

The Springbok Experience

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The Springbok Experience - a museum with a difference

Courtesy: Pro-systems

In the world of loved and recognizable brands, Springbok rugby holds its place alongside the best.

In addition to its pure sporting value, the Springbok brand is associated with braaivleis, sunshine and all things South African.

Anyone who remembers the 1995 Rugby World Cup will also attest to the powers of unification that the green and gold made possible. What many people may not understand is the extent to which rugby has been woven through the very fabric of South African history. Dating back to the 1860s, rugby has played witness to every aspect of our past, the good and the bad.

With this in mind, the South African Rugby Union set out to create a world-class shrine to Springbok rugby at the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town. This would replace the smaller museum at Newlands that had closed a while back and promised to deliver an interactive and entertaining experience to local and foreign visitors. It opened its doors to the Noon Gun on Heritage day, 24 September, aptly named the Springbok Experience.

“The Springbok Experience is a museum which is arguably unlike anything seen in South Africa before,” Jurie Roux, the CEO of the South African Rugby Union said at the opening. “We have worked with one of the world’s leading sports museum designers to create a unique and compelling experience for the general visitor as well as rugby fans.

“It will be a bricks-and-mortar, 364-day-a-year opportunity for rugby supporters from home and overseas to interact with rugby and the Springboks. It’s a world-class visitor attraction in the middle of one of Africa’s most visited destinations promoting our great game and team.”

The two-storey Springbok Experience design was produced by Mather & Co of Wilmslow in the UK. Their credits include the award-winning Wimbledon lawn tennis museum, the five-storey National Football Museum in the UK and they recently completed their work on the IOC museum in Lausanne. Project Director, and GM of Corporate Affairs at SARU, Andy Colquhoun recalls: “Mather & Co got hold of our project and within a month had turned it around and got it firmly on track to produce an outstanding museum experience that continues to ‘wow’ visitors. They grasped a complex history, converted it into a compelling, beautifully illustrated narrative and all to an extremely tight deadline.”

In conjunction with South African attraction specialists, Digital Fabric, which works on visitor attraction projects around the world, the project was completed in just 10 months. Digital Fabric had worked previously with Mather & Co on the SA Breweries World of Beer attraction, so Chris Mather had no hesitation in recommending them for the job. Mather and SARU entrusted Digital

Fabric with the entire build, including all exhibition set works, graphics, AV, lighting and interactives, both digital and mechanical. Digital Fabric's Gavin Olivier recalls: "This was the broadest range of responsibilities that we have had to handle under one museum contract. There was nothing that we had not done before, just not all at once. The tight time frame made it all the more interesting."

Also in the mix was the integration and dressing of display cases, which were hybrids of locally built rear carcasses and specialised secure door and glass systems procured by Mather & Co in the UK.

The display cases contain more than 230 artifacts ranging from Francois Pienaar's Rugby World Cup jersey to the original Currie Cup trophy and each item required a bespoke mount to ensure its optimal display. The entire display case mounting system was designed to suit Mather & Co's object layout, after which each and every item was re-measured and checked prior to final decisions on mounting methods. The objects used were taken from SARU's extensive collection as well as loans from collectors and institutions across the globe and really bring the exhibition to life.

SARU's Andy Colquhoun sums up the significance of this aspect of the exhibition: "Some of the objects on display are akin to the Holy Grail for rugby supporters and have a place of reverence among fans. So showing them off to their best effect was critical in the design. They are the glue that holds the story together and bring it to life in a tangible way and they have been beautifully presented and lit."

The experience is spread across two floors. On the ground floor, aside from ticketing and retail, visitors are able to engage in a range of interactive experiences in the Springbok Trials area. These consist of kicking, passing and fitness games and a Batak reaction unit, the first of its kind in South Africa. The games are based on projection with Kinetic tracking cameras.

