In much of Africa, the concept of "artist", as we know it in our Western cultures, is unknown. The artists did not consciously set out to make a work of art. They considered the piece a success if it fulfilled the task, as task that was primarily functional--economic, magical or religious (Wassing 1968, p.6).

"weavers, sculptors, potters and smiths were members of exclusive societies in which the masters, assisted by their servants, taught the apprentices the sacred craft. Rather than derive money...they devoted themselves to the sacred craft in order to please the gods and the spirits of the ancestors" – Amadou Hampate Ba, Malian historian & philosopher.

This landlocked West African nation is among the economically least developed on earth. However, as it has evolved from the ancient Ghana, Mali & Songhai Empires and later as a colony of France, the history of Mali is remarkable and its culture and people captivating. Politically and socially Mali is currently among the most stable nations in Africa. While at first glance the population may appear somewhat homogeneous, Mali is composed of greatly varied ethnic groups. From the Dogon to the Bambara are peoples widely differing in religion & culture. (While Mali is now predominately Islamic, there remains a powerful undercurrent of indigenous & animist beliefs.) An intriguing aspect of the past Malian cultural structure was the prevalence of societies & associations which were religious, political, judicial & philosophical in nature – whose chief aim was the maintenance of social, spiritual & economic harmony. Of particular interest in the historical makeup of the otherwise patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocial Bambara region was the Gouan society – essentially a sodality which focused strongly on women’s concerns and in which women held leadership positions. This may hold some significance for the studio project in that a large portion of Mali’s artisans are women. Mali is an alluring place with a rich tradition of entrancing ritual and stunning art – all coming together to the pulse of vibrant indigenous music.*

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** This project for the Union Association of Artisans of Koutiala is derived from an actual building project under the direction of U.S. Peace Corps volunteer Maridee BonaDea in Koutiala, Mali.

The program is to be developed to a degree by the individual student, but some of the essential functions will include studios & workshops for: Bogolan or traditional Malian mud cloth makers, metal fabrication, woodworkers, jewelers & tailors. The project may encompass a range of other trades such as electrical, cloth dying and motorcycle repair. An area for the restaurant association may include food vending and dining. A large group meeting area will be of central focus. Support spaces including administrative offices, accommodations for apprentices & caretaker’s quarters as well as other services and amenities are to be provided. In Mali much of the day-to-day activity takes place in unenclosed spaces.

The approach to the project may be taken as a pragmatic solution to something that could actually one day be built in Mali, dealing with locally available materials & construction techniques, or it may be a purely theoretical exploration of ideas (imagine a donor who wishes to create a high profile project introducing new materials & methods) – or perhaps the solution lies at some point in between. Students should work with whatever approach they feel will be the most meaningful learning experience possible.

* Sources include Pascal James Imperato and Patrick R. McNaughton.