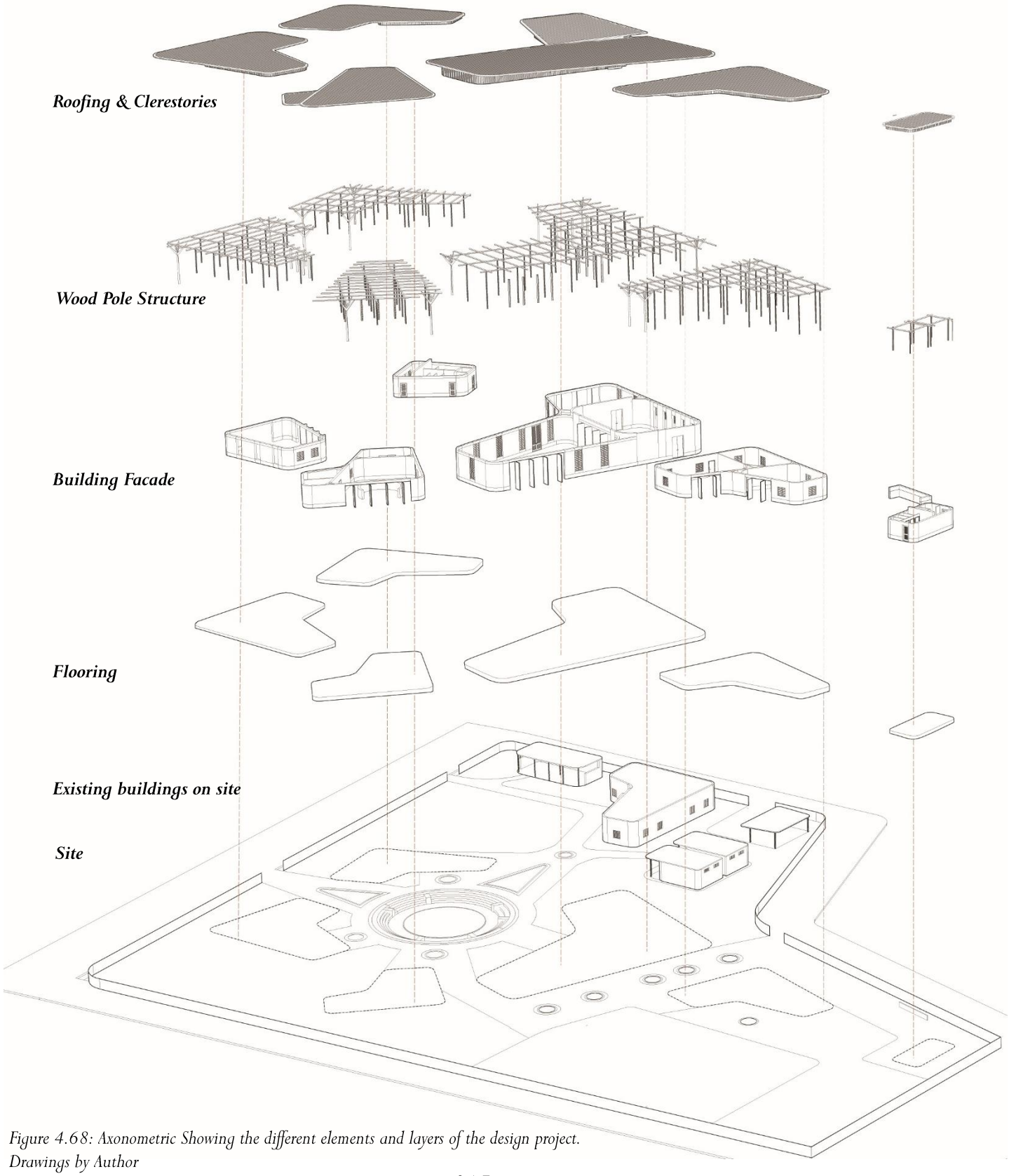


Figure 4.68: Axonometric Showing the different elements and layers of the design project. Drawings by Author

Material Palette

Roofing Materials



The roofing materials are corrugated metal which is great for rainwater collection, thatch to keep the buildings cool and wooden gutters to collect rainwater

Structural Materials



The structural materials are local wooden poles, wooden columns built to look like abstract trees and the connections are tied by rope.

Wall, Window, Door Materials



The walls are rammed earth with a local earth brick base and foundation. The screen doors are woven from thatch. The windows are wooden frames with glass louvers which is very popular in Kenya. The doors are made from local wood and the clerestory is made from wooden sticks.

