

A year before Expo : make way for the Expo experiment

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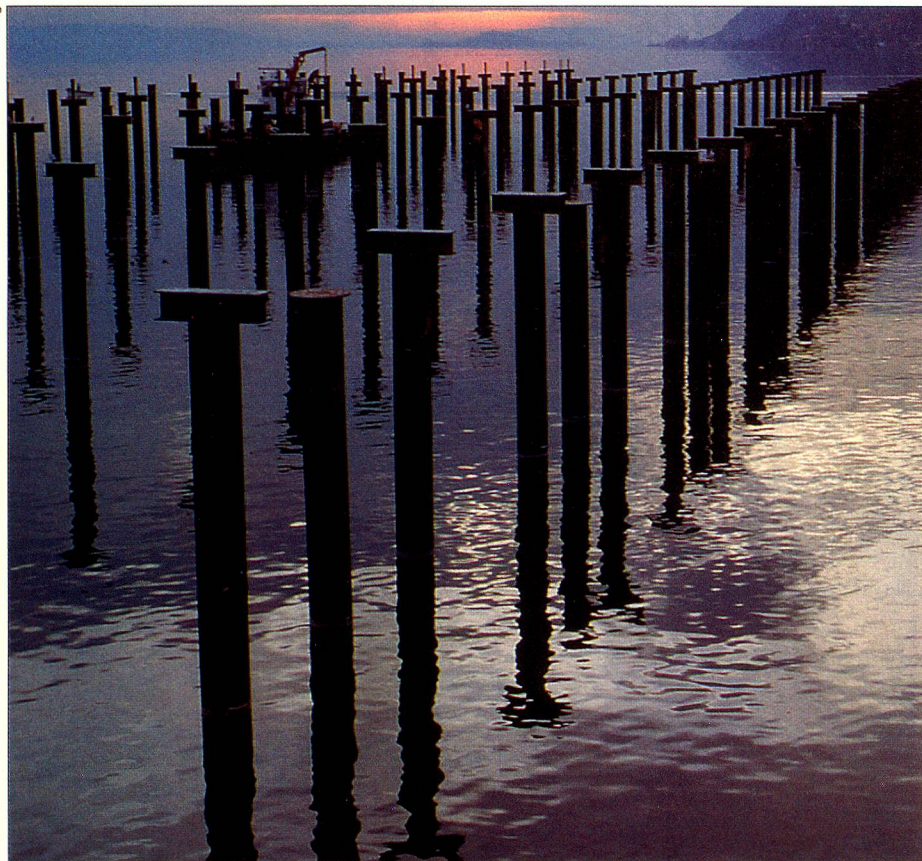
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A major pro

BY LUKAS M. SCHNEIDER

With one year to go and following some tough wrangling about the existence or non-existence of the first national exhibition in the new millennium, Expo.02 is now secure and promises a comprehensive show.

BETWEEN 15 MAY and 20 October 2002 the three-lakes region between Lakes Biemme, Neuchâtel and Murten will play host to a major event which it is hoped will give pioneering impetus to Switzerland.

Make way for the Expo experiment

INTERVIEW: ALICE BAUMANN

Martin Heller, Artistic Director of Expo.02, aims to use the national exhibition to change our ideas of Switzerland.

Mr Heller, what is your vision when you picture Expo?

Every day I am showered with wonderful images, such as this morning's sunrise over Lake Neuchâtel. Expo has much to do with the atmosphere of the cities and lakes where it is taking shape and will be held. This landscape dictates the architecture and character of the event. Expo is happening amidst Swiss normality yet is simultaneously a Swiss Utopia.

For whom are you creating the Expo?

Expo is an event for (almost) everyone. By

the same token, a great many people are involved in inventive, constructional and operational tasks. The result is a strong reciprocity. We hope that 50 percent of the Swiss population will visit the Expo. This openness and breadth of interest naturally presents us with the usual problem of comprehension in the four national languages as well as English for international visitors.

Does our country need an Expo?

Certainly Switzerland could live without an Expo. But had the experiment been aborted a year ago it would have left lasting scars. If this fantastic experiment is not allowed its day, Switzerland would be robbed of an opportunity to seek a cohesive image in its political, economic and cultural worlds. While the endeavour to develop new concepts in this way is far from easy, its success will be far more satisfying than a TV programme or a conventional cultural event.

Due to lack of funds, many projects had to

be cancelled. Can you forgive the business and political sectors their opposition to Expo?

