



Lessons on Design: A Gift from a Rwandan Village

by Alan Jacobson

Alan Jacobson is the president of ex;it and BAJdesign in Philadelphia and the founder of the ex;it foundation. He may be contacted at alan.jacobson@exploreexit.com.

I am a Yes Man. This time it happened during a national conference that I chaired in 2004 for the Society for Environmental Graphic Design (SEGD) when Lily Yeh sat down next to me in the front row after her powerful talk about community arts. I asked her if I could help. She asked, “Are you serious?” I said “Yes.”

Six months later I found myself in a small village in western Rwanda helping to build a memorial to the 1994 Genocide that took the lives of almost 1,000,000 people in 100 days. The memorial would be a burial site for the victims of families who live in this survivors village. As a designer, I like to think my tool box is equipped for any design challenge, but the lessons learned over the next five years that followed that first day in Rwanda provided me with a fresh set of design tools. Working with people whose circumstances were beyond my imagination has humbled me and changed the way I see everything.

To provide context about my day job, my professional design work happens with talented people in the two studios I run; ex;it and BAJdesign. They work as an integrated team or independently. Ex;it focuses on human behavior in the built environment through research on how people experience the places where they work, heal, play, and learn. We design strategies, communication and navigation tools to support visitor, staff, patient and customer experience transformation. Our interpretive design work tells stories in these environments to educate, inform and entertain, while documenting the culture and work of our clients. BAJdesign is focused on branding and identity, publishing, and print communication to assist organizations reach their potential by

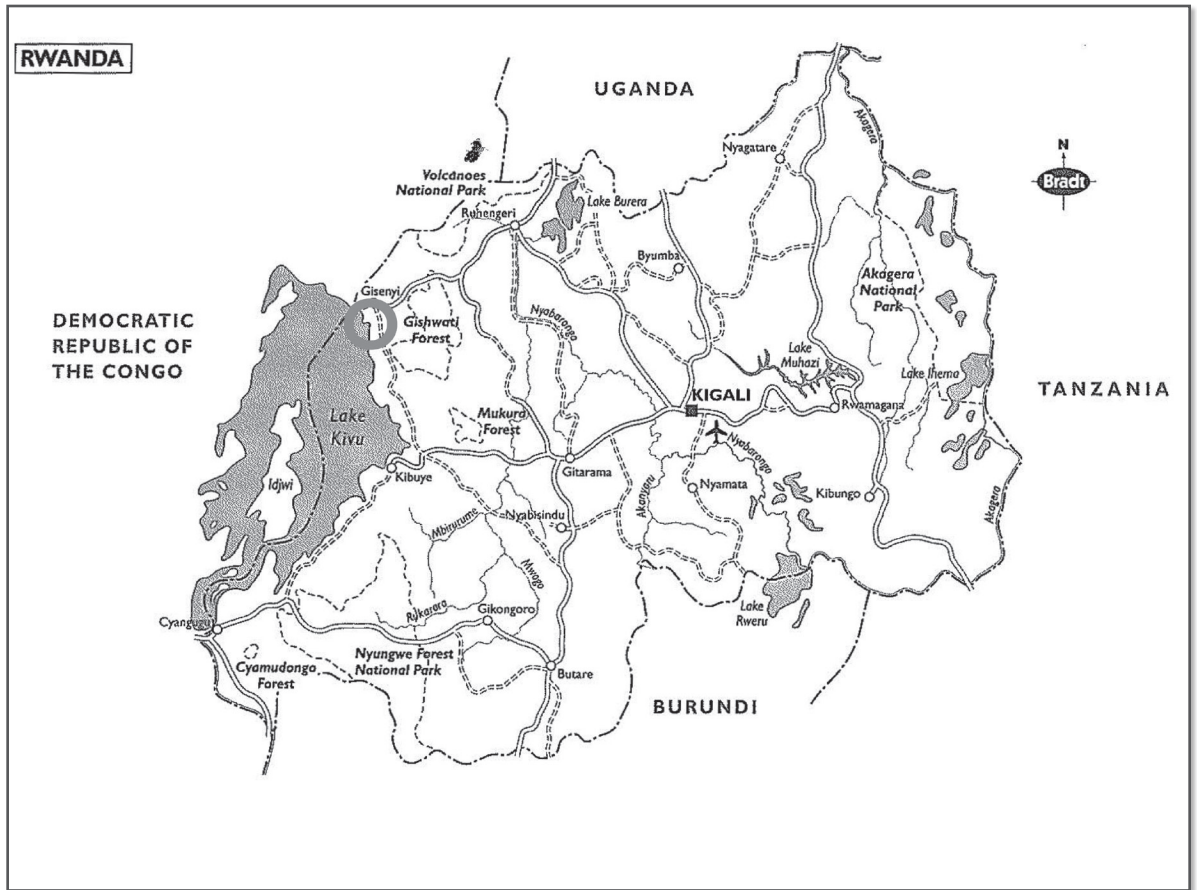
distilling and expressing their essence.

