

MAPPING SHARK ISLAND

Workshop by
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The workshop *Mapping Shark Island* began with a brief introduction to the film *Shark Island*, produced by Forensis and Forensic Architecture in collaboration with the Nama Traditional Leaders Association (NTLA) and the Ovaherero Traditional Authority (OTA). The aim of the film was to support activist initiatives that focus on the recognition and remembrance of the atrocities committed during the German colonial genocide in Namibia, particularly on Shark Island (Naminus). Through forensic methods and digital reconstructions, the film seeks to highlight both the historical violence of the genocide and the contemporary struggles of the affected communities.

The introduction was followed by a screening that provided a visual and immersive experience conceived to connect participants to the brutal history of Shark Island, which served as a death camp for thousands of Herero and Nama people between 1905–7. The film also gave the participants a glimpse into the ongoing fight for justice and recognition, bringing forward both archival material and personal testimonies from the descendants of survivors.

The film recounts the historical events that transpired on Shark Island, focusing on the genocide that occurred between 1905–7. It brings to light the inhumane treatment of the Herero and Nama peoples by German colonial forces, detailing their forced labour, starvation, executions, and the systematic erasure of their remains. The island became a place of extermination, where victims were often discarded into the sea or buried in shallow graves, their histories deliberately forgotten by colonial powers.

Forensic Architecture uses digital modeling and spatial analysis to uncover the layered histories of violent sites like Shark Island. This methodology allows for the reconstruction of both the physical structures as well as the experiences of the people who lived through these horrors. The film's immersive style was particularly effective in helping participants experience the island as if they were witnesses to its violent past. By seeing digital models of the island, participants could engage with the spatial aspects of the site's history. The immersive

experience was further enhanced by the film's sound design, which included the sounds of wind, thunder, and crashing waves—evoking the harsh conditions of the island and the overwhelming sense of violence and death that pervaded the location.

This sensory approach made the historical events feel immediate and visceral, bringing the past into the present.

Whose memories matter?

The movie offers a crucial platform for the affected communities, allowing them to share their history from their own perspective. By giving voice to the descendants of survivors, the film centres their experiences, highlighting the presence of the past in their ongoing struggle for justice and recognition. This approach creates a foundation for a decolonized memory culture that rewrites the colonial narrative and aims at a future of memories that acknowledges the injustices and violence of German colonialism. In a critical examination of the present, the workshop also explored the current development of 'green energy' infrastructure in Namibia, particularly the German-Namibian projects focused on hydrogen production. These developments, which include the expansion of ports and industrial areas, are seen as a continuation of colonial exploitation, as they threaten not only the biodiversity of the land but also the preservation of sites like Shark Island. The economic drive behind these projects raises questions about whose interests are prioritized and whether Namibian communities will truly benefit from the green energy revolution. At the same time, these developments risk further erasing the painful history of the genocide, with the island's memorials and historical significance being pushed aside in favour of industrial growth. This juxtaposition between the erasure of history and the pursuit of economic gain is a key tension in the debate over how Namibia's past should be remembered—and who controls that narrative.

Following the film screening, Sima Luipert and Maboss Ortmann, who were close collaborators on the project and emphasized the long process of working together with communities, rather than simply extracting

information, were invited onto the stage. Both Luipert and Ortmann spoke about the importance of telling history from a non-Eurocentric perspective, asserting that descendants of survivors must have the opportunity to share their stories on their own terms. Their message reinforced the ongoing struggle for justice.

The discussion then delved into several critical issues, beginning with the legacy of German colonial history. Participants highlighted the powerful role that digital reconstructions and virtual spaces play in preserving memory and creating a platform for learning. The digital models, such as

the one created for Shark Island, serve as compelling tools to both memorialize and educate about the violent past, offering a new methodology for engaging with colonial histories.

One key point of debate was the competing cultural economies in Namibia, particularly the ways in which both the Namibian and German governments engage with the legacy of the genocide. While the Namibian government emphasizes the liberation struggle, the genocide itself is often overshadowed, creating a complex dynamic between remembering the past and promoting national narratives. This tension is further complicated by the German government's reluctance to fully engage with its colonial history, which continues to shape the present-day politics of memory.

The conversation also turned to colonial continuities, again with the mention of the development of green energy projects. While these projects are framed as environmentally beneficial, participants questioned whether they represent another form of exploitation that reinforces colonial practices. German companies, in collaboration with the Namibian government, are pushing forward with large-scale industrial ventures. The discussion raised the question of who truly benefits from these projects and whether Namibians are being excluded from decision-making processes concerning their land and resources. The issue of responsibility was central to the conversation: how can both governments—German and Namibian—be held accountable for preserving the memory of the genocide, and for ensuring that the voices of marginalized communities are included in the shaping of their future?

Report by Raphael Steinwandel