



Stories Over A Thousand Hills:

Revealing Oral Histories in the Rwandan Landscape

A Roy DeBoer Travel Prize Proposal by:
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In keeping with the Rutgers motto, “Jersey Roots, Global Reach,” I would like to travel to the beautiful Central African nation of Rwanda to investigate ways to utilize landscape architecture to communicate traditional oral histories that are at risk of being lost.

STUDY CONTEXT

Roughly the size of Maryland, Rwanda lies just below the equator in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa (CIA World Factbook). It is the most densely-populated nation on the continent and home to three main ethnic groups: the Hutu, Tutsi, and Batwa (CIA World Factbook). Although considered relatively resource-poor, Rwanda’s exquisite landscape of forested volcanic mountains, vibrant savanna land, and glistening lakes has nurtured tremendous biodiversity and centuries of rich oral history tradition (Briggs 2012).

Sadly, between ethnic strife and European colonization, this “Land of a Thousand Hills” has seen its share of conflict, erupting most blatantly in the 1994 civil war and genocide in which over the course of 100 days, approximately 800,000 residents were killed and twice as many fled to adjacent countries (Sommers 2012). Although the tragic legacy of those events still lives on in Rwanda, the post-war administration has made a concerted effort to promote justice, reconciliation, economic and social recovery, and, above all, security (Sommers 2012) The fruits of these efforts are evident: the national economy has rebounded, thorough environmental planning and policies have been implemented, and development has proliferated in the administration’s quest to become a regional technology hub (Sommers 2012).

This increased development, along with changes to land use policies and other factors, has facilitated mobility within the country and contributed to more youth moving from subsistence farming in rural areas to seek employment in urban areas (Sommers 2012). Widespread orphaning from the civil war has also severed much of the population’s historic links to land and family (Carr 1999). As a result, traditional transmission of oral histories and stories within communities has begun to break down (K. Swanson, personal interview, February 23, 2014).

I learned about this situation from a friend of mine, Kristen Swanson, who, at the request of numerous Rwandan educators, started a program that trains local teachers and artists in writing children’s literature so they can preserve and share important stories with younger generations. I immediately wondered if anyone had considered partnering storytellers with landscape designers to convey elements of the rich oral history tradition in the changing Rwandan landscape. My background research suggests that this topic is ripe for a 2-week investigative trip.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

Given the brevity of my stay, I see my research as an initial foray into merging Rwandan storytelling and landscape architecture, which landscape design students from the National University of Rwanda might further explore, perhaps as studio projects. Chief objectives for my study include:

- Connecting with storytellers who are seeking new avenues of oral history transmission and learning enough about the stories themselves to identify ways that they could be revealed in the landscape

- Gaining an understanding of how many Rwandans (particularly youth) relate to/think about the landscape and traditional stories in order to brainstorm compelling and relevant ways to integrate the two disciplines
- Seeking new partners who could participate in the bringing stories to life in the landscape (local landscape design & architecture students, weavers and other local artists, etc.)
- Familiarizing myself with various Rwandan landscapes (urban, rural agricultural, national forests, important cultural sites, etc.) which are not only integral elements in the design proposals, but have been essential influences on the oral histories for centuries
- Building awareness of a very different perspective on human relationship to the landscape, approach to designing outdoor human environments, materiality options, aesthetic sensibilities, etc. Some African landscape architects have referred to a difference between African and “Western” approaches to landscape design, suggesting that “Western” designs in Africa lacked an intimate understanding of local cultures and thus lost depth of authenticity and connection between people and place.
- Developing further some of the skills (sketching, engaging meaningfully with tight-knit communities as an “outsider,” etc.) and ways of considering cultural landscape design that I explored in a former studio focused on St. Croix.

Obviously the topic must be studied on location in Rwanda, but it has myriad potential benefits. On a personal level, pursuing this avenue of study in Rwanda will challenge me to learn from new cultures and mindsets in an environment I have never encountered before, forcing me to examine landscape design through very different “lenses” than I could encounter in North America. These perspectives would not only help me grow as an aspiring designer who would like to work internationally, but could add great richness to landscape architecture dialogue at Rutgers as well. In addition, I think that my research could prove valuable to our colleagues in Rwanda, complementing current government efforts to boost local economies, engage youth, promote social harmony, and foster innovative celebration of cultural heritage. Furthermore, I believe that this investigation in Rwanda serves as a case study applicable to a much wider scope, as youth in many other African countries also grapple with how to maintain cultural identity in an increasingly changing world, pressured by globalization, environmental challenges, rapid urbanization, and widespread migration. Since I have found almost no literature on the topic, landscape design as a vehicle for revealing/transmitting the rich tradition of oral histories seems to be an important, yet rather overlooked, dimension to ongoing efforts to strengthen African communities.

