

Origins: An Interpretive History of MMA Design Studio's Exhibition for the 2023 Venice Biennale

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Abstract : 'Origins' is an exhibition designed and installed by MMA Design Studio, at the 2023 Venice Biennale. The installation formed part of the 'Dangerous Liaisons' group exhibition at the Arsenale building. An immersive experience was created for those who visited, where video projection and the bodies of visitors interacted with the scene. Designed by South African architect, Mphethi Morojele - founder and owner of MMA - the primary inspiration for 'Origins' was the recent discovery by Professor Karim Sadr in 2019, of a substantial Tswana settlement. Situated in present day Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve, some 45km south of Johannesburg, this precolonial city named Kweneng, has been dated back to the fifteenth century. This remarkable discovery was achieved thanks to advanced aerial, LiDAR scanning technology, which was used to capture the traces of Kweneng, spanning a terrain of some 10km long and 2km wide. Discovered by light (LiDAR) and exhibited through light, Origins presents a simulated experience of Kweneng. The presentation of Kweneng was achieved primarily through video, with a circular projection onto the floor of an animated LiDAR data sequence, and onto the walls a filmed dance sequence choreographed to embody the architectural, spatial and symbolic significance of Kweneng. This paper documents the design process that was involved in the conceptualization, development and final realization of this noteworthy exhibition, with an elucidation upon key social and cultural questions pertaining to precolonial heritage, reimagined histories and postcolonial identity. Periods of change and of social awakening sometimes spark an interest in questions of origin, of cultural lineage and belonging - and which certainly is the case for contemporary, post-Apartheid South Africa. Researching this paper has required primary study of MMA Design Studio's project archive, including various proposals and other design related documents, conceptual design sketches, architectural drawings and photographs. This material is supported by the authors first-hand interviews with Morojele and others who were involved, especially with respect to the choreography of the interpretive dance, LiDAR visualization techniques and video production that informed the simulated, immersive experience at the exhibition. Presenting a 'dangerous liaison' between architecture and dance, Origins looks into the distant past to frame contemporary questions pertaining to intangible heritage, animism and embodiment through architecture and dance - considerations which are required "to survive the future", says Morojele.

Keywords : architecture and dance, Kweneng, MMA design studio, origins, Venice Biennale

Conference Title : ICCAHHH 2024 : International Conference on Cultural Architecture, Humanities, History and Hermeneutics

Conference Location : San Francisco, United States

Conference Dates : June 03-04, 2024