Flooring Materials



The flooring in outdoor spaces and pathways is local stone, the indoor spaces are earthed flooring & the sunken courtyard has coloured paving stones made from brick

Figure 4.69: Materials palette diagram highlighting materials used in the design projec

Energetic Section

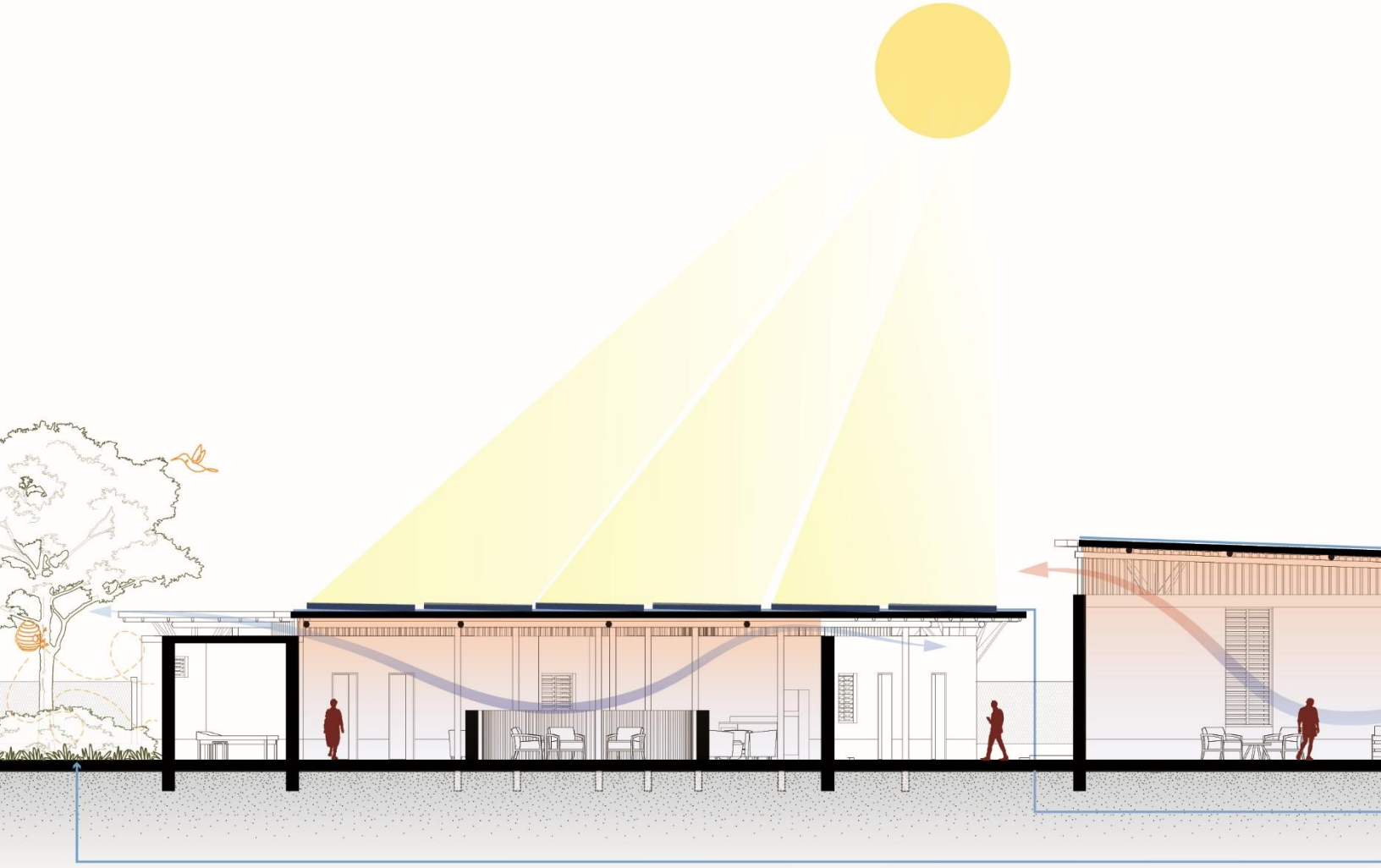
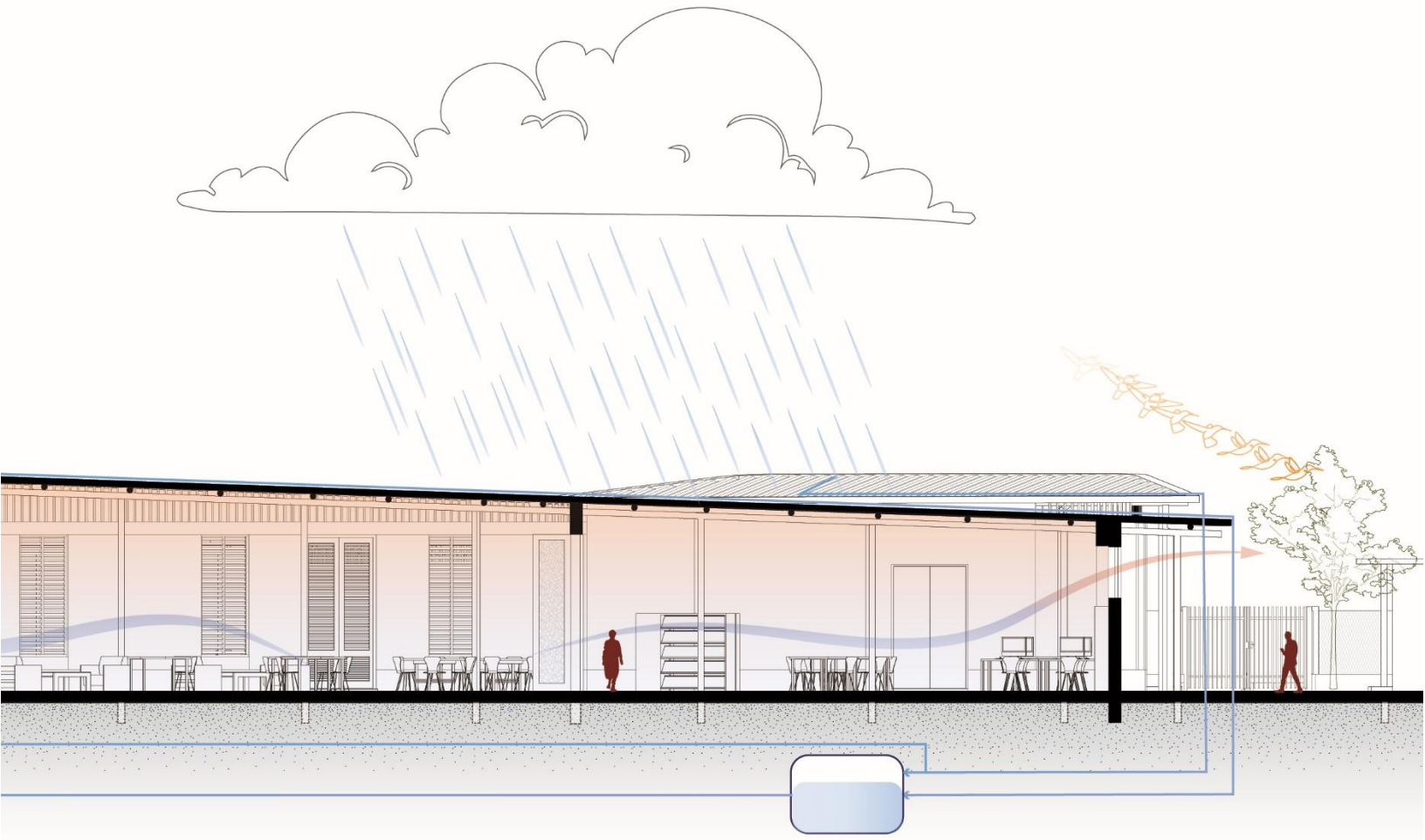