STUDY PLAN & METHODS

Much of my research methods would involve either formal or informal, participatory interviews with a variety of local contacts: traditional storytellers; faculty members and students in the Architecture & Environmental Design program at the national university; artists of different mediums; local or national government official (e.g. from ministry of cultural affairs); teachers; residents; and youth of different ages, family situations (i.e. orphaned vs. parented), regions, and development settings (urban, rural, etc.). Questions would be tailored to the area of expertise/interest of the interviewees (see attached *Sample Lines of Inquiry* section) as they relate to landscape and oral history transmission. I am advised that many contacts in Rwanda are more likely to share true opinions if they can do so anonymously, therefore I will record notes in writing; I might be able to record storytellers presenting oral histories in audio or video format.

I must re-emphasize that I intend these interviews to form just a first, brief yet important segment in a larger exploration of the topic; I realize that I will not have the time to interview truly representative sample sizes, amass an extensive oral history repository, nor build the trust relationships that a more extended study would allow. Nevertheless, I have built opportunities to meet a wide variety of contacts into my sample itinerary so that I can get a range of inputs.

Experiencing various landscapes within Rwanda is critical to gaining a better understanding of the context in which many oral histories developed and essential to identifying potential design interventions. For that reason, I plan to document the environments that I visit and travel through (cities, agricultural lands, roads, universities, national parks, historic sites, etc.) via journal sketches, maps, and photographs.

STUDY PRODUCTS

- Journal of daily sketches, interview notes, observations, etc.
- Hybrid written/visual report of findings for further exploration by the Department of Architecture & Environmental Design at the National University of Rwanda (the Rutgers Center for African Studies has already requested a copy). Would include potential partners, a map of potential sites for design interventions, and/or other graphic representations of design ideas inspired by my findings, etc.
- Photo essay and accompanying oral narrative, perhaps infused with traditional African storytelling techniques (the Rutgers Center for African Studies has also expressed interest in this product)

SAMPLE ITINERARY

The following sample itinerary has been designed with flexibility in mind; growing up in West Africa taught me that travel plans must be adaptable to unforeseen circumstances and the less hurried pace of life in Africa (compared to the northeastern United States). When I am sure that I can go, I will receive more recommendations and schedules of availability from my contacts in Rwanda.

Tue 7/15: Arrive in Kigali Airport
 Check in at Guesthouse, confirm driver
 Explore Kigali

Wed 7/16 Meet with Rwanda Writes contacts (Kigali)
 Meeting at Ministry of Culture
 Visit with some traditional storytellers in Kigali
 Visit with artists at ASAR co-op

Thu 7/17 Ruhande Arboretum (Huye/Butare)
 Meet with design faculty & students at university
 Tour National Museum [excellent introduction to traditional history, arts, etc.]
 Visit with COPABU co-op

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- Drive to Nyungwe
- Fri 7/18 Trek through Nyungwe National Park
[montane rainforest setting; chat with guides about stories & landscape]
- Sat 7/19 Meet with storytellers in Karongi/Kibuye
Visit with children @ L'Esperance self-sufficient orphanage
Lunch in Rubavu/Gisenyi
Visit with Batwa community in Abatigayubuke
Short trek through Gishwati Forest Reserve
- Sun 7/20 Join contacts for church and lunch
Stroll around Kigali and nearby Nyarutarama Lake
Catch up on sketches & journal (many places are closed on Sun.)
- Mon 7/21 Morning in Kigali
Drive out to eastern provinces
Visit with girls at Institute for Women's Excellence in Rwamagana
Drive to Akagera
- Tue 7/22 Akagera National Park [savanna setting; chat with guides about stories & landscape]
Drive back to Kigali
- Wed 7/23 Kigali Genocide Memorial & associated sites
Ivuka Arts workshop
Visit with children & teachers at the Meg Foundation [school for young urban youth]
Visit with children & teachers at the Centre Marembo [center for older urban youth]
- Thu 7/24 Spend day in village of Cyeza (near Muhanga/Gitarama)
[day-in-the-life-of experience: chat with residents while performing chores,
weaving, dancing, eating, etc. alongside them]
Overnight in Ruhango
- Fri 7/25 Ruhango Friday Morning Market
Visit *Urutare rwa Kamageri* (site of famous oral history)
Visit with Batwa potters at the Poterie Locale de Gatara
Rukali Palace Museum & Rwesero Art Museum in Nyanza
[traditional & modern stories and artforms]
Return to Kigali
- Sat 7/26 Participate in national monthly community clean-up day
Free day
- Sun 7/27 Trek around Lake Burera in western provinces & learn associated oral histories
Visit with youth and caretakers at Imbabazi Orphanage & tour plantation
Intore performance [traditional stories performed in glorious ancient dance form]
Return to Kigali

Mon 7/28 Free day

Tue 7/29 Depart Kigali Airport for U.S.

