

# a legacy project

the Wangari Muta Maathai House



Nairobi, Kenya

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# Wangari's legacy



Wangari Muta Maathai's legacy takes many forms: the special qualities of her personality and vision; the lessons she took from her experiences; and the fortitude she displayed in speaking truth to power. In Kenya, she remains a symbol of hope and steadfastness. Her moral authority, resoluteness, and incorruptibility are truly missed by the ordinary people she championed and on behalf of whom she spoke. Throughout the world, she is remembered for her unwavering commitment to the global environment and the most marginalized people, particularly women. The loss of her strong voice and accessible presence has left a huge gap, particularly as nations and communities grapple with the realities of a changing climate.

We, her friends, family and the extended Green Belt Movement family are dedicated to ensuring that her work and life are not forgotten, but that they continue to encourage people to live with conviction and courage. We believe that legacy projects are a vital way for people to honor Wangari's memory, share experiences and be inspired by her life's journey to take action. To that end, we are proposing the creation of the Wangari Muta Maathai House (WMM House): a sanctuary for reflection and renewal; a final home for her ashes; and a place of learning, growth, and action.

# Origins: the essence of Wangari

In the wake of Wangari's death, her family and friends asked ourselves what aspects of Wangari we wanted to remember and spotlight. The following emerged:

She was open and had time for everyone. She was comfortable in the company of the great and good as well as the impoverished and needy. You could find Wangari dancing in the countryside with grassroots women on one day and with some of the world's most inspiring and influential people on another. She believed deeply in the power of one. She thought a values-based society was a prerequisite for prosperity, and that empowering women was a key to breaking the cycle of poverty.



This is the dynamic energy that encompasses her joy and enthusiasm, her affirming spirit, and her faith in individual commitment and in genuine community that we wish the WMM House to exemplify. We want people to be touched by the passion that Wangari brought to everything she did—as if they had just met her and been embraced by her. We want everyone who visits the WMM House to feel they have become a better version of themselves: that they will become more socially engaged, more compassionate, and more dedicated to the public good. We want them to stretch their capacities and for the House to provide them with the inspiration and the tools to do so.

Too often in the course of her life, Wangari had to confront those who would destroy our common home—the forests, mountains, watersheds, and the Earth's other ecosystems on which we all depend. Her response was to engage, and to encourage others to also:

Those of us who understand, who feel strongly, must not tire. We must not give up. We must persist. I always say that the burden is on those who know. We are the ones who must take action.

The key word here is “we”. Wangari never thought of letting other people handle challenging situations alone. She was always part of the solution even when it cost her her friends, and in many situations threatened her life. The government of Kenya in the 1980s and 1990s was not amused at her challenges to their incompetence, corruption, cronyism and rampant land grabbing. From her campaigns to save Uhuru Park, Karura Forest, and Jivanjee Gardens, and in solidarity with the mothers of political prisoners, she remained steadfast in her support of those who, like her, believed in freedom and justice and accessible and green public spaces.



Wangari seemed to be able to operate at a level of consciousness that was higher than many. She connected realms that we normally do not link, environment, democracy and peace, and in doing so created a new literacy for our time. Wangari was action-oriented and always responded to challenges by asking, “So, what are we going to do about it?”



She had a deep sense of clarity and purpose in all she did and always put 110% of her energy behind her initiatives. The Wangari Muta Maathai House will seek to engender this purpose and energy in its programs.

The WMM House will showcase Wangari's belief in the importance of finding the courage to stand up for what is right public opinion notwithstanding. It will be dedicated to improving the lives of others and the Earth as a whole, undergirded by her recognition that, as she put it, "nature's wounds are our wounds."



## who might come to the house?

It often proved very difficult to organize Wangari's schedule: she gave her phone number to presidents and farmers alike, and was willing to talk with and learn from anyone she came across. The WMM House must reflect this deeply democratic spirit: open to people of all abilities and from all walks of life, citizens of Kenya or the world, who want to be motivated by her life and work.

You might be a tourist on a trip to Kenya who wants to know more about the Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner and author of Unbowed: A Memoir. You might be a writer/researcher on a scholarship seeking peace and inspiration in a weeklong stay as you study Wangari's life and legacy. You might be laureates from the Nobel Women's Initiative gathering to celebrate and plan a new campaign. You might be attending a seminar hosted by leaders of non-profits advocating for girls' education.