Figure 4.70: Energetic section showing the buildings sustainability systems such as natural ventilation and cooling, solar power collection and rainwater harvesting methods. Diagram by Author

The building uses passive strategies to stay self-sufficient and climate responsive. Rainwater is harvested from sloped roofs and stored for reuse, while photovoltaic panels generate electricity on site. Cross ventilation and thermal mass ensure comfort with minimal energy use



Rainwater Collection Diagram

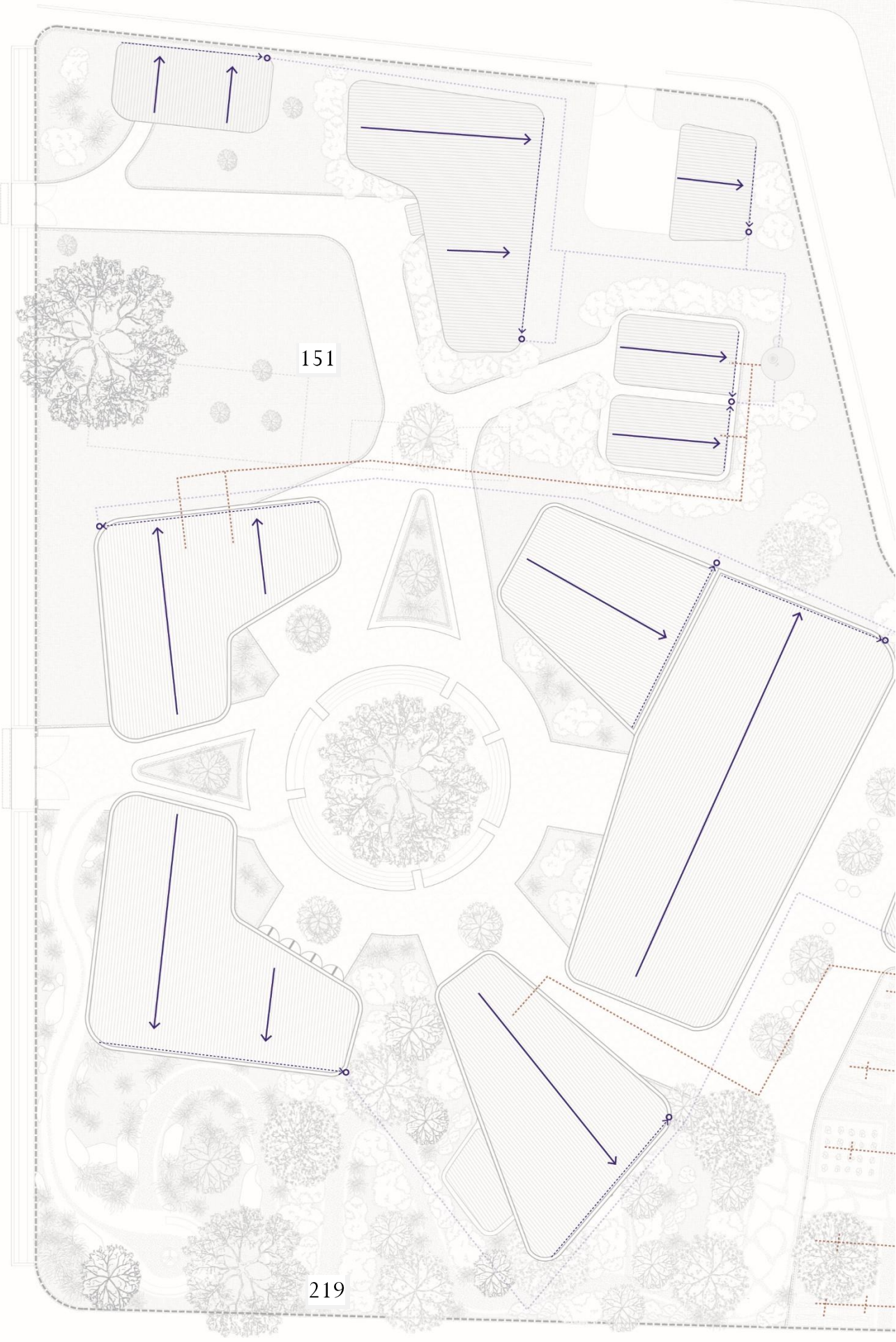


Figure 4.71: Floor plan highlighting the rainwater collection system and where the water will be used. Diagram by Author



