From December 2012 - January 2013, I had the opportunity to backpack through Eastern Africa. The Wallenberg Travel award has granted me the opportunity to explore one of the 7 wonders of Africa, immerse myself within the architecture of historically significant locales, and live within communities of inspiring people from various cultures in Africa.

Special thanks to Neil Robinson for his support and priceless advice, as well as Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning for providing me with experiences I will cherish for a lifetime, both within and beyond the University of Michigan.
One of the most memorable stops along on my journey through Tanzania was my stay at Mambo View Point Eco Lodge, perched atop the Usambara Mountains, at an altitude of 6200 feet. It is truly a castle in the sky. The lodge is composed of a small community of sustainable huts that are carved out of the mountainside, and are constructed with materials specific to the Usambaras.

The local architect explained that the foundation is made from granite, which is broken into pieces by the masoners from the neighboring town, Mambo. The roofs of the huts are made from local Eucalyptus and Sisal wood poles, tied together via Makuti palm trees (the fibers of which are cultivated by the Mambo women). The poles fan out in a radial form, supported by long red cedar poles that are firmly planted into the ground. Red cedar is also used to construct the furniture and doors. Clay-fired bricks, also made on the mountain, clad the hut exteriors.

Mambo Viewpoint is truly a spectacular achievement. The founders of the village were able to build this self-sustaining environment quite literally in the clouds. Travelers from around the world make Mambo View Point a destination, for it’s 360 degree views, sustainable building practices, and welcoming community.
NGORONGORO CRATER / ARUSHA
From the top of the Usambara Mountains, I made my way North to Arusha, and down into the valley. My next excursion on the voyage was taking off on a Safari in the Ngorogoro Crater, one of Africa’s Seven Natural World Wonders. As we drove 2000 feet below the top of the crater’s rim, the tour guide informed me that the crater was once a volcano that imploded due to the sheer magnitude of it’s own magma. The Ngorongoro Crater is now a 100 square mile caldera, and an ecosystem for over 30,000 mammals. Within one game drive, I was fortunate enough to see lions, leopards, buffalos, elephants, and even the rare black rhinoceros of the “Big Five” species.

Apart from the looming crater walls, lush vegetation, and my alarmingly close proximity to the unfazed zebras, gazelles, and lions (I even witnessed a group of male lions hunt a zebra mere feet in front of our jeep), one of the most interesting aspects of Ngorongoro was the presence of the Masaai Tribe. The Masaai men and women coexist with the animals in the crater, and abide by traditional roles, even to this day. The women raise and herd cattle, cook for their families, and construct their homes with grass, mud, and animal byproducts. The men herd livestock, and when of age, the male warriors protect the homes and boma communities. It was truly amazing to see another self-sustaining community in another unique environment.
STONE TOWN / ZANZIBAR
From Arusha, I headed south and into the city harbor of Dar Es Salaam. From there, I sailed East of Tanzania to the archipelago of Zanzibar, and disembarked into Unguja’s main port and historic capital, Stone Town.

Stone Town is notorious for being the island’s main port for spice trading, allowing Zanzibar to be coined “The Spice Island.” Stone Town continues to be the bustling historic center of Zanzibar, made up of winding alleys and unique bazaars. Due to the slave and spice trade, the city has been influenced by a plethora of cultures and religions, which is reflected in the varied styles of architecture. The looming mosques, Arabian mansions with walled-in courtyards and narrow corridors, and lime-washed coral buildings are a direct product of Islamic, Indian, Persian, and Portuguese influences, which have combined to form a characteristic Swahili architecture.

I found that the best way to explore Stone Town was to lose oneself amongst its web of meandering alleys. Around each corner was another intersection of narrow streets and passageways, set into a labyrinth of curio shops with crumbling coral facades and multi-story residences with intricate hand-carved wooden doors. Stone Town is truly a place molded by multiple cultures, and the city’s architecture is indicative of its rich history.
Upon the last leg of my journey, I had the chance to visit Beit-Al-Mtoni, or the Mtoni Palace Ruins, one of the oldest standing structures in Stonetown, Zanzibar. Beit al Mtoni translates to “Palace by the Stream” due to its location on Zanzibar’s western coast. Similar to the buildings in Oman, the Mtoni Palace was once a multi-story palace, constructed with coral stone and lime-washed walls.

The Palace was home to Omani Sultan Sayyid Said, his 2 wives, 75 concubines, and 125 children, along with his extended family and their servants. Although parts of the palace are undergoing renovation, the palace’s grand reception hall, courtyard, women’s quarters, Persian baths, and existing architecture are still standing, and tell a story of the life of 19th century Arabian royalty.

The common areas are accessible via wide passageways, which give way to an expansive courtyard in the middle of the palace. As the women of the sultan’s household were not to be seen by the sultan’s visitors, their quarters and the bathhouse were located at the other end of the place, furthest from the main entrance. Here, the baths are a series of rooms with basins, connected by stone bridges. The palace residents would spend hours in the bathhouse, even praying, bathing, eating, and drinking here.
The large **reception hall** now serves as an open-air entertainment space for dinner and music each evening. After the architectural tour, we had the wonderful opportunity to be treated to a night of classical **Taarab music**, fresh seafood, Zanzabarian spiced meats, and a selection of curries. The actors portrayed members of the household and sang classical music, reminiscing about the times of luxury in the Sultan’s palace.

Although several areas of the palace have decayed over time, the Mtoni Palace Conservation Project (a foundation that now looks after the establishment), has spent years preserving the existing architecture. **Beit el Mtoni** serves as a lasting monument to a time when the island began to prosper from its natural resources, and produce beautiful architecture as a direct effect of the mix of cultures and the building materials that were unique to Zanzibar.

Thank you again to the **Benard L. Maas Foundation** and the **University of Michigan** for this memorable opportunity to travel through Africa. This trip has provided me with a broadened understanding of cultures different to my own, knowledge of unique building practices, and the chance to make lasting friendships with the most humble and welcoming people. I am truly honored.