In the central circulation hub a large curved screen is flanked by two camera booths in which headshots are captured to be composited into the main visuals of game action shots. At the centre of the hub, a virtual interactive book displays the Springbok Opus book, filled with glorious high-resolution images. Unlike most virtual books that are projected onto a flat surface, the Opus is projected onto a shaped book structure that Digital Fabric machined from a solid block, giving it a dimension and feel that enhances the touch experience.

The first floor houses the museum component and while the ticketing structures allow visitors to limit their visit to the ground floor, it's hard to imagine why anybody would want to miss out on the extraordinary story that awaits, and this is where the real magic comes into play. Visitors are taken back to the 1860s, to the very origins of the game, and then on a complex journey through South Africa's history, marking major moments along the way and pausing to note even the tiniest details, anecdotes and personal glimpses into the personal stories of those involved along the way.

One of SARU's key objectives in setting out this narrative was the telling of the whole story, warts and all. Colquhoun explains: "Rugby has been a great uniting force in South Africa's history in recent times, but it was also seen as a divisive force and took a central place in South Africa's wider politics on many occasions. It was the centre of many protests and controversies and we couldn't shy away from that."

So how does one set out to tell a story of this breadth in a way that will engage an audience made up of local and foreign visitors, young and old, sports fans or not? Gavin Olivier is quick off the mark here: "This is where good design really counts, and the mix of visual elements, display cases, lighting and audio-visual with such a complex storyline requires an experienced eye. Mather & Co excels at this and lead designer Steve Deaney was superb in this regard. Given that we had such a lot to deliver in a matter of months, every detail had to be right the first time around."

Technically, the experience is streets ahead of most other attractions in South Africa and makes clever use of monitors, projection and audio in some innovative ways. On entry, visitors pass through a curved projection tunnel, mimicking the entry into a stadium, flanked by players on either side. The four-projector system has to deal with the curved surface as well as the soft-edge blending in the centre. Curved projection screens are used throughout the experience, in single and blended configurations.

The video playback is largely handled by servers from Brain Salt Media, both for linear video and interactive. "The BSM servers handle the warping and blending effortlessly, allowing us to employ simpler projectors at the end of the line," comments Alex Sanfilippo, technical director at Digital Fabric, "in addition, we have full control over every aspect of these servers, including status of the apps they are running, which makes remote maintenance a lot simpler."



Projection is handled almost entirely by Optoma LED short throws with a minimum of UHP lamp driven units for the higher brightness requirements. In the interest of long term running costs, the LED units are a no-brainer for an experience that opens for 364 days a year and even at 2 500 ANSI Lumens, they deliver more than enough punch for the image size.

Audio throughout the experience is managed by a BSS Soundweb platform, with Crown CTS875 multi-channel amplifiers. "Once again, with the control options that we can achieve with Soundweb, we are able to offer a fully flexible system, with ambient noise sensing in several places and presence detection cameras to automatically reduce levels in key areas during low attendance moments," reports Sanfilippo. Loudspeakers were chosen for each exhibit, to suit

levels, localisation and physical size and were selected from K-Array and JBL Control Contractor series.

The entire system is housed in two rackrooms, one per floor, with an Ethernet backbone throughout the exhibition floor that manages all displays and projectors. This all resides on a Crestron platform with X-Panel control in the racks and on a WiFi tablet. With the aforementioned server controls, the venue operations manager is able to monitor and control all software and hardware elements from a tablet, requiring very little intervention in the racks.

Digital Fabric's Gavin Olivier sums it up: "It's not every day that we get to deliver such a comprehensive product, designed properly and with good content. We feel privileged to have played such a key role in the Springbok Experience and look forward to an ongoing relationship for many years to come."

A few fun facts on what it took to complete the exhibition space:

24 000 man hours

14 kilometres of cabling

542 sheets of MDF board

91 channels of media

19 display cases

230 display case objects

480 metres of LED strip-lighting

550 metres of printed vinyl

1 500 engineered metal parts