Solar Panel Diagram

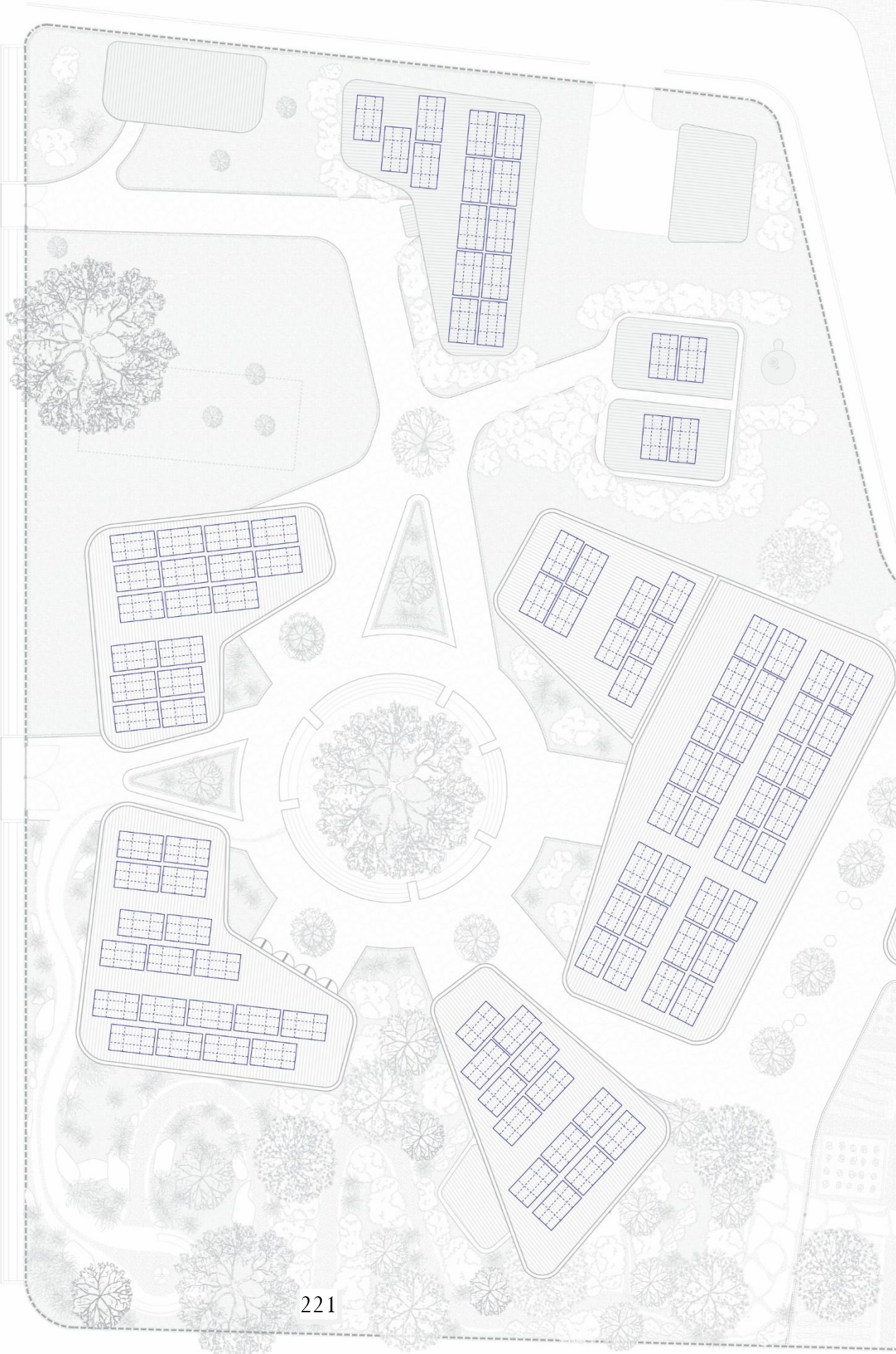


Figure 4.72: Floor plan highlighting the placement of solar panels on site. Diagram by Author