In this article I will share a personal journey that has helped me become a better designer by learning deeper lessons about the importance of understanding “the other” before I attempt to apply my thinking and ideas.

The “other” in this case is 500 survivors of the Rwandan genocide gathered in a small village on the outskirts of Gisenyi. There are 150 women, 50 men and 300 children. In the shadow of volcanic Mount Nyiragongo this small town rests along beautiful Lake Kivo bordering the turbulent Republic of the Congo. This spot on the planet seemed an unlikely place for a designer. It was sobering to find myself standing on the ground where such atrocities occurred such a short time ago. Our initial goal was to build a memorial conceived by Lily, bury the bones of the genocide victims of the families in the village, and create a place of healing for the survivors. Lily Yeh is the founder of the Village of Arts and Humanities, a community arts organization in North Philadelphia. During a 20 year period she changed a challenged inter city community through the participative transformation of vacant lots into positive places where murals and mosaics replaced blight. The Village of Arts and Humanities continues to provide youth at risk a safe haven and leadership development through engagement with creativity. Lily currently works internationally to transform communities through the arts. After a speaking engagement in Barcelona, Rwandan Red Cross official Jean Bosco Mussana Rukurando invited Lily to create a genocide memorial.

Horror and Hope

During the six months before departing for



Map of Rwanda bordered by Uganda, Republic of Congo, Burundi, Tanzania. Circle is area of the survivors village.

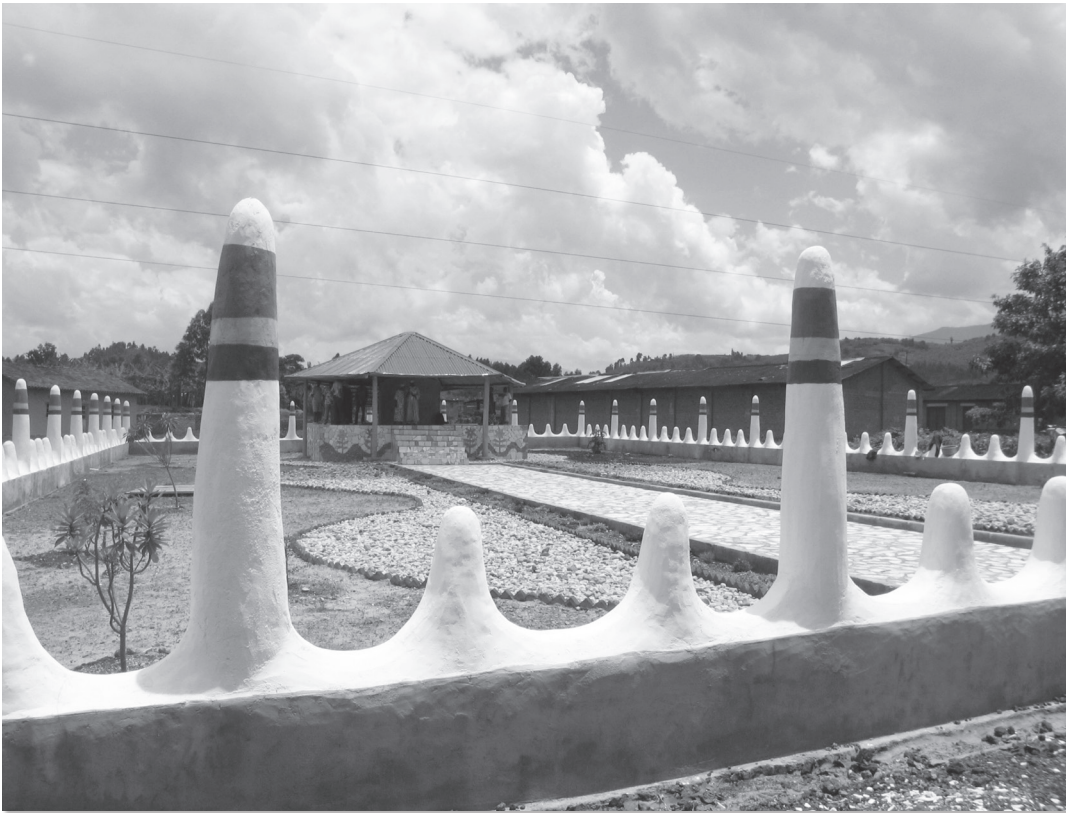
Rwanda, I read intensively about the genocide. The horror of this event mixed with the brutality of deep poverty was beyond my comprehension. Fear and apprehension gathered as I studied. Family, friends, and those in my professional world expressed their concern. I felt driven by an inner voice that reminded me that this sort of work was something I had to do.

