

Design That Heals: An Interview with Alan Jacobson

by Steven Heller | February 20, 2008

Last December at AIGA/NY's "Cause/Effect" conference, Alan Jacobson, proprietor of the Philadelphia-based consulting and design firm ex;it, spoke of an incredible community-building initiative in Rwanda, a country still recovering from the ravages of a horrific civil war almost 14 years ago. Jacobson's firsthand account of his work with the Rugerero Genocide Survivors Village, how he became actively involved and has applied his skills in design as a vehicle for positive social change, could not help but move those of us in the audience who have found it difficult to disrupt our comforts—who, despite our best wishes, have not sacrificed our own security for the benefit of others. Inspired by his activism and that of his collaborators in this grassroots effort, I took the opportunity to interview him just before he returned for another extended stay in Rwanda.



Residents of the Rugerero Genocide Survivors Village stand before a community-created memorial mural.

Heller: *How did you become involved in the Rwanda Healing Project?*

Jacobson: I chaired an SEGD design conference in Philadelphia in 2004, which I named "The Power of the Individual." My goal was to inspire a discussion about our responsibility as designers and our capacity to create positive change in the world. It was also important to send a message to young designers early in their careers that everyone can do something.

Heller: *Didn't you also meet someone there who would become deeply involved in the project with you?*

Jacobson: My search for people who exemplified

the message, who are creating change through design, or designers who are creating change through other means, led me to Lily Yeh, an artist and creator of the Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia. After a powerful talk about her 18-year project in North Philadelphia, she sat down next to me and I asked her if I could help. We became friends over the next few months, meeting for breakfast every three weeks, exploring how we would work together. One day we met after she had returned from speaking at a conference in Barcelona, where a Rwandan Red Cross worker asked her if she would come to a genocide survivors' village to design and build a memorial to house the bones of loved ones killed in the 1994 genocide. Lily asked me if I want to be

her partner on the project, and after six months of discussion and planning, we left for Rwanda.

Heller: *This was not some tourist trip to sites in Africa. You put yourself in a challenging position in a nation where only a decade earlier the worst genocide in recent history occurred. What did you believe your efforts would accomplish?*



Completed village murals.

Jacobson: I truly entered this project not knowing what the result would be. Our goal was to build the memorial, bury the bones and create a place of healing for genocide survivors in the village and surrounding communities. After intensive reading about the genocide and about the country of Rwanda, I realized it was not possible [for me] to understand the people of Rwanda, their needs or their struggles. The horror of genocide mixed with the brutality of deep poverty was beyond my comprehension. The more I read, the more fear and apprehension I had about going. Family, friends and those in my professional world expressed their concern. Most of the time I wasn't sure what was driving me, but I knew somehow that I had been preparing for this for my entire life.

Heller: *Can you discuss the role of design in the Rwanda Healing Project?*

Jacobson: Design is big word. The most obvious role of design in the visual sense was the design of the memorial. Environmental design would be the best bucket to carry this project. The undulating walls contain and define the space. The designed landscape formalizes the approach to the tomb and creates space for gathering and contemplation. The tomb, above and below, was designed to accommodate the vision and traditions of the survivors and mourners; on top, a bright and hopeful mosaic, and underground, the quiet blue green painted wall and shelves that carry the purple draped caskets of many gathered bones.

The murals that were painted on the mud-brick homes in the village were designed from drawings created by adults and children in the village after simple workshops were given.



(clockwise from top) Rugegero Genocide Memorial monument designed by Lily Yeh and sponsored by Barefoot Artists Inc.; the memorial close-up; inside the burial vault; children painting; and a painting workshop.

Heller: *Was there a design process?*

Jacobson: The process of design and implementing the vision that emerged from that process was the essence of the project. The building of the memorial and the painting of the homes was a conversation between us and the Rwandans that worked with us, and it sparked a new conversation between themselves. The process became a serious, and emotional, conversation between Lily, myself, Terry [Tempest Williams] and Meghan [Morris]. Whose project was this anyway—ours or theirs? How much of the design should be controlled and how much must be let go?