You might be a member of civil society convening a workshop on improving governance or strengthening climate diplomacy. You might be a grassroots environmental activist from East Africa strategizing with colleagues on how to protect local watersheds. You might be a Kenyan schoolgirl learning about your remarkable elder.



## what would happen here?

We envision the WMM House as an intimate dwelling where people will learn about the past and then grapple with the tough questions that will be raised as they explore the various exhibits at the House. They will also explore the values that Wangari cherished such as integrity, accountability, honesty, responsibility, volunteerism, gratitude, love of nature, and self-empowerment and discuss what a values-based society might look like. They will be inspired by stories about Wangari and her own words.

You cannot protect the environment unless you empower people, you inform them and you help them understand that these resources are their own, that they must protect them.

“Wangari Muta Maathai: A Life of Firsts”, p. 1

The House will embody Wangari’s educational ideas and ideals. She was an inspirational and effective teacher and developed a thoughtful approach to civic and environmental education. Her

“walks and talks” offer rich insights for learning by visitors. The visitor experience will be based on key salient points of her educational legacy ranging from a childhood sense of wonder to the ethical foundations for her action-taking.

These anchor points are elements of an educational philosophy for the Wangari Muta Maathai House. Among others they include:

**A Sense of Wonder:** Visitors will experience a sense of place in the natural beauty of the site. They will be reminded of the critical importance of significant life experiences in childhood as they lead to formation of values and sensitivity to nature. Indeed, a deep love and connection to nature was a driving force for Wangari’s work.

*The challenge is to restore the home of the tadpoles and give back to our children a world of beauty and wonder.*

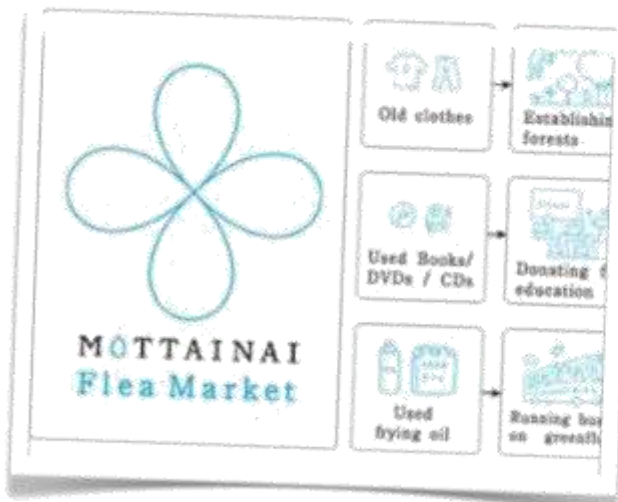
*“Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Speech”*

**Empowerment.** Among the most moving inspirations of Wangari’s legacy is her own empowerment as a woman and as a leader. By her example and through the methods of the Green Belt Movement, she inspired millions especially women and girls. Visitors will be invited to reflect on their own capacity to make a difference. Wangari famously said, “Planting trees is my little thing.” Visitors will be invited to consider their “little thing”. Through the hummingbird story, Wangari asked us, “What could you do? What would you do?”--- and reminds us that we ought to be doing the best that we can, no matter what.

*“Be a Humming Bird and Do the Best You Can”*

*Wangari Maathai, the Humming Bird Story*

**Mottainai:** The Japanese concept of “Mottainai” was a source of great inspiration for Wangari. She was moved by how a deep sense of values can be captured in a single word. Translated into “do not waste and use anything you have with gratitude and respect”, Mottainai (in Japan) was re-popularized by Wangari during a visit in 2005. The WMM will work closely with the Mottainai Campaign office in Tokyo to showcase this important concept that Wangari held so dear.



Taking action based on ethics: Inviting visitors to consider the concerns on which they are willing to act can be an engaging and important experience that can long outlive the visit. Wangari was willing to put everything on the line to protect Nairobi's Karura Forest and Uhuru Park. The power of these transformative actions grows over time and continues to inspire new generations of leaders in Kenya. Wangari was also a major author of The Earth Charter, an historic statement of ethical principles for creating a just, sustainable future. The Charter has great educational value in introducing learners to ethics--- and can be used to inspire visitors to reflect on their own ethical values and consider what action they might take.

Intergenerational collaboration: Wangari thought a lot about the need for collaboration across generations. She was committed to intergenerational learning and the need to inspire the world's young people. The WMM House will feature special experiential programs for young people.