After a two day journey in September 2005 from Philadelphia through London and Nairobi we landed in Kigali. I was traveling with author Terry Tempest Williams, researcher Meghan Morris, and Lily Yeh. We were greeted by the smiling faces of Jean Bosco Mussana Rukurando of the Rwandan Red Cross and a volunteer, Damas, who would drive the tired but resilient passenger jeep that would become our home base for the next five years. I have come to love that jeep. It provided me with painful lumps on my forehead over many miles. I have returned the favor with new tires and required TLC. We have a deal.

Those first moments in Rwanda were exciting as I did a reality check of where I was. We loaded the jeep for the first time and were whisked off to our hotel in town. There was a chaos in the streets that I hadn't experienced in my travels. Shanty developments of mud bricks and tin roofs were plentiful. People on foot crowded the streets, all second glancing and staring at us. Was it our color? Or lack of? We just watched out the windows feeling a bit overwhelmed. Faces looked angry and somber at first. I smiled often, and smiles were returned.

Morning came quickly with the disorientation of serious jet lag. Our jeep waited patiently. Rwandan time moves slowly. As we pulled away from the hotel, Jean Bosco explained that we must understand the genocide to understand Rwanda. This was step one of the design process. We were beginning our journey into the darkness of genocide as we headed out on the rocky dirt roads to Nyamata, the site of a massacre memorialized to tell the story. The living conditions grew worse as we left the city.

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Completed memorial before dedication. Design by Lily Yeh. Courtesy of the author.

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This first experience of witnessing deep poverty first hand was overwhelming. It forced me to confront the guilt about the fortune of my life.

The church memorial at Nyamata implanted visions and stories that haunt me still. Thousands of Tutsi Rwandans were gathered into this place of prayer, doors locked behind them, then brutally slashed with machetes by Hutu Rwandan militia. No survivors. Evidence and stories of cruelty unimaginable and too inhumane for me to repeat. Rwanda is left with millions of witnesses and victims. The wounds are dark and deep. As I have listened to stories of those who have become friends in the village I am horrified as I imagine what it would have been like for my family and me in those moments. Jean Bosco understood that this injection of cruel reality was required in order for us to do our work.

Permission was step two in the design process. As with any project, there are people in power who are gatekeepers of what gets done and what doesn't. Jean Bosco facilitated a series of meetings over the next week with various

ministry leaders of Rwandan Culture and Development, followed by district leaders and mayors as we moved closer to the village location.

The language barrier was considerable. We had English, they had Kinyarwanda and French. We relied on Louis, a young man recruited by Jean Bosco as our translator. Each conversation took twice the time as Louis was everyone's filter. This was his first experience as translator. We were too naive to understand the miscommunications this would create. The words we say often translate into different meaning and context. Often the intent of what we said was misunderstood by Louis and conveyed incorrectly. The same was true as we listened to those we met. These misses were discovered when something other than what we agreed would manifest itself. There was often humor in the result, and sometimes not. One example was a misunderstanding that occurred after we asked someone to participate in the process and he thought we had offered him a job.