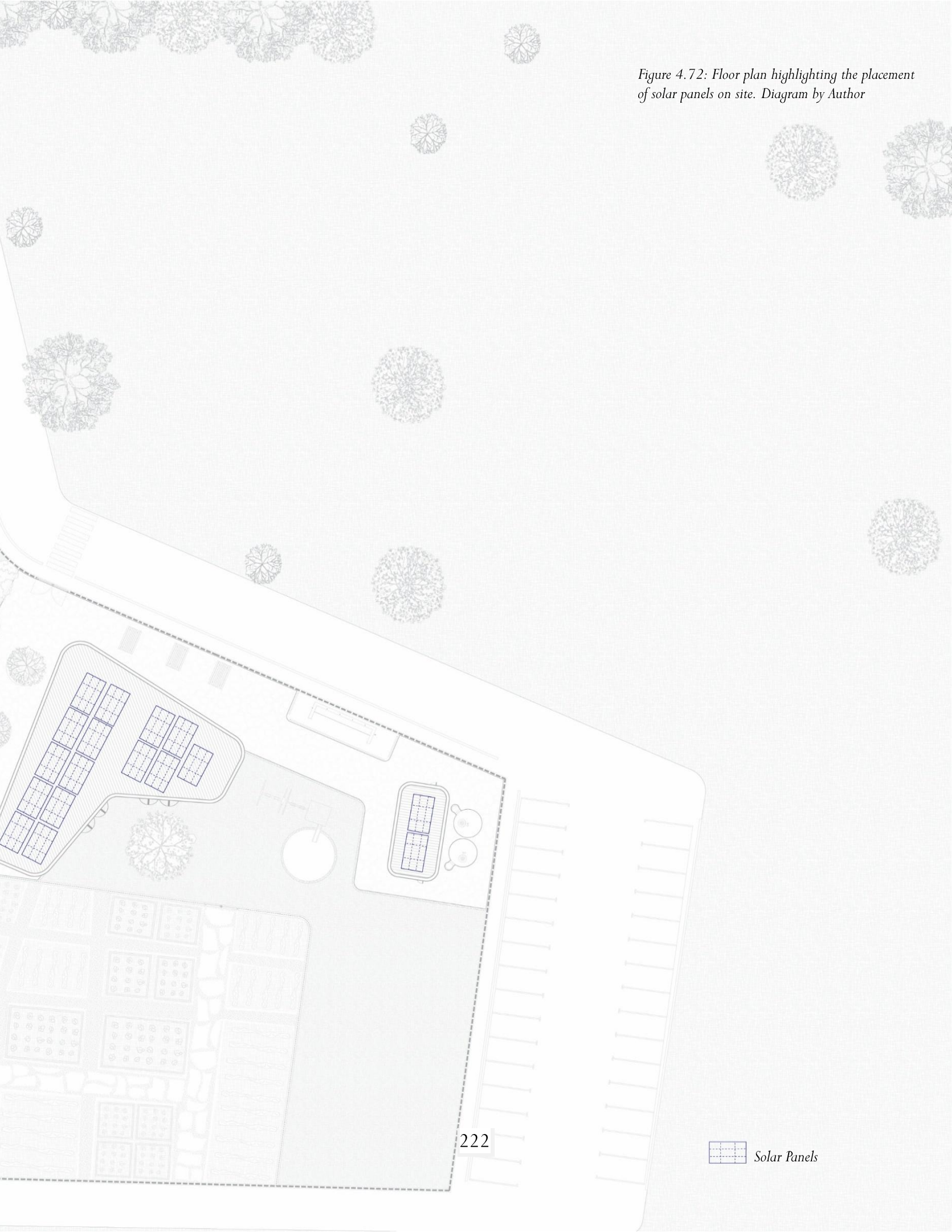




Figure 4.73: Image of the sign board I made for the Beads Museum as a thank you gift. Image by Eti Dayan

4.3 A Gift Back to the Women

I wanted to give something back to all the women that I spent time with in Sekenani from Eti to Beatrice, Naserian, Nyamalo and the Maasai women, not just through design, but through other thoughtful actions that could genuinely support them.

As a thank you to Eti and the Beads Museum, I designed a roadside sign to be placed at the front of the property. It faces the main road and is meant to inform tourists and passersby about what the space is: a cultural museum, a place of craft, and a women-led initiative. The goal was to help bring in more visitors, spark curiosity, and support the women by increasing foot traffic and visibility. It's a small gesture, but one that can make a meaningful difference in helping more people discover and appreciate the museum. I also designed pull-up banners for Eti to take to conferences and public events. These banners promote the museum, the women and the beadwork the women create, helping share their story and mission with wider audiences.

Another contribution I hope to make is a website for the museum and the women. Since many of them are already learning to use computers, I thought it would be powerful to create a digital platform where they can sell their jewelry online, tell their story in their own words, and connect with customers from around the world. I plan to design the site to be simple, visual, and easy to navigate, but more importantly, I will adapt the design based on their feedback, so it reflects their voice and needs. When I return to Kenya, I hope to visit the museum and personally walk them through how to use it and get their feedback on what they like about it and what they don't. This "gift back" is about supporting independence and giving back to a place and group of people that gave me so much. Just like the building itself, these gestures are rooted in care, reciprocity, and respect.



Figure 4.74: Image of my brother, Eti, Beatrice and me with the pull up banner I designed for the bead's museum. Image by Author



Figure 4.75: Selfie of Beatrice, Mercy, me, and another Maasai woman at the beads museum. Image by Author



Figure 4.76: Image of me handing out sweets to the children in Simankas village. Image by Author.



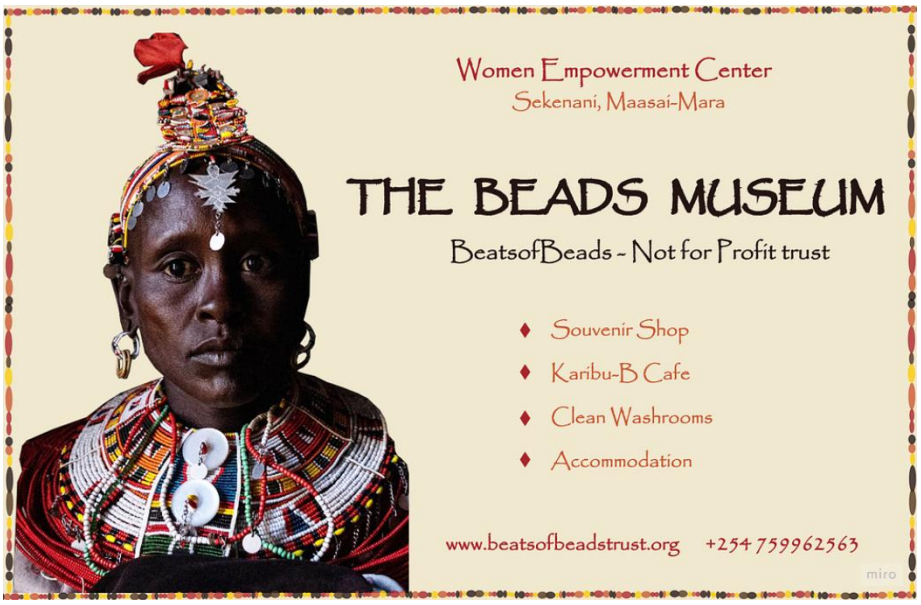
Figure 4.77: Image of and Simankas outside her home after she dressed me in her cultural clothing. Image by Author.



