

# Looking at the past to the future

All photographs by Dudley Bunn.

The history of the Constitution Hill Precinct in Braamfontein Johannesburg goes back to 1892 when the Old Fort was built under the *Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek*. Except for the four years of the South African War (1899 – 1902) when it served as a military defence post, the Fort functioned as a prison. During the Apartheid years it became notorious for its harsh treatment of ordinary men and women who were imprisoned for contravening colonial and apartheid legislation, and Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, Joe Slovo, Bram Fischer, Albert Luthuli, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Albertina Sisulu and Fatima Meer list among the many political activists who were incarcerated there before being

transferred, once sentenced, to serve their prison terms elsewhere.

Although the Old Fort complex was declared a National Monument in 1964, it continued as a functioning prison until 1987. After that time, the buildings and site were left to run down until they were identified as the location for the new Constitutional Court. Today, the city precinct – managed

by Gauteng Growth and Development Agency and JDA – is considered to have given rise to some of the new South Africa's most admired architecture and, with its interactive guided tours and exhibitions, is a popular destination for tourists and locals alike.

These days, the reception area of the Old Fort – the building where people were logged into the prison system, de-clothed, deloused and given their prison numbers – serves as a museum and it is in this regard that the Joint Venture team of Xhamai Design, Urban Works Architecture and Urbanism, and HMJ Prins Architect (lead consultant Morag Campbell of Xhamai Design) became responsible for designing and overseeing a recent restoration

programme that started in November last year and was completed in July 2014.

The brief given to Campbell by Constitution Hill Manager: Facilities, Events and Marketing, Themba Ntuli, was all-encompassing. The team had to conserve the building in terms of both the National Heritage's Act and internationally accepted guidelines, such as the Burra Charter, while creating a layer of memories, not just of a negative past, but also of a positive future. In doing so it was imperative that damage to the building be minimal and that all structural activities be congruent with the existing structure. This on a shoestring budget.

Revenue generation obviously therefore played a rôle in the final outcome as the venue had to





attract people to it and be rentable as a space suitable for public and education programmes such as corporate training, book launches and art exhibitions. "It was important," says Campbell, "that we conceived of a solution that was multi-functional with a very specific use for separate artwork exhibitions. We needed someone who knew what they were doing when it came to lighting artwork and maximising the ambient space above the artwork and throughout the interior."

Campbell approached João Viegas of Pamboukian lightdesign to consult on the lighting for the heritage site.

Visitors to the museum enter, what was the reception area for incoming prisoners, from Kozze Street through the 'tunnel' linking the main entrance of the Old Fort to the prison atrium. The imposing gates and the gun crenels in the thick walls give a striking sense of what incoming prisoners must have felt when being brought there. A heavy door opens to a space divided by two arches with the second area leading down a dark corridor to two sizeable exhibition halls at the end

of the building. En route to these rooms, visitors pass what were two holding cells on their left and a barred window, with no glass, opening into an air shaft, on their right.

Throughout this progress from one side to the other, the conservation approach highlights the old and the new so that it is possible to see the original structure alongside the revamped one. "This," explains Campbell, "is one of the strong concepts of the design. You can see what is old and what is new and the contrast highlights appreciation for both."

Heritage is a subjective concept with many layers and there is lively debate as to what stays and what goes when working on an historical site. In this instance, the graffiti that is now at least 25 years old provided the topic for discussion. In the end, it was preserved as it was deemed to be important in the history of the site.

Campbell explains that there was water damage to the walls and windows throughout the building. Some selected plaster had to be removed and redone and timbers that had rotted were replaced. In addition, a wooden deck was installed on top of,




but without damage to, the existing floor. This was done for a number of reasons: first, the floor was unusable and putting a screed on it would have changed its character; second, the new deck now allows universal access to visitors and third, as an unexpected consequence, it has improved the acoustics throughout. In order to keep consistent the theme of highlighting the old and the new, the design team included glass floor panels allowing visitors to see, by LED strip lighting, the original floor beneath the wooden deck.

The walls and ceilings were wire brushed a number of times to remove loose and exfoliating plaster and paint, mainly because of rain during the restoration. During this process, every effort was made to keep the patina and the end result is good. An additional variation to the scope of works was the inclusion to prevent water penetration from the grass ramparts above. Until this was installed, each time it rained heavily water ingress would damage some of the plaster and paint in the barrel vault roof.

"When it came to lighting," says Campbell, "João specified the details for all the lights and made sure that the lighting levels were right". Museum lighting is specific, but that level of lighting was not required for this installation. The lighting levels at Old Fort have been specified for comfort and there are controls that allow the focus to switch from artwork to ambience and to increase or decrease the levels, depending on the requirement.

Because it is a heritage site, everything that was altered must be able to be reversed. To adhere to this requirement, the team included in each room a multi-purpose steel frame to deal with the exhibi-





tions that form a large part of the function of the building. Campbell explains that a horizontal bar is incorporated within the frame, from which artwork used in the various presentations can hang. LED drivers and LED strips of soft light are installed within the steel frame and the LED lights allow the artworks to speak for themselves. The exhibition halls have both general and exhibition lights that can be switched on individually. In general, the soft focused light is atmospheric.

Where the steel frame was not appropriate, lighting has been cleverly incorporated by custom designed light fittings from Dokter and Misses onto the conduit round boxes. Wooden caps on the heads tie in with the wooden floors and the compact fluorescent freestanding elements light top and bottom.

The reception area has a vaulted ceiling which is accented with soft light. When the team designed the lighting for the roof, they intended to show its imperfections as well as its charms. Spotlights are mounted at what were partially existing points at the apex of the arch to prevent glare, placing a night time accent onto the walls opposite. A number of spots have been placed in the air shafts for further effect.

A South African indigenous hard wood was used for all the flooring and Viegas specified warm light throughout to highlight the colour of the timber and to create a softened and inviting space.

Intensifying the emotion attached to the building, glass panels expose 'time-worn' steps in the bigger

exhibition room showing the age of the structure and giving the visitor a sense of the number of prisoners who walked up and down those steps over the years. In the same room, an old toilet and graffiti are reminiscent of the purpose that the building once served.

In the two smaller rooms, the space just beneath the window is dark creating an area of high contrast. To break the contrast, the lights have been installed opposite the window to provide full light while, in the corridor, bursts of light break the monotony of the passage and at the same time make a feature of the conduit.

The finished project achieves its goal. Visitors cannot fail to gain an understanding of what it must have felt like to walk into the cold and dank prison reception area. However, with the exhibitions in place there is a definite sense of positivity at what we have managed as a country to achieve since 1994.

"The challenge," concludes Campbell, "was to establish a balance between being sensitive to the heritage while allowing something new to take place. We feel we attained this by inserting something new into an obviously very old fabric. The result, we believe, is good and visitors do not lose sense of what it was like to be here." LID

#### References:

The Heritage Portal: [www.heritageportal.co.za](http://www.heritageportal.co.za)  
History and heritage: South Africa's Constitution Hill: [www.southafrica.info](http://www.southafrica.info)