PUMA's socially mobile venue packs light

By Jan M. Brenny

PUMA*, the sport and lifestyle company, wanted a practical and high profile venue when it enlisted Inflate Products Ltd., a U.K.-based manufacturer of inflatable fabric pods, cubes and domes, to design a temporary structure for use at the Volvo Ocean Race. PUMA sponsors an entry in the round-the-world sailboat competition and sets up temporary brand venues in each of the 10 pit stop port cities. This project, dubbed the PUMA Social Club, "was supposed to be a casual and chill place to hang out," explains Nick Crosbie, founder of Inflate. "There would be a bar and other activities to attract the young and the hip."

"[PUMA] wanted the design to complement what they had," he says. "They wanted something big enough but also something that could be packed down smaller than the containers." PUMA settled on a structure that can be set up in four days, taken down in two to three, and once down, all components fit into three open-top, 12m containers.

Inflate had worked with PUMA before, supplying temporary structures at a number of events in the U.S. and U.K. PUMA initially expressed interest in the Airflow line of stitched-together inflatables, constructed of PVC and ripstop nylon that require continually running inflation fans because air leaks through the seams—hence the name Airflow, Crosbie explains. It's one of several pneumatic systems offered by Inflate.

The company's newer AirClad design, produced by a division of the same name, is a sealed system intended for more permanent installations. The fabric is high frequency welded and fans run only when necessary—typically about 10 seconds every 20–30 minutes, depending on the weather, Crosbie says.

Instead of the sport/garment-grade material supplied to Inflate by factories in China and Malaysia for Airflow structures, the design team chose France-based Serge Ferrari's 501 PVC-coated polyester for the AirClad project. Because of the more technical, architectural nature of the fabric, "it was ideal," Crosbie says. "Able to withstand high-tension, high-pressure inflation, and it's longer wearing."

Inflated fabric cells, constructed out of 225m² of the rain- and dirt-repellent material, stretch down the sides of the PUMA Social Club's steel subframe. "Inflation gives the structure extra tension and lateral strength, as well as increased insulation," Crosbie says. Gray-tinted glass panels adorn the front and rear exterior walls. The panels, juxtaposed with the inflatable cells, make the building "look sort of like an iPad," Crosbie notes.

The club measures 135m² and can comfortably accommodate about 100 people. A rooftop terrace of the same dimensions, accessible by an exterior staircase, offers visitors a great view of all the port-side race happenings.

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Traveling to 10 port cities on a promotional tour, the PUMA Social Club pop-up inflatable venue is made of PVC/ripstop nylon for ease of deployment.