

CROWNING THE CAPITAL

Javett-UP, a revolutionary new public-private art destination at the University of Pretoria, sets out to explore and probe the question 'What is the Art of Africa?'

TEXT GRAHAM WOOD

THIS SPREAD

Designed by Mathews & Associates Architects, Javett-UP art institution in Pretoria includes the Mapungubwe Museum (this page) and the Bridge Gallery (opposite page).





finally, the landlocked interior of South Africa has an answer to Cape Town's Norval Foundation and Zeitz MOCAA: Javett Art Centre at the University of Pretoria (abbreviated to Javett-UP). And it's not in Joburg! Leaping the fence of the University of Pretoria's Hatfield campus and forming a bridge over Lynnwood Road, the gallery and museum touches down on the university's south campus, where it will be open to the public.

Like its Cape Town counterparts, Javett-UP occupies the middle ground between being a public art gallery and a private collection, and creates a new landmark and destination for the capital city. On the one hand, it houses the collection of retired businessman, philanthropist and lead donor Michael Javett, and on the other, the historical Mapungubwe gold collection (often called SA's 'Crown Jewels') – the iron-age artefacts discovered in Limpopo in the 1930s. Included in the offering is the Golden Rhino, one of the items that proved that complex, prosperous early African civilizations predated colonial incursions.

The development of the centre has been overseen by Christopher Till, the current director of the Apartheid Museum. Till was director of Johannesburg Art Gallery in the 1980s and Joburg's director of culture in the 1990s, and curated the South African Pavilion for the 2015 Venice Biennale – and that's just scratching the surface.

Apart from the Javett collection, and that of various donors, he's secured the famous 13m-long, 3m-high mural 'Discovery', by Alexis Preller, for the foyer. It was originally commissioned for the old Transvaal Provincial Administration building in Pretoria. 'It's been hidden for

years,' says Till. 'It needs some restoration, so we will be doing that in public view.'

In addition, the centre will also be the new home of the BHP Billiton collection from the '80s and '90s, which will be on 10-year loan. And, to be shown along with the Mapungubwe collection, he's also secured the Gold of Africa Museum collection, an array of jewels and artefacts crafted by 19th century West African goldsmiths.

The Javett-UP building, designed by Mathews & Associates Architects, is as much a symbol as it is a magical bit of urban acupuncture. Lead architect Pieter Mathews has worked at the intersection of art, architecture and urbanism for years, experience he brought to bear here.

'I think you can see from the geography of it, it's spectacular in the sense that it straddles Lynnwood Road – one foot in the street and one foot in the university – and that is a bit of a metaphor for what we're doing and how we're doing it,' says Till.

The Mapungubwe Museum, a faceted sculptural, concrete building – a kind of abstracted architectural interpretation of the Mapungubwe Hill, where the treasures were found – is on South Campus, and is open to the public and includes an outdoor exhibition space and a restaurant.

Then, the Bridge Gallery – for student exhibitions and the like – carries you across the road to a range of other galleries and event spaces. Parts of the building will be functioning areas of the university.

Mathews explains that he selected the centre's position to reactivate the university's former main entrance and historic 'Tukkielaan', which was once a public road running through the campus. 'Tukkielaan links the entire campus, and

we've taken it over Lynnwood Road and linked it to South Campus,' he says.

The triangular roof at the entrance of the bridge makes a prominent focal point, and both draws you in and directs your gaze towards the Mapungubwe Museum. The patterns on the panels over the bridge are simplified abstractions of shweshwe fabric, which symbolises the intertwined and overlapping cultural heritage of the university's three official languages: Sepedi (shweshwe), Afrikaans (sislap) and English (the famous Three Cats brand was printed in Manchester). 'We just reduced it and randomised it, and made it a bit more architectural,' says Mathews.

The *raison d'être* of the centre is not only to make artistic treasures available to the public, but to 'create a space, an institution, on the continent that looks at what I've described as "the Art of Africa";' Till says, pointedly making a distinction between 'the Art of Africa' and the misleading and devalued term 'African Art'.

'What is the Art of Africa?' asks Till. 'That's exactly what Javett-UP is setting out to explore. We would be a place where we exhibit, research, identify, and discuss what the Art of Africa is, and try to present that within the future profile of the centre.'

Javett-UP's opening exhibition brings together 100 works drawn from private and public collections across the country. 'I've approached all of the public art institutions in South Africa, as well as corporate and private collections, and we've asked them each to nominate what they consider to be their most significant work,' says Till. What a place to start!

Javett-UP will open to the public on 24 September 2019. **O javettup.art**