

Iconic Eyethu Theatre revival opens to a warm community welcome

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Soweto landmark gets a new lease on life with a Heritage Hall and community shopping centre



The iconic Eyethu Theatre in Soweto, home to one of the first black-owned cinemas in South Africa, has been revitalised and transformed into a contemporary community hub while preserving a local legacy that began in 1969 with the late Ephraim Batana Tshabalala and the Tshabalala family.

The Eyethu Theatre in Mofolo, Soweto, was built in 1969 and became a cultural and historical landmark in the heart of South Africa's largest and most iconic township. The cinema was a fixture on the community landscape - a place for locals to come together and enjoy the latest movies, culture and entertainment.

The driving force behind the cinema was entrepreneur Ephraim Tshabalala. Born in 1910 in Vrede in the Free State to farmworkers from Eswatini, Tshabalala worked as a forklift driver on a farm, before heading to Sophiatown where he was employed by a bus service. With his enterprising spirit, he quit his job in 1946 with £20 in savings and began a meat business, which was a roaring success. Tshabalala went on to build a flourishing retail empire that included garages, bottle stores, fish and chips outlets, supermarkets and dry-cleaning depots.



The pride of Tshabalala's empire was the Eyethu Theatre. Eyethu was more than just a cinema; various community events were hosted here and it holds fond memories for many Sowetans.

Sadly, the once-bustling cinema closed in the 1990s with competition from multiplexes and streaming, and the building fell into disrepair. It has since been recognised as a significant heritage, cultural and social site.

The Tshabalala family has long dreamt of restoring the theatre to its former social relevance for the community. In 2018 the family found a partner that could help them unlock their vision.

Some 30 years after the theatre shut its doors and, as result of a joint venture of the Tshabalala Family with Abland Property Developers, the leading real estate developer known for shaping the South African landscape for the better, the theatre has finally been reanimated and once again become a thriving hub for the people of Soweto.

The original cinema building has been restored and repurposed into a Heritage Hall that pays tribute to the late Ephraim Tshabalala and the history that is displayed in preserved artworks of the theatre. The Heritage Hall has been incorporated into a new shopping centre, and together they serve as a symbol of the community's enduring resilience and determination, designed to inspire a new generation of culture and community.

The new Eyethu Shopping Centre development in the Mofolo Central, Soweto, opened Thursday, 23 November, to an enthusiastic community welcome.



Grant Silverman, director of Abland Property Developers

Grant Silverman, director of Abland Property Developers, says, *"We are humbled to work with the Tshabalala family and the community to preserve this treasured landmark and ensure it remains an asset for its community for many years to come."*

In honour of its iconic local heritage, the developers have respectfully retained the original theatre structure, while tailor-making the new centre to the highest standards, especially for the shoppers from the local community in Mofolo, Soweto.

Extensive efforts ensured that as many people as possible from the immediate community could benefit as part of the 14-month construction project, with many local businesses and workers bringing the two-level, 10,000sqm new shopping centre to life.



Eyethu Shopping Centre features a powerful lineup of anchor tenants comprising Shoprite, OBC Chicken, Ackermans, West Pack, Clicks and bank branches from FNB and Capitec Bank. In addition, it features Tekkie Town, Jam Clothing, Pep Home and Cash Crusaders. Shoppers can also enjoy food from Pedros Chicken, Debonairs Pizza and Fish and Chips while making use of the centre's outdoor seating, as well as the convenience of the centre's Chicken Licken Fly Thru.

The community will remain engrained in the ongoing operation of the centre, not only as visitors and customers but also by running the kiosks and small incubation hub retail outlets, as well as being employed by larger retailers.

Conveniently for the community, and friendly for the environment, the centre includes its own solar power and will trade during loadshedding. It has taxi laybys for public transport and easily accessible on-grade parking, with special consideration given to safe pedestrian access.

"Eyethu Shopping Centre is for the community, but no tour to Soweto is complete without visiting the lovingly restored Heritage Hall," notes Silverman.

The Eyethu Shopping Centre development is funded by Nedbank. The property is managed by Broll Property Group and marketed by Kitchen Sink.

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