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South Africa announces curators for 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia

The South African Department of Sport, Arts and Culture and Ms Nosipho Nausca-Jean Jezile, The South African Ambassador to the Italian Republic, who also serves as a Commissioner for the South African Pavilion at Biennale Architettura 2023, have announced three curators for the South African Pavilion at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia: Dr Sechaba Maape, Dr Emmanuel Nkambule and Mr Stephen Steyn. They will be supported by 2BLN, Spies Architects and Breinstorm Brand Architects.

Scattered over ten thousand square kilometres of grassland in Mpumalanga, about two hundred kilometres east of Johannesburg, lay the ruins of a vast civilization known as the Bokoni. Of particular architectural interest at this site is a large number of low-relief rock carvings depicting building plans. It is widely agreed that the plans were not intended for construction, but constitute a theoretical architectural representation, demonstrating that Bokoni herdsmen made drawings of social structures as they are represented by architectural plans.

It is with this tradition in mind that the South African Pavilion at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia is themed around the architectural representation of existing and speculative social structures. The exhibition, titled *The Structure of a People*, will engage contemporary conditions such as ecological change and inequality. The inclusion of formerly peripheral value systems relies heavily on the appreciation of pre-colonial values, through the study of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and their role in the reimagining of our contemporary human settlements, institutions, and communities into the future.

The theme chosen for the Biennale Architettura 2023, which will be held from May 20th to November 26th 2023 (pre-opening May 18th and 19th) in the Giardini, at the Arsenale, and at various sites around Venice, is *The Laboratory of the Future*.

The South African Pavilion was conceptualised with this theme in mind, and it is explored through three cohesive exhibitions in the Pavilion. The first being *The Past is the Laboratory of*

SA PAVILION
The Structure of a People

La Biennale di Venezia

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the Future, an exploration of the Bokoni site and its various representations, including an augmented reality of a Bokoni homestead ruin. Here, the Bokoni rock engraving is displayed, alongside a woven installation in which visitors can have an immersive experience of a digital replica of the original site of the Bokoni. There is also a commentary on Southern African indigenous architectural forms and spaces in this section of the exhibition. Based on Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) art installation, the commentary is an interplay of a model of a folly, photos and text.

The second exhibition, *The Council of Beings*, features research-practice drawings by Dr Sechaba Maape inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon's critique of Negritude, as well as Leopold Senghor's ideas of African Philosophy, especially the notion of vitality. The drawings point to a future in which non-western, and Pan African traditions of thought are introduced to the epistemological realm of architecture.

Political Animals, the third exhibition, features the results of an architectural design competition for South African students. The competition invites students to develop architectural models and artefacts that represent the social structures around them. Six student models or artefacts will be exhibited.

"We have a key opportunity with this Pavilion to present previously unseen artefacts and thinking that is deeply entrenched in vital Indigenous Knowledge Systems in South Africa – and show how the past can truly be the laboratory of the future and help us to rethink critical issues that we face as a global society," say Maape, Nkambule and Steyn, Curators of the South African Pavilion.

Acting Director General (DG) of The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, Mr Vusithemba Ndima outlined that South Africa had been participating in this exhibition since 2011. The Department obtained a permanent exhibition space in 2012 for a period of 20 years in the Arsenale building in Venice. Every two years, the Department participates in the architecture exhibition and in the alternative years, SA practitioners participate in the visual arts exhibition.

South African participation at the Biennale Architettura 2023 is exceptional. In addition to the South African Pavilion, curated by Dr Sechaba Maape, Dr Emmanuel Nkambule and Mr Stephen Steyn, the following South African architects have been invited to participate by Prof Lesley Lokko: Summayya Vally (*Force Majeure*), Huda Tayob (*Dangerous Liaisons*), Kate Otten Architects – Kate Otten (*Dangerous Liaisons*), MMA Design Studio – Mphethi Morojele (*Dangerous Liaisons*), Office 24/7 Architecture and Lemmon Pebble Architects – Nabeel Essa and Tanzeem Razak (*Dangerous Liaisons*), Wolff Architects – Heinrich and Ilze Wolff (*Dangerous Liaisons*), Mareli Stolp and Clare Loveday (*Gender & Geography*, alongside

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Caroline Wanjiku Kihato from Kenya), Gugulethu Sibonelelo Mthembu (*Gender & Geography*) and Craig McClenaghan (*Mnemonic*). Philippa Tumubweinee, Sarah de Villiers and Thireshen Govender will serve on a panel of 15 international tutors who will work with 50 students, early career practitioners and academics from around the world as part of the Biennale College Architettura.

South African architecture showcased at the Biennale Architettura is selected by the Department via a tender process. This enables local architectural practitioners to exhibit cutting-edge thought and concepts works to an international audience.

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