When Moses Mabhida stadium was designed, the architects and planners kept in mind that the venue should be capable of hosting the Summer Olympics should Durban win a possible bid for the event. There was much talk last year that South Africa was aiming for hosting the 2024 event. Durban would be a likely candidate host-city. But the South African government hasn’t decided anything yet.

“But in the end, it is the South African Olympic Committee and the national government who have to decide first whether South Africa will bid for hosting the event. And only when they have decided to go forward can Durban be one of the city’s that can express its intentions of hosting the event,” explained Julie May Ellingson, while explaining why Durban hasn’t pushed the agenda openly yet.

Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban is one of the iconic stadiums that were built for the 2010 FIFA World Cup™.

But with one of South Africa’s most popular rugby stadiums next to it, many feared that Stadium would become another white elephant. Feature-writer Guy Oldenkotte interviewed Julie May Ellingson and evaluated the venue’s first three years in business.

The extra seating capacity required for the hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup™ has now been removed but it can be quickly re-installed whenever necessary.
Ellingson explained: “We felt that we didn’t have the knowledge and experience to make an informed decision when the issue was put to the table before the 2010 FIFA World Cup™. We spoke to managers of many stadia around the world and had many consultants on board before the World Cup, but we weren’t too sure whether we should run the stadium ourselves or to establish a department within the city to do so, or to lease it to an outside company. We learned, for instance, about the problems Wembley Stadium experienced by outsourcing its catering operation. This made us decide to install our own kitchen to avoid similar problems. But you will need an operator prepared to accept this. So making the call of who would be responsible for operating the stadium would have been premature, as we didn’t have a clear understanding of the revenue that could be generated or the cost that it would take to keep the venue running.”

**Return on Investment**

Durban wants to ensure it gets value for money and makes a return on its investment in the stadium.

“We decided to first establish a record, so we could get proof ourselves. We want to make sure that we can make a reasonable deal,” said Ellingson, while referring to Cape Town stadium, where a joint-venture between Sail and Stade de France was disbanded back in late 2010 after it came to the conclusion that it would not be able to operate the venue profitably. “The problem is that if the deal goes flat and the operating company goes bankrupt the stadium will be returned to city. Durban does not want to end up paying for the stadium twice. Moses Mabhida stadium is like a baby to the city.”

**Business as Usual**

In 2011, government spokesman Jimmy Manyi announced that South Africa is not intending to bid for the 2020 Summer Olympics, shattering the dreams of those who were hoping Durban would soon host another major international sports event. While many still hope the government will reconsider its stance, for the stadium it remains business as usual.

“The stadium complies with the requirements set by the IOC for venues that are to be used for the Summer Olympics but it is not a prerogative for the venue to operate,” said Ellingson.

The seating capacity at Moses Mabhida has been temporarily reduced and space for a possible athletic track is still used as part of the field. But, when necessary, everything can be put in place quickly to host the Games.

“The ablution facilities and lifts for another tier are still there. It is just a matter of reinstalling the seats,” advised Ellingson in relation to the stadium’s readiness to host a Summer Olympics.

The city took a careful approach for the appointment of a stadium management company. Many qualified companies indicated being keen to take over the responsibility but Ellingson says the city first wanted to know what exactly it had to offer or could achieve.
BKS (Pty) Ltd & Moses Mabhida Stadium

Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban, managed by BKS (Pty) Ltd, has done exceedingly well since the FIFA World Cup 2010™ having hosted forty major events, including PSL and international football matches, South Africa v India Pro Twenty20 cricket, music concerts such as Neil Diamond and a Bollywood Extravaganza with Sharuk Khan, cycle races, marathons, cultural and political rallies, etc.

The stadium’s home football team is amaZulu Football Club, while the second Premiership football club in the province, Golden Arrows, uses the stadium for all of its bigger matches. In addition, the stadium is one of Durban’s most popular venues for corporate entertainment and has hosted around 500 functions for a variety of blue chip companies.

