

History of the Museum - Chronicle, Part 1

The House of Freemasons and the Masonic Museum Switzerland: History of a determined and audacious Project with a Vision for the Future

The Grand Lodge Alpina of Switzerland (SGLA), the administrative body of all Swiss lodges, has worked effectively for decades, but its activities were to a degree, shrouded in mystery. It has therefore long been considered by SGLA and its subordinated Lodges, that it should become more perceptible to the public. They also needed premises that would give them the possibility of holding larger meetings, to facilitate the reception of representatives of foreign Grand Lodges and to be able to work more efficiently, and to such a high standard pursuant to modern times.

In the summer of 2009, the then Grand Master, Bruno Welti (Lodge In Labore Virtus, Zurich), instigated a means to realise these ideas by proposing to his Executive Board, that they evaluate all possibilities to give the Grand Lodge a "FACE", so as to make both international and national Freemasonry more transparent and comprehensive to the Swiss public. Consequently, the conception of a House of Freemasons, was born, predestined not to be merely an administrative centre, but also a haven for all Freemasons.

In early 2010, convinced of the necessity and importance of such a masonic establishment, Lodge Modestia cum Libertate, Zurich, gave a guarantee of a substantial donation, thus enabling Bruno Welti to propose to the College of Grand Lodge Officers (SGLA), that they prepare the preliminaries for the creation of a Foundation for the 'House of Freemasons'. To set up a project group for this purpose, to move the domicile of the Chancellery from Lausanne to Berne and to look for suitable property in Berne. The College of Grand Lodge Officers (SGLA), supported these proposals and the Executive Board submitted these relevant proposals to the Delegates Assembly, held on 5th June 2010. The Delegates Assembly approved these proposals and simultaneously granted an endowment capital of CHF 100'000. The project group started work immediately and on 8th October 2010, established a Foundation for the 'House of Freemasons' in Bern.

The first executive board of the newly constituted foundation was composed of the members of the project group. They were: Bruno Welti (now Past Grand Master), President, Ueli Haudenschild (Lodge Zur Hoffnung, Bern), Vice-President, Hans-Peter Uster (Lodge In Labore Virtus, Zurich), Treasurer, Jean-Michel Mascherpa, Grand Master (Lodge Union des Coeurs, Geneva) and Christian Pechner (Lodge Les Amis Fidèles, Geneva). They were remarkably quick in finding a property suitable for the intended purpose, arranging the necessary financing and subsequently purchasing the property.

The property acquired was the former Swisscom telephone exchange at Jupiterstrasse 40 in Bern, and thanks to considerable donations from individual Freemasons and Lodges, the reconstructing and renovation could commence without delay. The architect Manfred Vollenwyder (Lodge Zur Hoffnung, Berne) supervised the work. The reconstruction of the third floor, where the SGLA's chancellery is located, proved to be particularly challenging. Simultaneously on the executive-administrative level, the Executive Board of the Foundation received three new members, namely: Michele Frigerio (Lodge Il Dovere, Lugano), Roger-Albert Mages (Lodge Lux in Tenebris, Morges) and Christoph Meister (Lodge Modestia cum Libertate, Zurich).

The Masonic Museum Switzerland was from the very beginning part of the project of the House of Freemasons. Therefore, it was always considered to relate to both of them, with a domicile that meets the needs and representational requirements of the Grand Lodge and a museum suitable for communicating Freemasonry to the outside world and intensifying it within the brotherhood. The latter was also decisive for the choice of the industrial building on Jupiterstrasse, as the industrial workshop on the second floor, due to its size and structure, offered ideal conditions for it to be converted into and used as a museum.

After concluding negotiations with Swisscom, who stayed on as tenants on the second floor, Manfred Vollenwyder in a first step, renovated the second floor to such an extent that the installation of the museum was possible. The newly formed 'Interior Design Commission', consisting of Bruno Welti, Christoph Meister and the architect Manfred Vollenwyder, devoted themselves to the concept and design of the museum. At their request, the Executive Board of the Foundation commissioned Alfred Messerli (Catena Humanitatis, Zurich) and Barbara von Orelli-Messerli as specialists to develop a preliminary concept, thereafter a detailed plan with a scenario for the exposition in the House of Freemasons in Bern, the first version was available on 15 April and final version on 15 July 2013.

Responsibility for the planning, construction and operation of the museum was transferred to the independent society: Museums-Gesellschaft SGLA, founded on 19th December 2013, specifically for this purpose. Bruno Welti became president, Jean-Michel Mascherpa, Vice-President and André Bamat (Post Tenebras Lux, Zurich) as treasurer of this body, which is also the sub-tenants of the first floor in the House of Freemasons. The membership fees were deliberately set low so that the museum could effectively become an institution supported by all Freemasons. As with the Foundation Board of House of Freemasons, care was taken to ensure that the Executive Board Members originated from German-speaking and Latin-Switzerland.