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The good news is that we received overwhelming approval and promises of support from everyone with whom we met. The Rwandans in government were expressively grateful for our initiative. I was often asked, “Why is it that you would leave your family and your work at home and travel so far to our little country to do this work?” I am still touched by this question and ask it often of

same for those who lived there. It would be the first time “Muzungos” (*white people or rich people*) from the west were to enter the village, much less work with them on a project.

Welcome to Our Village

Once settled in the town of Gisenyi we began our first day meeting the leaders and walking the main paths between the partially completed



*Completed sunflower mural on renovated cooperative building where oil is produced.
Courtesy of the author.*

myself to help me face the truths begged by this inquiry. The answer is for another writing.

Finally, on to the village. Our jeep took us on a four hour “poverty road” journey into western Rwanda rising and falling into the land of a thousand hills. Poverty road was a term used by our driver Damas. We greatly anticipated our arrival in the village and discovered it was the

mud brick homes. There were small areas of undeveloped land and minimal crop growth. Village elders Mamma Emma and Sheramanzi and village leaders Dorteia and Moises were our early hosts. On the few random chairs to be found we gathered and talked about our plans: building a memorial and painting murals on the village homes. Everyone would get to play.

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One of ten women of the support group and resident of the village painting the sunflower mural. Courtesy of the author.

We were troubled by the conditions in the village. While we could feel the excitement about our arrival, we also observed the malnourished children, the lack of water or food, and a hopelessness about their future. Everyone over fourteen was a refugee who had escaped death by fleeing to the Congo and had returned at the war's end. Homeless upon return, they were placed in this village by the local government. Everyone had experienced death in their families: their parents, siblings and children. After seven years, they were still not a cohesive community. With so much yet to learn and understand, we moved forward in our work, trusting that insight would be gained in the doing and hoping that the mistakes ahead would be forgiven and fruitful. I'm sure they felt the same.

The site selected on which to build the memorial was sufficient, with only a small brick structure in the way and a vegetable garden under a tin roof. The bones collected to date had been removed from the area and stored in an unknown place waiting for their future resting place. We knew the sensitivity of the work. Lily's sketch of the memorial was our guide. The rest would be worked out as

we proceeded. This process was a departure from the design and build world to which I was accustomed. Schematic design through documentation then build was replaced by concept to build. Gathered on our first day were many locals, village leaders, local politicians, and a steady stream of about 100 children of all ages. In the first day we charted the site and mapped the position of the memorial perimeter. We were working outside of our expertise here, but the locals who engaged and joined our team had utmost confidence in our capabilities. We gained confidence through them.

Many shortcomings in our understanding of life here created serendipitous learning moments. One such incident occurred after we had proudly marked the positioning of the memorial site with wood stakes and rope. As we sat resting between play time with the children a village leader, noticing we were done for the day, asked us if we were leaving the stakes and rope in place overnight. "Yes, we will be back first thing tomorrow." He smiled and respectfully advised us that there would be nothing there when we returned tomorrow as the stakes would be taken for firewood. Of course. It was the first of many laughs about

our ignorance. In the next moments we saw the power of the workforce around us. Lily told all the children to pick up a volcano rock, then instructed them to place the rocks under the rope that lined the site between the stakes. In sixty seconds the rocks replaced the rope as our site line. We were in business!

Painting Rwanda

As the memorial work continued we spent more days in the village getting to know people and engaging with the children. Our second project was to paint the village together. Lily's belief was that in the process of people changing their environment, healing and hope emerge, manifest themselves. I have come to believe the same.

We recruited teachers from the surrounding community and some adults in the village and presented the concept of mural painting. Creating art was not in the mindset of the village, but through workshops and discussions about art around us such as fabric patterns and nature, the team was ready to begin. Most teens and children in the village also joined the art workshops to prepare for the painting. Teach the teachers, then let them teach. We did just that to ensure that we could include the many children in the process and sustain the art culture once we were gone. Simple patterns were designed, and images selected from children's drawings.

The long days that followed focused on charting wall designs on the central village houses and organizing teams to paint. Supplies were scarce. Our palette was limited to the five paint colors available in town: blue, yellow, green, black, and red. Locals were paid to make ladders for us. The village came alive with



Members of the sunflower oil cooperative holding bottle of oil with new label and a poster to market the cooperative. Courtesy of the author.

activity. Art was happening and we were having wonderful conversations through art making. We were creating together and playing together.

