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Curtain up for the National Exhibition

GABRIELLE KELLER

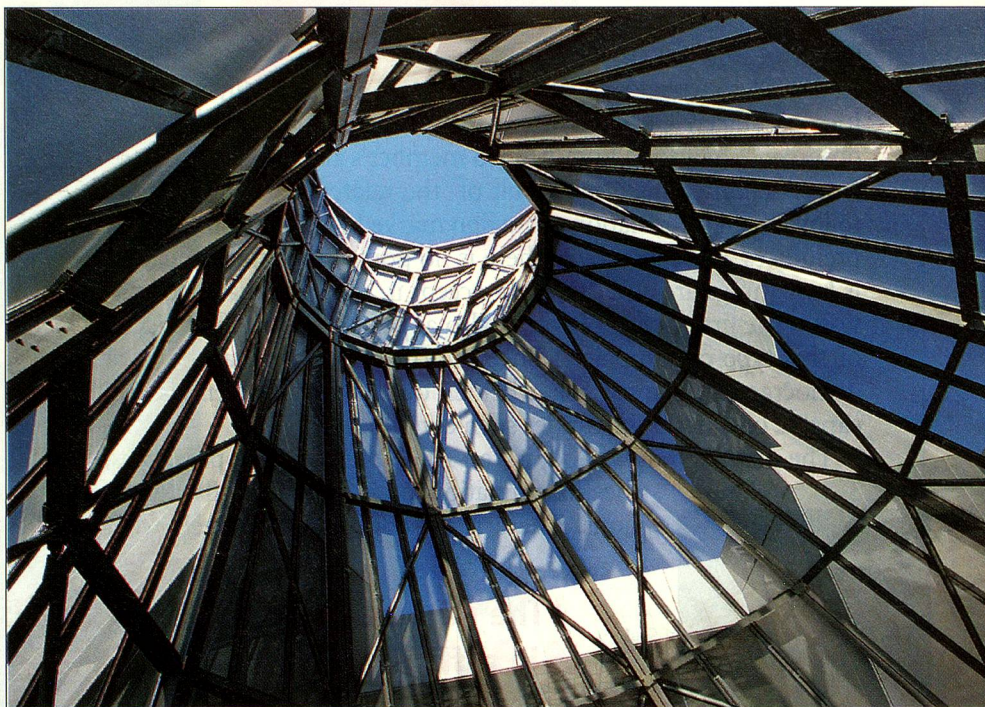
The time has come: Expo.02 opens its doors on 15 May. With its spectacular architecture the seventh national exhibition offers an unforgettable snapshot of Switzerland. Including the Fifth Switzerland.

SWITZERLAND IS THE ONLY COUNTRY in the world to hold a national exhibition once in a generation. For the first time an entire region rather than a single location is the venue for the national exhibition. For 159 days the three-lakes region will be the cultural capital of Switzerland. Every arteplage has its own character: Bienne is urbane, Murten poetic, Jura mobile, Yverdon sensual, Neuchâtel artistic. Expo organisers expect around 14 million visitors. Curtain up!

Five locations

The hallmark of the Bienne arteplage consists of three enormous towers symbolising power. At a height of 38, 42.7 and 35 meters

Michael Stahl



Soon tones and sounds will be reverberating through this imposing tower on the Bienne arteplage.

respectively, they offer a very special interior experience. One of the towers boasts a staircase and lift, and the round so-called "tonal" tower features unusual sounds. All three are supported on four platforms which are capable of bearing a weight of 200 tonnes. Each of these platforms in turn rests on four 50-meter-long stilts directly embedded in the lake.

To get to the urban Expo park, visitors cross a 450-meter long footbridge high above the bay.

A new peninsula has been created on the lake, roofed by three "galets". The islet, resting on 480 steel stilts, is surrounded by hundreds of illuminated plastic rods. A bridge connects this extensive complex with the mainland. The whole projects a type of high-tech poetry.

Less poetic but more witty is the "Manna", a 15-meter-high, 48-meter-wide pudding. The 21 giant cakes are made of plastic but smell of vanilla. The focus here is on eating habits and trends in the food industry.

The Yverdon-les-Bains arteplage offers visitors a magical feast for the senses, with hills and dales, light-play and tonal montages. An extended wing with membrane-like awning protects the exhibitions. Visitors cross a ramp to reach a huge, real cloud which hovers above the southern part of the lake. Here you can wander around to your heart's content, or take the weight off your feet for a while.

Murten is an arteplage city par excellence. The exhibitions fit seamlessly into the medieval town and adjacent lakeside landscapes.