Figure 4.78: Image of donations we had bought for Beatrices village, there was tea, sugar and maizemeal as well as treats for the children. Image by Author.



Figure 4.79: Image of Simanka and her son in their living area of her home. Image by Author.



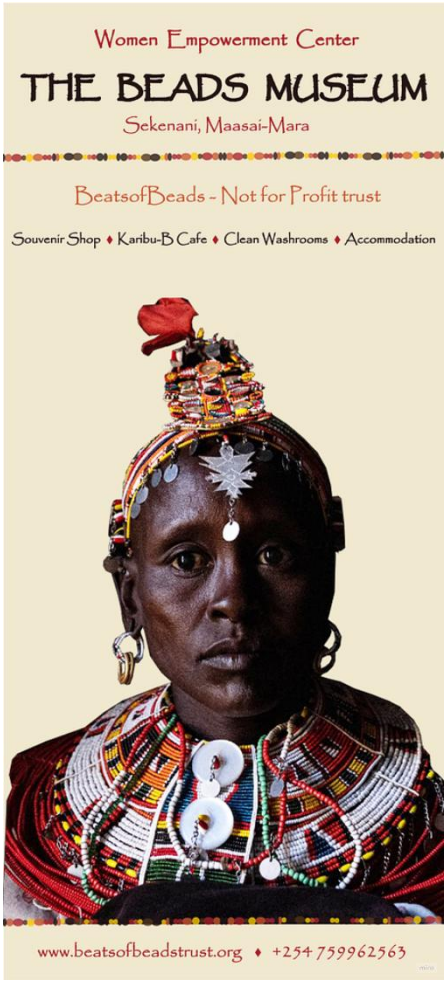




Figure 4.80: Prints of the Banners and road sign I designed for the Beads Museum. Images by Author.

