Telling Tales

Presents

Lost & Found; a Place of your Imagining
Project Background

• Telling Tales is a project by an all female collective of thought leaders and custodians of African textiles and material narratives.

• Supported by the British Council, the project was awarded a NaNa catalyst grant from the British Council to support new art for new audiences from the UK, Southern Africa and West Africa.

• It is a design project exploring new possibilities emerging within the field of textiles. Specifically looking at material narratives from the African continent and the personal, professional and spiritual dynamics which exist between people and materials.

• It was founded in 2018 by Textile designers; Yemi Awosile (UK), Nkul Mlangeni-Berg (SA/SWE), Djamila Sousa (Moz), Wacy Zacarias (Moz) and Product Designer, Thabisa Mjo (SA). This is a radical approach to collaboration and a design project, bringing together design practitioners from West Africa, Southern Africa and Sweden.
Project Chapters

Through an experimental research format, the Telling Tales project takes the form of a story made up of a series of chapters. Each chapter presents a series of ideologies from the past, present and future.

It examines the nuances between contemporary art and design, whilst exploring important points of difference.

The chapters are **Native Touch, Digital Touch, Unrendered, Foreign Customs and Lost & Found; a Place of your Imaging.** Each member of the collective has chosen a chapter to interpret in their chosen medium.
The focus of this submission is on the chapter: Lost & Found of the Telling Tales project. Lost & Found is a speculative center where Weavers, Artisans, Designer-makers and students share ideas, collaborate, design, manufacture and showcase their work. A place to create income generating opportunities and to access skills development. Participation at the London Design Biennale is a vital part to the design process and the design thinking of this still-speculative space.

At the online showcase in the Autumn exhibition, we will present renders of this center. The masterplan of the center is designed using the principles of African Fractal Geometry, principles that informed the vernacular design and architecture of West African villages. Fractals are intuitive geometries found in nature, in African weaving patterns, in the fables of the Chokwe people as told through their Sona sand drawings and in the vernacular architecture of West and Central African villages.

How does the design and existence of this center address the many crises we’re faced with?

1. “Your heritage is your inheritance”. For many people in Africa, their grandparents and parents cannot afford to leave them money, but they do leave them heritage, culture and a sense of belonging to something bigger than just the individual. Part of that heritage is expressed in crafts; from mud dyeing, to wood carving, textile designing, weaving and painting. The center would be a place where these people could use their heritage, these incredible craft skills, to generate an income for themselves.

2. Collaboration, a place where designer-makers and artisans come together to think of solutions for problems faced by their communities, to share knowledge and exchange skills, to work together to create a contemporary African design aesthetic.

3. Empowerment and Inclusion – the fact that the design of the center itself is based on African geometry challenges the notion that African art and design is simply decorative. This encourages us to start asking the questions about indigenous knowledge and to think of the ways in which that knowledge can be applied to help solve for today’s problems. Inclusion from the standpoint of you don’t need to have gone to a design school or a university in order for you to use your craft skill that was passed down, to make products to enable you to participate in the design economy of the world.

4. This project will cast a lens on the nature of contemporary design on the continent today.

What we will present at the London Design Biennale at Somerset House 2021
- An immersive installation
- Built using the materials that the users of the center specialize in; ilala palm, wire mesh, telephone wire weaving, Manjak weaving, Malian cloth, upcycled plastic, acoustic fabrics inspired by the music and sounds of West and South Africa
The geometric principle that we will use to design the center is Sona Geometry. The Chokwe, of Northeastern Angola, meet at the center of their village, they usually sit around a campfire or in the shade of deciduous trees, and spend their time in conversations which they illustrate by drawings in the sand, called Sona (singular Lusona). They refer to proverbs, fables, games, riddles, animals, etc., Most of these drawings are from a long tradition and play an important role in the transmission of knowledge and wisdom from one generation to another. The drawings must be made in a continuous flow, for any interruption or hesitation from the designer would be interpreted by the public as an imperfection or lack of knowledge. To facilitate the memorization of their pictograms or ideograms, the akwa kuta sona – specialists in design – have invented an interesting mnemonic: they mark with their fingertips an orthogonal network of equidistant points, where the number of rows and columns depends on what will be represented. Each Chokwe drawing reorganizes, so to speak, the points of the reference grid. This is the grid that we will use to design the masterplan of the center.
MATERIALITY

Examples of materials and skills that will be taught and practiced at the center

- Ilala palm
- Telephone wire
- Cork textile
- Mud dyeing
- Clay
Examples of traditional African crafts used in contemporary design

By: Mash.T Design, Houtlander
Beauty Ngxongo

By: TheNinevites