Every experiment has its own rules. It is part of the ritual of Swiss National Exhibitions that they have to be pushed through initially. This was the case even in 1939 and 1964. We fight for every project and every loss hurts. Nevertheless: in the cultural world it is also normal for certain ideas to be scrapped due to lack of time or funds or by virtue of their content. Every exhibition begins with a surfeit of ideas and ends in reality.

Will Expo change Switzerland for the better?

We are forging a network of contacts and expertise which will produce long-term benefits. What is exciting about this form of communication is that it is taking place outside normal channels. This is why I believe that the aesthetics and intellectual discourse will outlast Expo. Because it is neither an

ject takes shape

Among the organisers are the cantons of Berne, Fribourg, Jura, Neuchâtel and Vaud, as well as the cities of Bienne, Neuchâtel, Murten, Yverdon-les-Bains and the national government. Expo.02 will be spread among five exhibition complexes called "arteplages". These are located on four stationary platforms on the waterfront (in Bienne, Murten, Neuchâtel and Yverdon-les-Bains) and a mobile, floating platform (Arteplage Jura) which travels between the stationary complexes.

Each of these arteplages is designed around a specific leitmotif. Bienne addresses the theme of "Power and Freedom". The exhibitions held here revolve in the widest sense of the word around the relationship between the individual and society. In Murten the theme is "Instant and Eternity", while Neuchâtel focuses on "Nature and Artistry" and Yverdon-les-Bains on "The

Universe and I". The mobile Jura canton arteplage addresses the somewhat untransparent concept of "Meaning and Movement".

All these exhibition complexes share one thing in common: the architecture, exhibits and events are all designed around a central theme. At the end of 2000 the organising committee under Chairman Franz Steingger approved a basic programme guaranteeing a minimum number of 37 exhibits: eleven projects in Bienne, nine in Neuchâtel, and eight in Murten and Yverdon-les-Bains respectively. Added to these is a special project, the form and content of which is not yet finalised.

Since then the Expo management has received financial assurances for three additional projects, bringing the target of 40 exhibits within reach. The budget for Expo.02 is set at CHF 1.4 billion. In addition

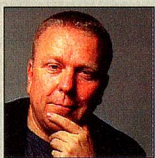
to funding from private business sponsors, public sector money will play a key role. The government stands guarantor for a CHF 358 million deficit.

Spectacular opening ceremony

Besides the exhibits (the cornerstones of Expo.02), there are plans for other events and attractions spanning the entire spectrum from theatre, dance, classical and contemporary music, cinema, street theatre, multimedia spectacles, up to and including circus. Cultural treats are presented on the cantonal days, when Swiss cantons will be able to prove their innovativeness.

Keynote events include the opening and closing ceremonies, the content and form of which is the remit of François Rochaix. At a press conference presenting his concept, the experienced director promised that the →

The interviewee



Martin Heller (48) is an ethnologist, art expert and former museum director. He lives in Zurich and has been Artistic Director for Expo.02 in Neuchâtel since January 1999.

elitist nor a conservative/patriotic festival, Expo can instil a new type of cultural understanding.

Expo is being built in the three-lakes region of the Jura and is aiming to attract city and country dwellers from all over Switzerland. Is it a cosmopolitan or a Helvetic event?

Expo draws on its own territory and is therefore first and foremost a Swiss event. But it is also outward-directed. We Swiss

often forget how closely we are observed abroad. People abroad are not interested in the wrangling over funding and projects. They are fascinated by the opportunity to see how Switzerland projects itself for 159 days.

What makes the Expo attractive for Swiss Abroad?

Nowhere else can one have such a concentrated view of Switzerland as at a National Exhibition. Switzerland presents itself in this way only every 30 years. Instead of painstakingly piecing together the modern face of Switzerland from its constituent parts, guests can gain an impression of our country as a whole within the compact dimensions of a festival.

Initially Expo.02 attracted much criticism and little praise. What motivates you, Mr Heller?

(Long silence) What I am about to say is bound to sound pompous: I am curious and

passionate about three things: people (I studied ethnology), pictures (I have been exhibiting for 20 years), and our country with all its strengths and weaknesses.

When is Expo taking place: now or in 2002? In other words: Are the difficulties of organising a major event here symptomatic for Switzerland as a whole?

During the planning period Expo, with all its feuds, prejudices and anti-female alliances, was and is a perfect mirror of Switzerland. So it has fulfilled its national/educational function. But the actual exhibition in 2002 will reflect a more open, forward-looking image of Switzerland.

Expo will temporarily create jobs. Does the fact that Expo is associated more with the economy than with culture concern you as artistic director?

I like to look at it another way – the inspirational impact of Expo.02 will not be measured in financial investment terms. 