Pride of creation is a powerful driver. The process of designing and implementing the idea and plan sparked an energy that we learned later was manifest for the first time since these people had been randomly gathered to live in this village.



Villagers working on a sunflower mural.

For the first time, they had begun to work together as a team—some emerging as leaders, some as artists, some as workers—each learning what they had to offer the project. I could feel the pride in the air and see it in their faces. Together we were creating something unique. Together we were finding what was special about each of us through the process. I was learning that this was not a project to build a memorial or to paint a village, but the beginning of a new hope for a better future that could carry forward—but how?

Heller: How were your skills and talents marshaled for this experience?

Jacobson: My skills, our skills, are often defined by the ones that people buy from us. As a designer I apply graphic design, environmental graphic design, some research techniques, a strategic thinking process and business acumen. Yes, all of these came in handy on the project—from space planning the memorial [to] designing the murals and providing leadership. But most of all, what was most handy is not a skill at all. It is my respect and appreciation for the uniqueness in all of us and a genuine desire to learn and gain understanding along the way. In a place where the nature of things was so foreign to my paradigm and my experience, I understood quickly that while leadership was expected, my ability to listen and my desire to understand their realities was paramount to develop trusting and loving relationships in order to work together to make change.

Heller: How have you changed?

Jacobson: Much has changed for me personally over the last two years. I have recalibrated what is most important in my life, and the decisions I make are clearer. My gratitude for the luck of my random landing place on earth has been heightened because of what my friends in the village have unknowingly taught me.

Heller: In the presentation you gave at AIGA NY's "Cause/Effect," you spoke of relationships with the adults and children of the Rwandan village. How have these relationships manifest in your life?

Jacobson: The relationships are the reward, as we are helping each other grow and thrive. I have come to love the children and adults I have met in the village as a family of sorts. The dichotomy they live—of poverty and hardship with hope, faith and joy—is confounding. I don't claim to fully understand how the people I know in the village really feel about things. I do know that I feel unconditionally loved and appreciated for just coming to the village and caring about them. I know they feel my unconditional love and respect for them.



Alan (center left) and the sunflower oil cooperative.

Heller: Has this project quantifiably changed others?

Jacobson: There are many children in the village I see growing over the last two years. We do art together and play together when I return. Some things have changed for them, but the hope for a productive future is a far off horizon that is elusive. The adults have little hope for change, and daily life

is experienced in survival mode. They know I, and others, will return and that we are working to find new ways of helping them improve their daily lives and hope for the future. They are all with me every day now. Not much happens in my life where they don't help shape my decisions.



Children in art class.

Heller: *Whenever Westerners descend on a third world nation, even to bring aid and comfort, there is a sense of cultural colonialism at play. How did you reconcile the need to help with that concept?*

Jacobson: This concept wasn't clear to me until I experienced the reality firsthand. The complexity of it all requires huge energy and discipline to understand the ramifications of what you are doing there. The given power we have when we arrive to do this work must be placed in check quickly. Having money, being white and American, and carrying a plan to improve the human condition can be a license to build and destroy at the same time. I found by exposing my naiveté and by working hard to understand what is really needed, instead of pushing the plan as we brought it, helped to bridge the conflict between imposing our ideas and working together to create a cooperative and sustainable solution. More time is required to better understand how well we are doing in this area.

Heller: *In offering to help design and build a memorial to the murdered you must have had to learn essential aspects of Rwandan life so as not to misstep. What was involved in that process?*

Jacobson: Misstepping comes with the territory. There is a big difference in misstepping due to

arrogance and misstepping due to ignorance. When our ignorance becomes apparent through an act of love and we are open to listening and learning, then it is forgiven and we become students. I do think that we moved too quickly at times without understanding the realities of the people in the village. I felt at times that the project was setting expectations and hopes that we could not meet. The survivors in the village could not have understood what our vision was in the beginning, but they engaged fully with us. I still wonder what they hope for as a result of the work.