I would like to call on young people to commit themselves to activities that contribute toward achieving their long-term dreams. They have the energy and creativity to shape a sustainable future. To the young people I say, you are a gift to your communities and indeed the world. You are our hope and our future.

New literacy: As an integrative thinker, Wangari saw the need for new forms of learning and understanding. She taught us that we can not have peace without democracy and nonviolence, that we can not have democracy without social and economic justice, and that we can not have social and economic justice without healing the Earth. She was committed to intergenerational learning and transformative leadership based on integrated ethical models. The educational programs will help visitors understand how to develop these new literacies.



## “3 legged stool”

I am inspired by the metaphor of the 3-legged stool - peace, democracy and environmental stewardship - fundamentals for sustainable development

In addition to short-term educational programs, the WMM House will also host longer term experiences, including conferences, retreats and seminars. Participants would have the opportunity to both enjoy the inspiring facilities but also interact with Wangari's ideas and ideals through the exhibits. These, too, will embody Wangari's educational philosophy.

Wangari Muta Maathai's legacy lives on through our commitments. At the end of one's visit to the WMM House, visitors will be invited to make a commitment to action. We envision a “wall of commitments” - electronic or otherwise, where these commitments will be populated and shared as an exhibit with subsequent visitors.

## what will the House look like?

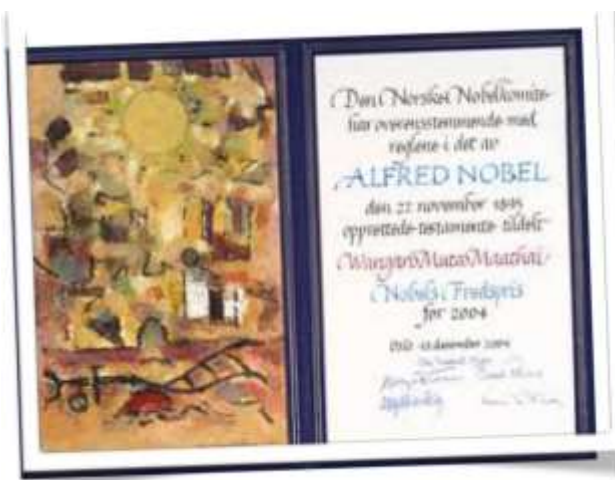
The overwhelming consensus of friends and family is that the House must be close to, or in, Nairobi, to take advantage of the high number of visitors, maximise exposure and enhance participation. The Green Belt Movement's training center in Lang'ata, in the leafy outskirts of Nairobi, offers a perfect venue. It is residential, yet close to five university campuses and popular tourist attractions such as the Karen Blixen Museum, the Giraffe Centre, and Nairobi National Park. Space exists for developing the existing house and gardens to accommodate both day visitors and residential guests.

When you arrive at the WMM House you will enter a serene and inviting dwelling. As you participate in the programs and walk through the exhibits, you will also encounter gardens filled with flora and fauna. A pond will contain a small island with a hummingbird sculpture, surrounded by flowers and shrubs where Wangari's ashes are interred. You can sit and reflect on Wangari's life, either on benches or on traditional three-legged African stools.



Wangari often spoke with pride about her community, the Kikuyu, and how, as a blessing to the dead, one would say, “May you rest where it is green and there is dew”. She called herself a child of the soil and would reflect on how much Kenya’s struggle for independence was about land, soil and community. The gardens will be filled with green and, in the mornings, layered with dew and the sounds of birds. It is fitting she should rest here.

The WMM House will also contain a building to host all indoor events and exhibit Wangari’s awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize medal and diploma. Here you will read about Wangari and the lessons of her life, listen to her speeches, and see her iconic personal effects (for example, the dress Wangari wore to the Nobel Prize Ceremony, her desk and chair, and her famous 1969 VW Beetle). These will form an inspiring and entertaining exhibit.



The House will benefit from multiple archival resources, currently in the family's custody, to enrich the exhibits, including: more than 150 hours of archival video footage, Wangari's books, video recordings of Wangari at various engagements locally and internationally, photographs, newspapers, documentaries, awards, and letters from people of all walks of life who were inspired by her. Products from the Mottainai campaign, as well as Wangari's books, DVDs, and other sustainably-produced items will be sold in the WMM House gift shop.

