

Exhibition design by Kossmanndejong and AFARAI

Our Colonial Inheritance, Tropenmuseum

Together with AFARAI, Kossmanndejong has created the concept and design of the exhibition. This topic required a design team with a critical approach, so diversity and dialogue were high on the agenda from the start. The collaboration between these design agencies and with the museum, other partners, academic experts, and experience experts, provided continued mirroring and questioning. Together they searched for a concept that would appeal to the imagination both in terms of content and scenography. This resulted in the idea of Spaces of Togetherness, expressed in 9 scenes, each with its own theme.

Narrative Spaces

When translating content into spatial experiences, designers always look for poetical and metaphorical ways to capture the essence. The content should be palpable at a glance. In the first scene, for example, visitors step into a space formed by circles of blue voile that fan out like drops from a central point. This represents the attraction that indigenous cultural 'treasures' held for the colonial powers. Rather than the colonial perspective, the existing indigenous culture literally takes centre stage. Another room presents the colonial worldview of the earth as a supermarket, where everything is for sale and available. This is shown as a modular space constructed from green supermarket crates. Throughout the exhibition, colour has been used as an important structuring tool. Since the entire exhibition is a continuous experience with hardly any partitions, the colours indicate the transitions between the different scenes and themes.

Spaces of Togetherness

The normative colonial historical narrative lacks other perspectives or only shows them in the margins. For the longest time, the Tropenmuseum was part of this normative system, and its collection largely originated from the former Dutch colonies. Only the items valued by the colonisers at the time were collected. But what was their value within the original context to the people who had made, used, and owned them? And, moreover, what items were neglected by the colonial rulers? By definition, the narrative of life outside the normative colonial system was invisible and absent because it wasn't noticed or considered relevant. So how can we still include these other perspectives?

The exhibition design was based on the idea that outside the normative system and in spite of it, there have always been spaces where resilience, creativity, and resistance brought people together to take control over their own lives. These places, habits, and rituals, these 'spaces of togetherness', form the foundation of the design concept. The starting point for each theme is a space of togetherness, and the colonial collection plays a secondary role. This literally made room for the culture that existed and emerged outside or in spite of the colonial system. It is set off against the colonial system and engages with it, too. The boundaries between the two are often permeable. This is particularly clear in the room dedicated to spirituality. At first, the church was part of the colonial system. Gradually, it became infused with indigenous spirituality, and sometimes the church would actually become a hotbed of resistance to the colonial system. Spaces of togetherness can be found across space and time, and so everyone can relate to them.

Spaces for Complexity

The colonial inheritance affects our daily lives in every aspect imaginable, from the macroeconomic system to our language, religious beliefs, and diet. It was challenging to capture this complex diversity in a clear substantive and spatial structure. The designers went with the architectural structure of the building. Open galleries surround its monumental atrium space. Although this calls for a linear narrative, visual connections between the rooms can be added. For this particular exhibition, the designers decided to make the building part of the scenography. The neoclassical arches provide rhythm and structure, and the design explicitly introduces visual connections, for instance by providing seating in front of an arch or by prominently placing the name monument in the central location so that it is visible from the surrounding rooms.

Kossmanndejong

Kossmanndejong is an Amsterdam agency of experience architects who create immersive, narrative spaces for interaction, inspiration, and connection. Since 1998, they have been leaders in the field of exhibition design and visitor experiences, and they have received numerous national and international awards. They won the European Museum of the Year Award three times in a row, lastly in 2022 for the Museum of the Mind. Kossmanndejong works around the world for museums, corporations, events, and public spaces and excels in creating substantive concepts for diverse audiences. The design process of Kossmanndejong is characterised by extensive research, marked integration with the architecture, and intensive collaboration with numerous parties, which results in extraordinary visitor experiences.

Recent projects include the Groote Museum in Artis Amsterdam, the Amsterdam Almere Pavilion at the Floriade in Almere, and Ons Land in Museum Sophiahof in The Hague.

Visit www.kossmanndejong.nl for more information.

AFARAI

AFARAI is an Amsterdam-based architectural agency that specialises in spatial design and strategy, led by architect Afaina de Jong. The studio's aim is to cross the boundaries of traditional architecture by taking an intersectional and interdisciplinary approach in dealing with the existing city, integrating theory and research through design. AFARAI is a feminist firm that advocates change in social and spatial issues and accommodates differences.

www.afarai.com