Grumbles were also heard 38 years ago

Expo costs a fortune (CHF 1.4 billion); the business sector is not pulling its weight; CVP, SVP and the Greens oppose additional credits by the government; politicians and the media describe the Expo management as "chaotic". None of this is new. After the opening of the last national exhibition in 1964 the Swiss Review (then called the "Echo") wrote: "That the Expo would take place was not a foregone conclusion. It has long had its critics who opposed its right to existence from the outset and regarded such a 'national show' as economically irresponsible (...) and expressed financial misgivings." And: "The Expo organisers themselves have at times given cause for major scepticism." Today, media representatives repeatedly complain that very little reliable information is obtained from Expo organisers, but it was ever thus: "The Swiss press was not always handled with delicacy," reported the Swiss Review laconically 38 years ago.

gk

Nelly Wenger, President of the Expo General Directorate:

"Nothing is more essential than a celebration"



Michael Stahl


The monolith designed by Parisian architect Jean Nouvel appears to have been standing guard over them since time immemorial. A strange, rusty, floating mausoleum, the monolith can be reached by boat and offers visitors three splendid panoramas: the surrounding landscape, the panorama of the historic battle of Murten, and present-day Switzerland.

The mobile arteplage of the Jura (MAJ) is the most imaginative and unpredictable of all the arteplages. This converted former gravel barge crosses from shore to shore, constantly changing. Even the events and exhibitions on board the arteplage are difficult to categorise. Following the principle of freedom, the MAJ goes its own way.

The Fifth Switzerland

In its message to parliament in 1999 the Federal Council expressly devoted Expo.02 to the Fifth Switzerland as well. The national exhibition should not only be an enriching experience for our people at home, but also have meaning for Swiss Abroad and raise awareness of the characteristics of our country among other nationalities, too (see also Interview with Nelly Wenger).

Swiss Abroad Day will be held as part of the Cantonal Days at Expo.02, under the motto "Images Suisses". The Organisation for the Swiss Abroad has designated this special festive occasion on 10 August as the highlight of this year's congress (see box).

Since the outset, the organisers of Expo.02 have included the Fifth Switzerland in their plans. For instance, six catamarans to be used as ferries during the national exhibition are to be called after consular regions where the largest number of Swiss Abroad are domiciled. Two were already christened at the end of last year and bear the names "Lyon" and "New York". 

INTERNET

www.aso.ch
www.expo.02.ch
www.artcanal.ch
www.chateau-de-penthes.ch

Gabrielle Keller: Ms Wenger, what is the aim of Expo.02?

Nelly Wenger: Expo.02 is an event where we can take a close look at the complex Swiss identity which is not always immediately discernible.

Are national exhibitions peculiar to Switzerland?

Absolutely. We have presented our project abroad and noticed that people have to know our country well in order to fully

understand the word "national". In Switzerland, to understand the word "national" means first and foremost overcoming the cantonal and community mindset. Abroad the word "national" is perceived as something narrower, a means of insulation. Expo.02 also presents a collective identity which the Swiss sometimes lose sight of.

Did you visit Expo 1964 in Lausanne?

No, because at the time I was a 9-year old

The Fifth Switzerland at Expo.02

This year's Congress of the Swiss Abroad has chosen Expo.02 as its backdrop. The congress will be held in Berne and Bienne from 9 to 11 August and will be officially opened on the Friday evening in Berne. The highlight will be Swiss Abroad Day on the Saturday, on the Bienne arteplage, when the OSA will be presenting the diversity of the Fifth Switzerland and its close ties with the home country under the motto "Images Suisses – la Cinquième Suisse en mouvement et solidaire".

Swiss Abroad Day

Various art installations have been set up in conjunction with Swiss at home and abroad. They can be admired, touched and experienced at various locations around the Bienne site.

In the morning a panel discussion on relationships with the homeland will be held on the main stage of the arteplage, featuring five prominent Swiss Abroad and two residents of Switzerland, and moderated by Filippo Leutenegger, CEO of Jean Frey AG and former editor-in-chief of SF DRS.

Various attractions await the public on the Scène du Rivage, also on the Bienne arteplage. These include a choir of young Swiss Abroad, Los Angeles-based dancer Lisa K. Lock from Basle, and the orchestra of the papal Swiss guard.

In the evening we open a window on the world. As with every year, a member of the Federal Council will address congress participants. Following a few artistic performances there will be a concert consisting of a mixture of foreign and Swiss sounds.

This unforgettable day closes with a night-time spectacle on the lake.

A detailed programme will be sent to you once your application has been received (page 7). gk

This day has been organised thanks to the support of swissinfo/SRI, the Association for the Promotion of Swiss Abroad Organisations, official Swiss representations, the EDA/Service for the Swiss Abroad, the "Institut des Suisses dans le Monde", Expo.02 and Unilever.