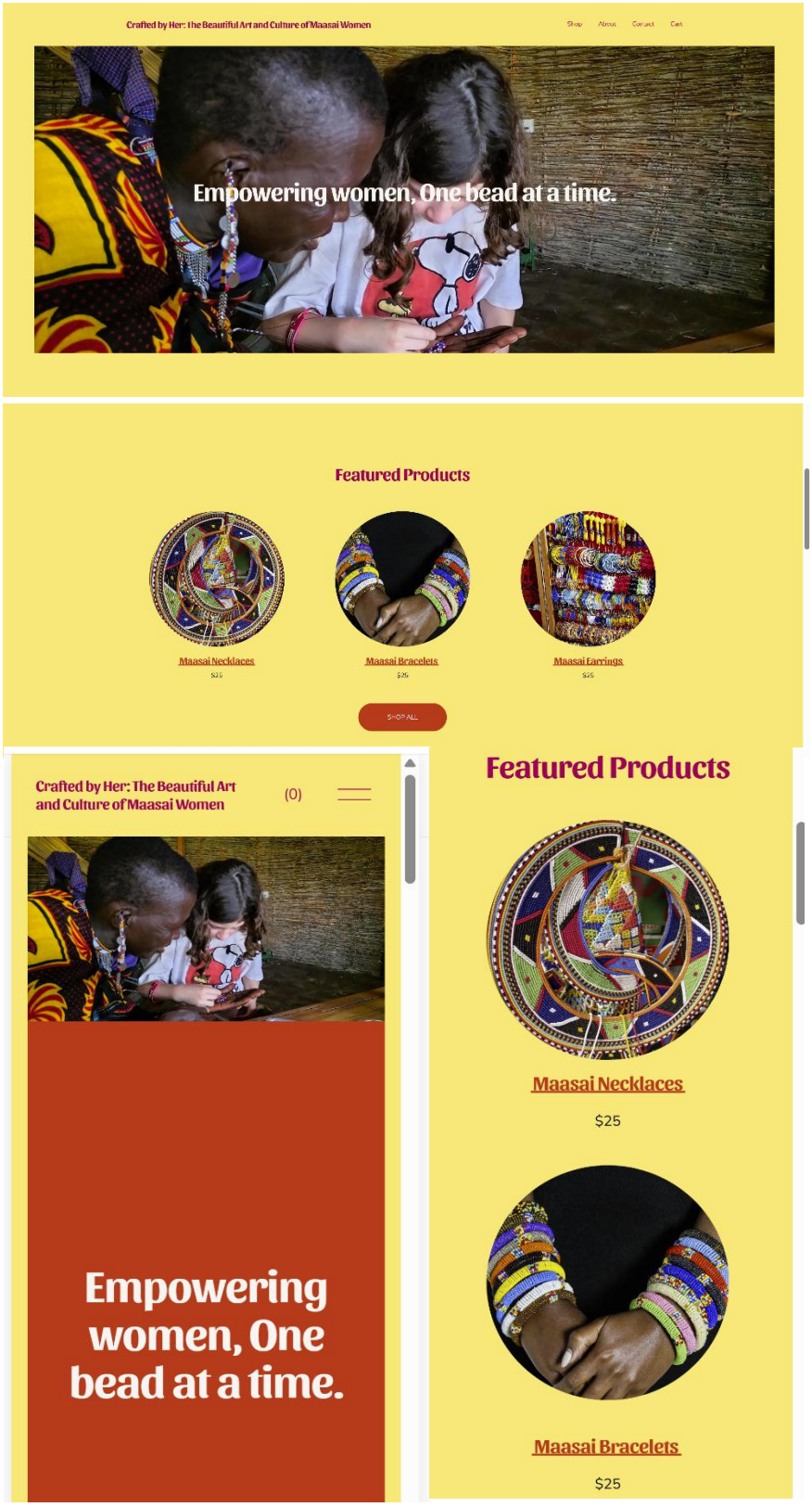


Figure 4.81: Preliminary, first draft screenshots of the website design for the Beads Museum. In both desktop and phone views. Images by Author.



Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how architecture can support the preservation and evolution of Maasai culture, specifically through the lens of Maasai womanhood. At the heart of this is a belief that design is not just about form or aesthetics, but about people, their identities, their lived realities, their culture and traditions. Through the design of the Maasai Women's Empowerment Center, this project offers a response to some of the complex and urgent issues facing the community today: the erosion of vernacular architecture, shifting gender dynamics, and the impacts of tourism and modern development on cultural representation.

One of the most important themes that emerged through this process is the tension between tradition and transformation. Culture is not static, and as the Maasai navigate contemporary pressures from land changes to digital shifts, the challenge becomes how to adapt without losing identity. This project embraces that tension, offering a spatial response that is grounded in cultural memory while opening space for growth, knowledge, and agency. The title, *From Thorny Branches to Resilient Roots*, speaks directly to this, acknowledging the difficulties of the past while celebrating the strength that continues to grow from it.

The design process was guided by the principle of designing with, not for. This wasn't about projecting assumptions or imposing external ideas, it was about listening, learning, and responding to what the women themselves expressed. Through interviews, informal conversations, and time spent together, the program of the center, from the library and craft space to communal gathering spaces to gardens, was shaped by their voices. The architecture became a way to support the things they were already

Figure 5: To the left - Image of Maasai women sitting under the tree at the Beads Museum with their craft m1aking supplies. Image retrieved from the Beads Museum Facebook.

doing and dreaming of: beading, healing, teaching, learning, resting, and leading.

The project is also deeply tied to place, not only in terms of physical site, but in material, spatial, and cultural logic. The layout draws inspiration from traditional Maasai homesteads, particularly the radial organization of the *Enkang*. Materials like rammed earth, stone, rope-tied wood, and thatch were chosen not just for sustainability, but to evoke the textures and meanings of vernacular building practices. Spaces are designed to be flexible and responsive, just like the culture they support, allowing for privacy, openness, gathering, and solitude as needed.

This thesis is also a personal act of reciprocity. In addition to the architectural design, I shared gifts back to the women and to Eti Dayan, the founder of the Beads Museum — from a roadside sign to increase visibility, to pull-up banners for promotional use, donating food and other times and the concept for a future website the women can manage themselves. These gestures are small, but they matter. They extend the life of this project beyond drawings or words and offer tools the women can use in real, practical ways.

If this research were to be taken further, one important direction would be the study of the Maa language, not just for translation, but for insight into the Maasai worldview. Language carries conceptual depth: it encodes spatial, ecological, and cultural values that may not be fully visible through English or Swahili. Understanding Maa vocabulary related to space, building, seasons, and ritual could offer a richer, more accurate foundation for architecture that emerges from within the community's own epistemology.

In many ways, this work is unfinished, and that's intentional. Like the culture it engages with, the Empowerment Center is meant to

grow, adapt, and respond over time. What's important is that it starts from a place of care, collaboration, and cultural respect. It's an architectural response to real people and real stories, rooted in history, shaped by the present, and open to the future.

Ultimately, this thesis asks: *What does it mean to design for dignity?* And the answer, for me, has been found in presence, in patience, in participation, and in believing that architecture, when done thoughtfully and respectfully, can be one of the most powerful ways to honour both who people are and who they are becoming.

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