## How will the House be supported?

It is anticipated that the WMM House will receive funding from hosting national and international conferences, retreats, and other gatherings, as well as from tourism visits and proceeds from the gift shop. We also imagine that the House will entertain regular visitors from the universities, religious institutions, and other organizations close by for meetings and seminars.

We envision the launch of the House being supported by individual friends of Wangari's, those who were inspired by her life, foundations and private sector philanthropy.

The WMM House will offer a space for everyone to learn, to grow, and potentially, to change the world as Wangari herself did. We hope you will join us in making it happen.

## Wangari Muta Maathai

Born in 1940 in Nyeri, Kenya, Wangari Muta Maathai was the founder of the Green Belt Movement, which has planted more than 50 million trees in Kenya and inspired environmental and civic action across the world by numerous civil society organizations, governments and individuals. The first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctoral degree, Professor Maathai became chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy at the University of Nairobi. In the 1980s and 1990s she was a leader in the pro-democracy movement in Kenya, and was jailed and assaulted on several occasions. In 2002, she won election to the Kenyan parliament and was appointed assistant minister for the environment. She received numerous global awards, and in 2004, she was named the Nobel Peace Laureate for her “contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace.” She wrote four books and was the subject of a documentary film, *Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai*. She passed on in September 2011 in Nairobi. [END]

### **PLANNING BUDGET:**

The following is the budget for the planning state of this project. If we were to receive this support, Acorn Group, a Kenya-based property development firm, will lead the completion of this initial planning stage:

## Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace & Environmental Studies

Centered at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, WMI came about as a result of Wangari's almost forty years of community-based environmental activities. Before she died, she wanted to ensure that future strategies employed by the Green Belt Movement (the organization she founded in 1977) were based on sound, research-based evidence and information. She also wished to expose academics to the experiential learning of GBM members and field workers. Thus was born the collaboration with the University of Nairobi, where Wangari had for many years been a professor. Through innovative research and training, WMI is becoming a hub for innovation and study in the areas of sustainable development, democracy and peace. It is nurturing the first cohort of students, Masters and PhDs: the next generation of change agents whose "vision" will be sharpened so they actually see the challenges before them and tackle them with confidence and innovation.

WMI is also currently hosting wPOWER, a high-profile initiative funded by the U.S. State Department, which aims to train more than 8,000 women as clean energy entrepreneurs across East Africa, Nigeria and India to deliver clean energy access to more than 3.5 million people over the next three years.

In coming years at WMI, future policy-makers, political leaders, and community organizers from across Africa and other continents will learn about the history, successes and challenges of GBM, and through understanding the realities of ordinary people, will develop far-sighted, innovative and appropriate initiatives. Likewise, research and thinking from WMI will find its way into the strategies of organizations such as GBM, enriching, informing and hastening positive social transformation. [END]



## The Green Belt Movement

Founded by Professor Wangari Maathai in 1977, GBM was a project of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK). The project sought to respond to the needs of rural Kenyan women who reported that their streams were drying up, their food supply was less secure, and they had to walk further and further to get firewood for fuel, building and fencing. GBM encouraged the women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil, store rainwater, provide food and firewood, and receive a small monetary token of appreciation for their work. The project blossomed and extended beyond Kenya to other African countries and Haiti.

Shortly after beginning this work, Professor Maathai saw that behind the everyday hardships faced by populations—poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation, water scarcity, deforestation, and food insecurity—were deeper issues of disempowerment, disenfranchisement, political and economic mis-governance, inequities and loss of ethics, values and traditional practices that had previously cushioned and enabled communities to protect their livelihoods, work together for mutual benefit of all, and to do so both selflessly and honestly for the common good.

The Green Belt Movement, then an independent organization, instituted seminars in Community Education and Empowerment<sup>1</sup> (CEE) to encourage individuals and communities to analyze why they lacked agency to change their political, economic, and environmental circumstances and what they could do to change the status quo. Participants began to recognize that for years they had been placing their trust in predatory leaders who had betrayed them and their aspirations. On the other hand, even they in the community were undermining and sabotaging their own lives by not working with their environment and for failing to manage their natural resources wisely and in accordance to the rules of Nature. As a result they suffered drought related famine, soil erosion and dwindling water supplies.

<sup>1</sup>"They" were also known as "Civic" & "Environmental" Education Seminars