

# casino

# luxembourg

## History

### Casino Bourgeois

The “Casino Bourgeois” was built in a central area of the capital by architects Pierre Kemp and Pierre Funck in the years 1880 to 1882. It soon became a cultural and social hotspot in the city. In addition to the gaming rooms, it also had a reading room and a restaurant. Its vast halls were used for all kinds of functions, including lectures, masked balls, plays and cabaret shows, concerts and the “salons” of the *Cercle Artistique*, and many societies held their meetings there too. The first highlight to this activity came when Franz Liszt made his last public appearance on 19 July, 1886. Among the other landmark events in its history, we may further mention the presence of Winston Churchill in the Great Hall on 15 July, 1946.

The “Société du Casino Bourgeois” was wound down in 1959. Later on, the building was purchased by the State and rented out to the Cultural Circle of the European Communities, founded in 1954. In 1959, the latter had built onto the building’s south front the glass and steel pavilion by Luxembourg architect René Mailliet and known today as the “Aquarium”. The Casino Luxembourg, now called the “Foyer Européen”, remained a centre for cultural and social events for the European Communities in Luxembourg up to the end of 1990.

### Transformation

In the perspective of a general makeover of the building, the Ministry of Public Building commissioned the architectural office Ballini & Pitt (Luxembourg) to conduct an estimate of the necessary works and to report on the building’s overall state in 1991-1992. But it was only during the preparation of a programme for “Luxembourg, European Cultural Capital 1995” that the wish developed to convert the old Casino Bourgeois into

an exhibition space. As a consequence, artist-architect Urs Rausmüller, director of the Hallen für Neue Kunst in Schaffhausen, who had only just succeeded in converting the Espace Rennes in Paris, was called upon.

As he became aware of the short notice at which new exhibition spaces needed to be conceptualised and created for the cultural year 1995, and after considering the city council's plans to build a museum structure at a later date, Urs Rausmüller suggested to dispense with the Casino Luxembourg's intended general renovation for the time being, and instead proposed to install a structure capable of hosting temporary exhibitions inside the building. In October 1993, the government commissioned the architect to convert the Casino Bourgeois into an exhibition space – for a limited time span only – and gave him the full responsibility over its interior furnishings.

### **White cubes**

Urs Rausmüller's architectural project convincingly combined simplicity, aesthetics and practical function. The first stage was to reduce the Casino to its elementary structures. Then followed the installation, in every one of the heightened ground floor and first floor rooms (the central entrance hall excepted) of open-top cubes made of uniformly white walls. This minimal, but clear and purposeful intervention simultaneously fulfilled various requirements. The historical substance of the building remained untouched, and the budget that this restructuring entailed was relatively modest. Because they offered a maximum of wall space, the cubes proved to be ideal exhibition spaces. Moreover, the walls protected the fragile artworks from ultraviolet radiation emitted through the natural light. Finally, the cubes formed coherent and homogenous entities that could be easily removed at the end of the cultural year. In total, thirteen rooms had been recast in the building. Taken together, they represented a floor surface of 460 m<sup>2</sup> and a wall length of 290 m.

The entrance hall, finally, is also a reception area, equipped with all the necessary furnishings to inform the visitor and sell tickets and catalogues.

### **From 1995 to 1996**

In March 1996, three months after the end of "Luxembourg, European City of Culture 1995", Casino Luxembourg became what it is today: Luxembourg's first forum of contemporary art. Its aim is to present today's visual arts with all their diversity and complexity.

Contemporary art is one of the most noteworthy means of questioning our essential values and a possible approach to our inner lives, despite (or because of) the crises it has to face regularly. To give people the

opportunity to reflect on art and to formulate their own opinions, without giving in to prevailing prejudices, is one of the Casino Luxembourg's major targets, and a step towards individual freedom of opinion.

Rausmüller's task was to create a space that could fit the requirements of the temporary exhibitions planned in the course of the cultural year. Whereas the size, height and number of rooms in the Casino seemed destined for such a purpose, the walls themselves disposed of too little hanging space for art exhibitions.

## 2016

In 2016, following an architectural competition by invitation, the architect Claudine Kaell was given the mission for the architectural transformation of the ground floor of the Casino. Her proposal convinced by the accuracy of the architectural concept and a perfect harmony of the visions of the Casino team for its future spaces. The project foresaw a more practical and fluid reorganisation of the interior spaces, as well as better accessibility for the public (the forum now has a second entrance, Boulevard F. Roosevelt).

The ground floor, a crossroads and meeting point, now has an entirely redesigned welcome area, next to the existing library; projection rooms devoted to artists' videos and video documentation of exhibitions; an area dedicated to learning activities and creative workshops; and a café-restaurant, the ca(fé)sino.

## Today

Ideally located in the heart of the capital, the Casino Luxembourg – Forum d'art contemporain holds contemporary art exhibitions with an international programme of mainly younger-generation artists. The art centre houses public spaces with a variety of uses and vocations, combining contemporary art with a warm and friendly meeting place: the ground floor, next to a library specialising in contemporary art, has an area dedicated to learning activities, and a café-restaurant. The first floor is exclusively used for temporary exhibitions, so artists' monographs and themed exhibitions are shown here. These are completed by a varied programme of guided tours, conferences and encounters with contemporary music, as well as artists in residence. Far from any museological concerns, the Casino functions like an artistic and experimental think tank heading for the latest trends in the art scene.