The Interior Design Commission was extended and transformed into a Museum Commission under the direction of Christoph Meister. While the Executive Board of the Foundation took care of the legal, financial and organisational matters, the new Museum Commission was responsible for the further planning, construction and the future operation of the museum.

The Executive Board of the Museum Society commissioned the experienced communication specialist Robin Heizmann (Lodge Zur Brudertreue, Aarau) with the development, production and management of its own homepage. The Board of Directors formulated a central and challenging requirement by setting the start of construction work for December 2015 and the inauguration for the first quarter of 2017. Based on the proposals that developed, the Museum Commission prepared the definite contents, evaluated commitments, the satisfactory and appropriate form of effective communication with the public, negotiations with lenders of exhibits, who proved to be extremely generous.

The commission consulted the exhibition designer and scenographer Tanja Gentina for assistance concerning the techniques of communication. The Executive Board of the Society was responsible for the equally demanding procurement of the necessary funds and the consideration of all legal instances. As a result of the extremely intensive and competent work of both committees, both goals, the timely start of reconstruction and the inauguration in spring 2017, were achieved. The targeted audience in the first instance was, Freemasons and their families, who were able to visit the museum for the first time on 26 March 2017, at an open day event. In addition to this group, non-Masonic groups and organisations were also able to visit the museum as of this date, but only by prior appointment. With a view on transparency, the basic idea was that these group-visits should always be accompanied by a tour guide, who would be an experienced Freemason.

It was clear to all those responsible for this comprehensive project, that this form of using the museum was important, but only as a preliminary measure. It could only become an authentic museum, if it could be accessed by the general public, at its own discretion, during specific opening hours, and only then could it officially bear the designation 'Museum'. In order to be able to meet these demands, the Museum Commission perfected the exhibition, wrote descriptions for all the presentations and exhibits, which were expertly executed by Renato Compostella (Lodge Aurora Humanitatis, Zurich). They recruited a team of German and French-speaking volunteer guides, all of whom were experienced Masons, who were prepared to look after the museum and conduct guided tours for the visitors during regular published opening hours.

The opening ceremony of the museum took place in a much more impressive and official form, on 4th November 2018, with a festive act officiated by the Mayor of the City of Bern, The Honorable Alec von Graffenried, the Grand Master of the SGLA, Dominique Juillard Lodge (La Régénérée, Fribourg), and the President of the Museum Society, Bruno Welti.

At a meeting held on 19th and 20th January 2019, in Balsthal, the Museum Commission endorsed a new managerial structure. It was reconstituted as a Board of Trustees, the duties of which are to administer the museum based on guidelines drawn up at this meeting, to develop and implement strategies that would serve the networking and development of the museum.

The structure of the new governing body consisted of a Board of Trustees, whose members were also responsible for the newly defined departments, an extended Board of Trustees, in which individual Freemasons assumed the sub-tasks assigned to them by the departments. Robin Heizmann was appointed President of this Board of Trustees and consequently Director of the Museum.

The new managerial structure, which was collectively developed at the meeting in Balsthal, and was presented at the annual general meeting of the Museum Society held on 27 June 2019, has been in force ever since. With the implementation of these strategic goals, the Freemason Museum Switzerland has succeeded in establishing itself extremely proficient in institutional terms. It is a national member of the Association of Swiss Museums and the Association of Museums of the Canton of Bern and a member of the International Association of Masonic Museums, Libraries and Archives.

The fruits of labour were rewarded with the highly honoured nomination of 'European Museum of the Year Award' by the European Museum Forum on 22.12.2020, which must certainly be attributed to the quality of the museum and its good networking. The agreement that the Museum Society and the SGLA were able to sign at the end of 2020 is also very gratifying. This regulates the relationship between the two and guarantees the Board of Trustees, within the context of the agreement, complete freedom with regard to Masonic themes that the Museum wishes to develop and communicate, to the modalities, transmission, and assigning of projects and its central role within the framework of the SGLA's Communication and Public Relations work. The confidence and appreciation manifested in this manner are also expressed by the fact that, upon the approval of the Delegates Assembly in 2021, the SGLA will contribute to the operating costs of the museum for an initial period of three years.

Other goals such as the installation of a Masonic Lounge in the House of Freemasons, and the implementation of the first special exhibition in the first half of 2022, are well on their way and should be completed on schedule. Another very promising project is the live-stream museum talks launched and supervised by Robin Heizmann.

For the operation of the many wide range additional activities, the museum relies on the contributions from volunteers of diversified expertise and professional competences, to act as guides, translators, specialized experts for art and antiquities, technicians, media professionals and others. To the immense gratification of the Board of Trustees, there are now over forty volunteers who gratuitously support with their skills and enthusiasm for Freemasonry.

This fulfils a great expectation on which all activities, from the very beginning of the Freemason Museum Switzerland, has been created: That this museum is a project characterised and supported by Freemasons - that it is the museum of Swiss Freemasons.