As the memorial progressed and the village turned color we turned inward to understand the short and long term impact of the project. The unfamiliarity of the people with the painting process combined with the constraints of materials and resources created shortcomings in the project vision. Was it okay to sacrifice quality and subordinate to the process? What were our expectations? More importantly, what were theirs? Were we in alignment? Did we have to be? What was important and what was not? Our small team differed in opinions at times and struggled with approaches. The cultural differences between us and the Rwandans we had begun to know were vast, and we often didn't know what were the right things to do, or where this was all going.

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Our design sensibilities were applied to the murals but we weren't sure what they felt was appropriate. Rwandans are reserved in their feedback to avoid being impolite. They also assumed we knew what is best and would follow our lead. Of course this is not always a good formula for mutual success; to this date, while there has been transformation in the village, we are not sure how they feel about the designs painted on their homes. We keep moving forward.

As we gained trust and affection in the village, the conversations led to the real life issues of lack of education, food, health problems and jobs. This is what was ultimately important, and while we were not equipped to address these challenges, we listened. These discussions came frequently from everyone and everywhere. I often felt helpless in my inability to bring solutions to these realities.

Over time I learned that I wasn't so helpless after all. I had gone to Rwanda as a designer and discovered that my role as a human being must lead. We discovered that one meal a day of bananas and beans was the norm. Most children were undersize due to poor diet. Education was minimal. Malaria was common. Clean water was scarce. Sanitation was deplorable, and most slept on mats on a dirt floor. There were moments I questioned the validity of our project.

Who Is Helping Whom?

After six weeks we returned home, forever changed. The memorial continued in our absence under Lily's supervision from a distance. The village was brighter and more colorful, and the process seemed to create a sense of community. Just our being there

seemed to have made a difference as an affirmation that someone cares and that maybe things can change in the future.

Each of the original four team members has returned. The memorial Lily designed was completed and dedicated on April 5, 2006. The bones are buried, and the community has a place to heal the scars of the past. Lily and I have separately initiated new projects in the village. Many others have joined each of us. This work could not end as an art or design project as I had originally thought. I found myself in the middle of an exploration and collaboration to create opportunity for sustainable change, as they define it. I realized that I made a promise to the people of the village and a promise to myself to work together until we have made lasting change. This for me is the ultimate role of a designer.

I have returned to the village often focused on improving the health conditions while, among other things, sponsoring a weekly children's art program. The unlikely friendships developed during the Mural and Memorial projects have become lifetime bonds. Our mutual affection and trust has led to many intimate conversations that have helped me understand more about what works and what doesn't. What works is a relentlessness to push through all obstacles while being ready and open to discover what you don't know.

What Do You Know...About Sunflowers?

Two years ago in the darkness of an evening meeting under the big tree in the village I suggested that we organize funds for an education program. An elder, Simon, reminded me of the reality of the daily conditions in the village and that the most sustainable way to



Mothers and children sit in front of their home recently painted with murals. Courtesy of the author.

help them exit poverty is job creation. Just back from a tour through Kenya to research ideas for the village I came across a machine that presses sunflower seeds into oil for cooking. I asked if anyone knew anything about sunflowers. All around “Yes” nods.

We have since been working to create a cooperative to produce sunflower oil. Two machines have been delivered and people have been trained to produce and filter oil. Farmers have been growing sunflowers for the cooperative. Elder women separate the seeds for production. A new sense of community has been created by the cooperative and the activity of working together.

A senior design class at Drexel University worked to create a brand, bottle labels, and a market table stand with feedback from the cooperative. The students won an SEG D Honor award for the work and have been shaken and transformed in the process. The project has come home. A small dilapidated building

has been renovated. Murals were painted by a young women's support group in the village from a hand sketch I provided, inspired by work from the children's art program. The ups and downs of the cooperative have been disappointing and rewarding, but we move forward together with a long way before success is declared.

The unexpected evolution of this project helped me define my core design principles, which cannot be separated from my “how I live” principles. These are not learned in class, and they don't draw from traditional design and build methodology. In a place where the nature of things was so foreign to my paradigm and experience my design skills were trumped by my respect and appreciation for the uniqueness in all of us. This was paramount to develop trust and deep relationships to work together and make change. I have re-calibrated what is most important in my life, and I will treasure a loving gratitude for the lessons that my friends in the village have unknowingly taught me. ✨

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