The popular tourist attractions at Moses Mabhida Stadium including the SkyCar, adventure walk, big swing and stadium tours, have attracted almost 450,000 visitors to date and the stadium has become known as an adventure destination in Durban. A range of shops, VIP gym, and restaurants provide a complete package for a great day out.

The various aspects of sustainability are high on the agenda — commercial sucess, environmentally friendly stadium operation, as well as social aspects of the development. It’s about keeping the venue as a whole — meaning the stadium bowl, adjacent park, shopping area, tourist attractions, and function venues — as busy as possible and creating an attraction for the people of Durban. The stadium and precinct are operated in as green away as possible (energy efficient fittings, recycling etc) and Durban achieved a carbon neutral World Cup through carbon off setting.

Legacy aspects of stadium operation and sustainability were considered as critical success factors from the early design stages — the intention was to create a landmark for the city and a stadium for the people of Durban used for sporting and non-sporting events seven days a week. BKS developed concepts for stadia bowl events and functions, a shopping area, unique adventure experiences, hospitality, public and VIP catering, waste management, safety and security, access and entrance control etc., which have been implemented since BKS started to operate the stadium.

Going beyond construction and managing the World Cup preparations for the Durban stadium, including the interface with FIFA and its Local Organising Committees, event overlay concept planning and stadium management during the tournament was also part of the BKS scope.

BKS led teams of international and local architects, engineers and project managers, which won the tenders in Durban, Cape Town, and Port Elizabeth, fighting off stiff competition to secure the design and construction management services for these new stadia, which have all won many awards. One reason for the success, was the combination of BKS — as a strong South African consulting company with experience of over 70 stadia and sport facilities in Africa — and international experts with extensive 2006 FIFA World Cup™ experience in architecture, engineering and project management.

There is no other company worldwide with similar experience and knowledge gained from the most recent World cup in terms of stadium development, operation and management consulting services. The challenges don’t end with the completion of a construction project — a new stadium needs to be operated professionally pre-, during, and after the tournament.
“We were hoping to have results within six months, but we have come to the conclusion that we actually require eighteen months before we have substantial information, which allows us to make an informed decision. Things like pricing and stock keeping for food and beverages, for example, was something we had to get familiar with from scratch,” said Ellingson.

Since the World Cup, Moses Mabhida stadium has been used for various events, including small conferences, presentations, and banquets.

“We have had forty-nine events since the FIFA World Cup™ and have seen one million people passing through our turnstiles, while another 450,000 people have taken the SkyCar — that runs over the arch of the stadium — Access All Areas stadium tours and the 500 step adventure walk to the top of the arch,” advised Ellingson.

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Ellingson added: “We knew that the stadium would be in a very corrosive environment, which would have a significant impact on the maintenance. We have a very big maintenance team and they have been involved in the stadium since it opened. Now we have experienced ourselves what it takes to keep the stadium running we are in a better position to negotiate.”

The stadium is now run by BKS — a company that has been involved in the construction and operation of the venue from day one — and so knows the facility through and through.

Identifying the Challenges & Opportunities

Ellingson is satisfied with the way the stadium has been managed since the 2010 FIFA World Cup™. However, she openly admits that identifying the challenges and opportunities has taken more time than first expected.

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US$1.5m investment in a Sport Medical Centre soon. This medical centre will be an added-value to the sports pre-
cinct that we are trying to establish and of which Moses 
Mabhida stadium is an integral part.”

More recently the stadium was converted into a race-
track to host the Top Gear show that is run by the pro-
ducers of the BBC’s television programme, Top Gear.

But the city has also learnt the hard way what it takes 
to operate a multifunctional stadium, as Ellingson 
advised: “We have come to the conclusion that retailers
don’t tender for floor space in a stadium. But as a munic-
pality we are obliged to publish a tender according to 
the Municipal Financial Management Act, so there is 
clearly a misalignment between the demands by the law 
and the demands by the market.”

Anchor Tenant Secured

Apart from a Twenty20 cricket match at the start of 2011 
and the aforementioned Top Gear show, soccer has con-
tinued to be the main sport played at Moses Mabhida 
stadium since the World Cup, as Ellingson explained: “We signed up local football club, AmaZulu, as an anchor ten-
ant, while the second Premiership football club in our 
province, Golden Arrows, uses the stadium for all of its 
bigger matches.”