ESTIMATED BUDGET

Visa:	\$50? (may not be required)
Airfare:	\$1900
Transportation/Driver:	\$400
Lodging:	\$260
Meals:	\$320
Entrance & Misc. Fees:	\$465 (2 National Parks contribute the highest cost)
Sketchbook:	\$12
SOS Student Insurance:	\$95
Vaccinations/Prophylaxis:	\$320
Emergency Medical Kit:	<u>\$70</u>
Total Cost:	\$4027

HEALTH & SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

Although the mention of Rwanda tends to immediately conjure up images of the 1994 genocide violence in most American minds, the current administration has actually achieved a remarkable level of security. The U.S. Dept. of State has no travel warnings or alerts listed for the country, and states that violent crime against foreigners is rare. I've researched numerous websites for women travelling solo in Rwanda and all responses from women have been very positive, stating that following basic travel precautions they felt perfectly safe, found locals friendly and helpful, and highly recommend it as a destination not to miss. Kristen Swanson reports that same, and has felt comfortable enough to bring some of her female middle school students to Rwanda.

Nevertheless, I plan to coordinate my travel with a teacher and librarian so I have travel companions for part of the time. I have knit together a sample itinerary such that I will spend most time in the company of my expanding network of local contacts, not alone, and Kristen has helped me to secure reliable accommodations and a good driver to assist me in my travels (e.g. act as interpreter if I encounter individuals that do not communicate comfortably in English or French).

I am familiar with basic safety precautions from living in West Africa as a child and living alone in New York City, but have consulted the U.S. Dept. of State website, CDC website, and several travel health & safety blogs for women for more Rwanda-specific precautions. Between conversations with Kristen and resources from individuals who have previously conducted research in Rwanda, I am fairly aware of cultural or political *faux pas* to avoid. I am Red Cross certified in first aid and will have an emergency medical kit to address any minor health needs; I will also have SOS health insurance should a more serious emergency arise.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I am so excited by the prospect of this trip! I entered into my landscape architecture and public planning studies at Rutgers with the intent of utilizing what I learned to help the people and continent that gave me so much as a child. The background investigation that I have conducted thus far into Rwandan history, environment, development, culture, and art in preparation for the trip has only increased my initial fascination with the project and my confidence that it matters. Thank you for your consideration and the opportunity to make it a reality.

REFERENCES

The following references have been helpful in my preparatory studies of Rwanda. I will, of course, be able to expand the list once my proposal is accepted.

General Information

Briggs, P. (2012). *Rwanda*. Guilford, CT: Bradt.

CIA World Factbook. *Rwanda*. Retrieved March 20, 2014, from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rw.html>

Rwanda History Pre-1994

Carr, R. (1999). *Land of a Thousand Hills: My Life in Rwanda*. New York: Viking.

Des Forges, A. (2011). *Defeat is the Only Bad News: Rwanda Under Musinga, 1896-1931*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

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University of Penn. African Studies Center. *Rwanda—History*. Retrieved 2014, February 24, from <http://www.africa.upenn.edu/NEH/rwhistory.htm>

Vasina, J. (2004). *Antecedents of Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Rwanda Genocide & Post-Genocide

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Davenport, C. and A. Stam. (2009, October 06). What Really Happened in Rwanda? *Pacific Standard* [online]. Retrieved February 24, 2014, from <http://www.psmag.com/navigation/politics-and-law/what-really-happened-in-rwanda-3432/>

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Strauss, S., & Waldorf, L. (Eds.). (2011). *Remaking Rwanda: State-Building and Human Rights After Mass Violence*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Rwanda Development, Architecture & Landscape Design

- Blum, A. (2007, November). Planning Rwanda. *Metropolis Magazine* [online]. Retrieved February 23, 2014, from <http://www.metropolismag.com/November-2007/Planning-Rwanda/>
- Morris, M. (2009). Preparing for a New Future in Rwanda. *Planning* 75(4), 32-33.
- Sharma, M. (2012, May 09). Remaking Kigali: A 21st Century Rwanda Built by Rwandans. *Matador Network* [online]. Retrieved February 23, 2014, from <http://matadornetwork.com/abroad/remaking-kigali-a-21st-century-rwanda-built-by-rwandans/>
- Seburanga, J.L., & Zhang, Q. (2013). Heritage Trees and Landscape Design in Urban Areas of Rwanda. *Journal of Forestry Research* 24(3), 561-570.
- Kinzer, S. (2008). *A Thousand Hills: Rwanda's Rebirth and the Man Who Dreamed It*. Hoboken: Wiley & Sons.
- Various articles about architecture & landscape design projects in Rwanda retrieved from <http://www.archdaily.com/tag/rwanda/>

African Storytelling/Oral History

Most Rwandan oral history resources that I could find focus on genocide experiences, which I didn't want to dominate my study. I am still trying to procure a volume of Rwandan oral histories written in French by Alexis Kagame. Dr. Ousseina Alidou, director of the Rutgers Center for African Studies and an expert on African storytelling, will be providing me with some other resources.