Heller: *What was the biggest error you made?*

Jacobson: The memorial design included mosaic mountains behind some flowers that were misinterpreted as snakes—a slang/derogative name for Tutsis during the genocide. Those that expressed the similarity knew our intentions were innocent.



Villagers and their murals.



Faces of genocide.

Heller: *The big question is, how did the people you encountered reconcile their own tragedy? Were fear, bitterness and anger tangible in their being? And how did you navigate through this?*

Jacobson: “Reconciliation” is a word often heard in Rwanda. It may be the most difficult concept to digest. The main thrust centers around the relationship between Hutus, who were the genocide perpetrators, and the Tutsis, the victims. While generations of intermarriage make this a gray issue, there is a huge undercurrent of anger, fear and pain tempered with a mandate from the government to forgive and reconcile. People do understand that in order for Rwanda to heal and thrive, there must be forgiveness. This is true, but I believe a generation must pass.

Heller: *You must have heard about a lot of horrors. . .*

Jacobson: The many personal horror stories I have heard and the unspeakable violence and hatred that they have witnessed makes forgiveness

inconceivable to me. Since my first days in Rwanda I have daydreamed my way into the time and place of the genocide and imagined scenarios where my family and I were victims of the violence. I have tried to feel the fear, the terror and the pain that they experienced. It is horrifying. I remain unsure as to how they live with the memory and the pain, but they do. There is joy in their souls as we work together. They have great faith in God and I have seen them muster hope. But I have also cried with them as they shared their wounds. It is a very dark place. In the early days I was overwhelmed by the hardship of Rwanda, but as I have come to know her better, and as I experience the beauty of the people and my new friends and family, I now feel more joy than sadness. I know we are making progress together.

Heller: *What was the physical manifestation of the Healing Project?*

Jacobson: The genocide memorial and the painting of the village was the original project goal. April 5, 2007 marked the completion and dedication of the memorial. Many bones of genocide have been buried there, some of which were family members of those in Rugerero Survivors Village. It is a beautiful outdoor healing space built collaboratively and now cared for by those in the village.



Alan and Mugakatari.

We painted a series of mud-brick homes in the center of the village after leading workshops to collect ideas and visions of the adults and children living in the village. There is now color and a new sense of unique identity in the village. Mugakatari, a woman who lost six of her seven children in the genocide, told me this year that the Rugerero Village had always been a sort of temporary place for everyone. It has been a place where homeless refugees were gathered and provided shelter after the genocide. She told me that our presence and cooperative painting of the village has helped them make this home.



(From left) Women cleaning seeds outside the renovated coop; and a sunflower cooperative celebration.

Heller: Was this all best suited the community?

Jacobson: The attention and love we have offered has given the people of the village a feeling of being special and that someone cares. The initial goals of the project do not provide the community what it needs to build a better future, but it is a great start to a long conversation. As we came to better understand the needs of the community and our relationships deepened, many other initiatives have begun.

Heller: For instance?

Jacobson: Two teams of medical students from Jefferson University in Philadelphia have visited the village to gain a better understanding of health conditions and have begun general hygiene training. After learning that the children are frequently ill with malaria, I raised money and sent 500 mosquito nets resulting in only two documented cases in the following six months. Many other basic supplies have been provided as a short-term relief. Lily Yeh has set up a sewing cooperative with six machines and training. I have begun a cooperative to produce sunflower cooking oil to sell in markets to provide an income stream in the village. It is in the early stages and the obstacles are many, but we will continue. A rainwater capture system was installed to gather water. A Saturday art program was established and continues. Conversations with the young women have begun to help them establish a support group to talk about AIDS and other personal concerns.

Heller: After seeing your documentation, I can't imagine this as simply a design problem. Is it an ongoing project for you?

Jacobson: I would not want this to end as an art or design project but an exploration and collaboration to create opportunity for sustainable change and progress, as they define it... I see no end in sight.

I will continue to support and work with the Saturday art program, one of my great pleasures when I go there. [We will] continue to learn about each other, play together and work together to make a better future. And maybe there is a great leader waiting to emerge from the village someday. I believe that is true.

About the Author:

Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre* and *Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press).

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