Although the agreements sound promising, attend-
ce figures for soccer matches have fallen sharply after 
ticket prices increased at the start of the season. The reduced attendance figures have placed the operators of 
the stadium under even more pressure.

To add insult to injury, soccer league organisers seem 
to be making matters worse for stadium managers across 
South Africa. “We find it very frustrating that the league 
still doesn’t sell tickets that are linked to a seat. That makes it very difficult for us to 
predict how much stock or staff we should have in certain parts of the venue. It is 
also very difficult to control the crowd or provide suffi-
cient entertainment. What is even worse is that we will 
have to deal with arguments or even fights that break 
out when people arrive at the stadium and find other 
people having taken their seats. It is time that the league 
comes to the table, as this makes it unnecessarily diffi-
cult for us to operate the stadium.”

No White Elephant

Ellingson has no fear the stadium will become a white 
elephant, despite having the iconic ‘Shark Tank’ stadium 
right next door, as she highlighted: “We received a lot of 
criticism when we decided to build a new stadium for 
the 2010 FIFA World Cup™. We invited the Sharks rugby 
club to participate in discussions and the planning about 
the new stadium, hoping that they would move to Moses 
Mabhida stadium after the World Cup. But they didn’t 
feel the need to participate as they still have a lease on 
their stadium until 2052.

“However, what they forget is that in 2013 a new Act 
will come into place in South Africa in which ‘safety at 
venues’ and ‘safety requirements’ are clearly defined. 
Moses Mabhida stadium was designed with the Act in 
mind. But the existing Shark Tank does not comply and it 
will cost the rugby club some serious money if they want 
to make the venue compliant. They can, however, move 
to the stadium immediately should they decide to adopt 
Moses Mabhida as their home ground. We have sufficient 
capacity for hospitality suites and we could even expand 
when required by adding another tier of suits on the top 
tier. We also decided to install individual baths in the
neutral venue is required. And as neither AmaZulu nor Golden Arrows made it to the final stages of either competition last season, Moses Mabhida stadium can be used as a neutral venue.

"Last season we had the MTN 8 final and a Nedbank Cup semi-final taking place at the stadium but we want to see more of those matches coming to Durban in the future. People like coming down to Durban and spend the whole weekend here, as we are blessed with one of the best climates in South Africa. Something that could stimulate this even further is the establishment of the high-speed railway link between Durban and Johannesburg that is currently discussed in parliament. This would cut travel times by more than half and allow visitors to travel only three hours to reach Durban," said Ellingson, while referring to the US$7bn project that the South African government is considering to alleviate congestion on the roads.

However, until the government and South African Olympic Committee give the go-ahead to bid for an Olympics, it is business as usual for Moses Mabhida stadium, as Ellingson concluded: "We have learnt a lot in the last twelve months and we will benefit from that in the coming season. Moses Mabhida stadium will see more matches and events in the year to come."

changing rooms, instead of one big Jacuzzi like you see at many soccer stadiums. In rugby, it is common practice for players to relax their muscles in a bath. So we have already met some of the expected demands."

Venue of Choice
Regardless of the ambitions of the Sharks rugby club, Moses Mabhida stadium is pushing hard to become the ‘venue of choice’ for events that are not committed to particular venues, as Ellingson outlined: "We receive a lot of requests for shooting advertisements at the venue. We have, therefore, made sure that we own all the intellectual rights of the venue. But we have also received a request to establish a hotel at the top-floor of the stadium, from where you have one of the best views in Durban."

Ellingson also added that, in the absence of the athletic track, the extended field allows for the erection of stages in every direction and configuration, thus enabling the venue to host a multitude of concerts and other events.

As the South African football league has several competitions that run parallel to the national league, Moses Mabhida stadium’s management team has had its eyes firmly set on the competition regulations that stipulate a

Moses Mabhida stadium is a key asset for Durban.