Landscape Architecture in Africa

- International Federation of Landscape Architects Africa website. Retrieved from <http://africa.iflaonline.org>
- Jackson, S., Adeya, A., Mehta, H., & Ndubisi, F. (2013, November 15). *What's Next for Landscape Architecture in Africa* lecture at the annual meeting of the American Society of Landscape Architects in Boston, Massachusetts.
- Stoffberg, H., Hinds, C., & Muller, L. (Eds.). (2012). *South African Landscape Architecture: A Compendium and A Reader*. South Africa: Unisa Press.

Rwandan Art

- Brownell, G. (2013, October 16). In Rwanda, Studio Space as Catalyst. *New York Times* [online]. Retrieved February 26, 2014, from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/arts/international/in-rwanda-studio-space-as-catalyst.html?_r=0
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Landscape Narratives, People and Place

Hayden, Dolores. (1995). *The Power of Place*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

NETWORK OF CONTACTS IN RWANDA

I have already started to knit together a network of contacts in (or who have friends in) Rwanda who can assist me in making my trip successful. I will pursue them further when my travel proposal is accepted.

- Ben Nkusi, ALARM in Kigali
- Dr. Felicia Akinyemi, Dean of Arch. & Env. Design dept. at the National University of Rwanda

- Chris Ordway, Senior Technical Advisor at HOPE International in Kigali
- Thecle Makuza, Ministry of Sports & Culture in Rwanda
- Kristen Swanson, co-founder of Rwanda Writes program in Kigali
- Ndunge Kiiti, Professor at Houton College
- Hitesh Mehta, Kenyan landscape architect who has designed eco-tourism sites in Rwanda
- Tara Armistead, landscape architect from Tennessee who has designed community gardens in Rwanda

SAMPLE LINES OF INQUIRY

- Meet with traditional storytellers & educators from various parts of the country to learn about Rwandan oral history
 - Hear some of the stories, proverbs, etc. that they think are important to pass on
 - Learn how the oral history has traditionally been transmitted (certain designated storytellers vs. older family members, formal events vs. informal conversations, etc.) & where they see the break down occurring
 - How they currently seek to engage the younger generations (what seems to work & what doesn't)
 - Ask their ideas about presenting oral history through the landscape
 - Learn about symbols, colors, materials associated with the stories that might be useful in landscape design
- Meet with faculty & students in the Architecture & Environmental Design program at the National University of Rwanda to learn more about landscape design in Rwanda
 - How do they think about the landscape & approach design? How do they find that similar & different to “Western” design approaches?
 - What kind of work do they engage in (studio projects, community outreach, etc.)? What kinds of challenges do they face in realizing their designs?
 - What is the current development situation in Rwanda? Their take on its effect on local population's relationship to landscape? What do they think is good? What could be better?
 - Ask their ideas about presenting oral history through the landscape
 - Learn about materials, design elements, cultural spatial & aesthetic preferences, etc.
 - Existing examples in Rwanda of good design that conveys/reveals stories in a compelling manner?
- Visit with local residents (especially youth) to get their take on landscape & storytelling
 - How do they think about and interact with the landscape? How has that changed over time?
 - What is their take on current development situation in Rwanda & its effect on local population's relationship to landscape? What do they think is good? What could be better?
 - What is their vision for the landscape? For transmission of oral histories?
 - For youth, what are their favorite histories/stories? How did they learn them? Are they concerned about history being lost? Do the stories seem relevant to their lives &

something that they would want to pass on to their children and younger generations? Why or why not?

- Ask their ideas about presenting oral history through the landscape.
- Learn about materials, design elements, cultural spatial & aesthetic preferences, etc.

- Meet local & national officials (minister of culture) to get their take on landscape & storytelling
 - Learn more about local/national efforts to promote cultural heritage (storytelling, specifically); successes/challenges; what is their vision?
 - What is their take on current development situation in Rwanda & its effect on local population's relationship to landscape? What do they think is good? What could be better?
 - Has cultural heritage promotion been a priority in current development? Why or why not?
 - Ask their ideas about presenting oral history through the landscape.

- Visit with local artists of various mediums
 - How do they think about and interact with the landscape? How has that changed over time?
 - What is their take on current development situation in Rwanda & its effect on local population's relationship to landscape? What do they think is good? What could be better?
 - Partnering with storytellers?
 - Learn about materials, design elements, cultural spatial & aesthetic preferences, etc.