

Objects Tell Stories: A Visit to the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum

By **MARCIA DE FRANCESCHI NETO-WACKER**

The 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum in Doha.

Photos: OOSM



Recently the international press reported on the opening of the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum, inaugurated on 31 March 2022. Apart from the opening ceremony, the international news has focused on the museum architecture, which Barcelona architect Joan Sibina designed. Some media also mention the journalists' experience of visiting the museum.

The architecture introduces visitors to the world of sport. The building is a cylindrical glass structure with five rings inspired by the Olympic symbol. Because of its dark facade, the black ring has been replaced by a white one.

The museum occupies a 19,000 square-metre site next to Khalifa Stadium in Doha, Qatar, one of the eight stadiums for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The museum includes eight exhibition rooms, including one for temporary exhibitions. It also holds a congress hall, a thematic library, restaurant, café, and gift shop. The so-called Activation Zone is an experiential space for visitors of all ages.

The museum was 14 years in the making, including the development of its concept, historical research, and the acquisition of objects, documents, and literature. This meticulous care is one of the unique characteristics of the museum, which prides itself on

its philosophy of collecting, preserving, interpreting, and documenting sporting events.

The 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum is one of the largest sport museums and the second-largest Olympic museum in the world, not only in terms of its physical size but also in the scope and quality of its collection of artefacts and documents. The collection currently holds approximately 17,000 items; 1,300 of which are on display. Another particularity of the collection is that many of its holdings were donations by athletes and sports enthusiasts.

As published in the press, visitors can see a shirt of football legend Pelé, a Ferrari that Michael Schumacher drove, and boxing gloves from Muhammad Ali. Further objects that may draw the attention of sports historians and fans include the ball from the FA Cup final match of 1888 or the first booklets by Sheffield FC, founded in 1857, which state the original rules.

Beyond the artefacts, multimedia presentations reflect how the curators have interpreted sport themes – one of the great challenges for curators of sport and Olympic museums. “The conflict of interpretations”, as philosopher Paul Ricœur puts it,¹ is always very complex, particularly in the area of sport. The curators of the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum have succeeded in finding an

interesting approach based on documentary research, particularly the oral histories used to reconstruct the history of sport in Qatar and the region.

The curators have opted for an approach in which controversial themes of various historical moments are presented and addressed in temporary exhibitions. In my opinion, this is a thoughtful approach that avoids sensationalism.

Museum tour

Visitors can immediately experience the museum's innovative concept right after entering. The photo installation *Hey'ya* by the photographer Brigitte Lacombe presents Arab women in sport and questions the Eurocentric vision of the world of sport. This sense of questioning can be felt throughout the entire museum, showing that the world of modern sport is not restricted to Europe alone.

The first exhibition space is called "World of Emotion" and greets visitors in the lobby. The next room, titled "A Global History of Sport," takes visitors on a trip through time, where over 100 objects and reproductions from the 8th century BCE to the early 1920s are displayed. When I visited the museum, I chose "swimming" on the multimedia touch screen in this space; one of the topics it leads to is pearl diving in Qatar, demonstrating the concern for context.

"The Olympics" space is dedicated to the ancient Games and the modern Olympics. The ancient Games are presented in a very didactic way, especially in the installation depicting the various disciplines that were practised. The archaeological site of Olympia is also addressed but may be difficult to understand for visitors unfamiliar with it.

A film in the Olympic Theatre presents milestones in the history of the Games in a dynamic and emotional way. It includes complex themes such as the 1936 Games in Berlin and the massacre at the 1972 Munich Games, among others. The film remains objective without passing judgment, leaving the final interpretation to the visitors.

After leaving the film-screening room, visitors are confronted with an exhibition of torches from all Winter and Summer Games since 1936, when the torch relay was first introduced. The torch gallery has a special scenography. All torches are originals, except for one, which is an authorised copy. There are also spots reserved for the torches from Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022. For me, the scenography of this space successfully conveys the mysticism of the original torch lighting ceremony in Olympia. After the torches, visitors enter an area presenting the modern Games. Mascots, medals, posters, photos, and multimedia, among others, tell its history.



Gallery of Olympic Torches.

My personal critique of this space is that the installation, "Shaping the IOC", only identifies four presidents: Pierre de Coubertin, J. Sigfrid Edström, Jacques Rogge, and Thomas Bach. In my opinion, every one of the presidents have shaped the IOC, and Dimitrios Vikelas, Avery Brundage, and Juan Antonio Samaranch should not be missing. Samaranch, for example, was a chief proponent of upholding the cultural memory of sport and encouraged the creation of sport museums around the world. Of course, the curators have all the freedom to make their conceptual choices, but in this case in particular, either the installation's title should be changed, or the other presidents included.

The next space is "The Hall of Athletes", where 90 athletes from different sports, disciplines, and countries are presented. The choice of athletes is very interesting, as it reflects the rich diversity of the world of sport. Kudos to the curators for taking care not to idolise anyone but to present them as human beings, as "main actors and actresses of the world of sport". I think this space is where visitors can identify most with the museum.

In the space dedicated to "Qatar – Hosting Nation", visitors can revisit mega sporting events held in Qatar over the years and learn about the history of Qatar's commitment to national and international sport. One of the things that makes this installation interesting is that the various events are presented inside structures reminiscent of traditional desert tents.

During my visit on 27 April 2022, the last room on "Qatar Sports" was still under construction. Panels in front of the space provided information on its planned content – whetting appetites for a future visit once this area is ready.

The last exhibition gallery in the museum is called the "Activation Zone". It greets visitors with personal testimonies from six physically active Qatari residents. The interactive installation aims to promote the culture of a healthy lifestyle.

Undoubtedly, the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum is a new cultural landmark in the sport and Olympic museum scene. ■

1 Paul Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays on Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

Additional information:
The director of 3-2-1
Qatar Olympic and Sports
Museum is Mr. Abdulla
Yousuf Al Mulla.
www.321qosm.org.qa