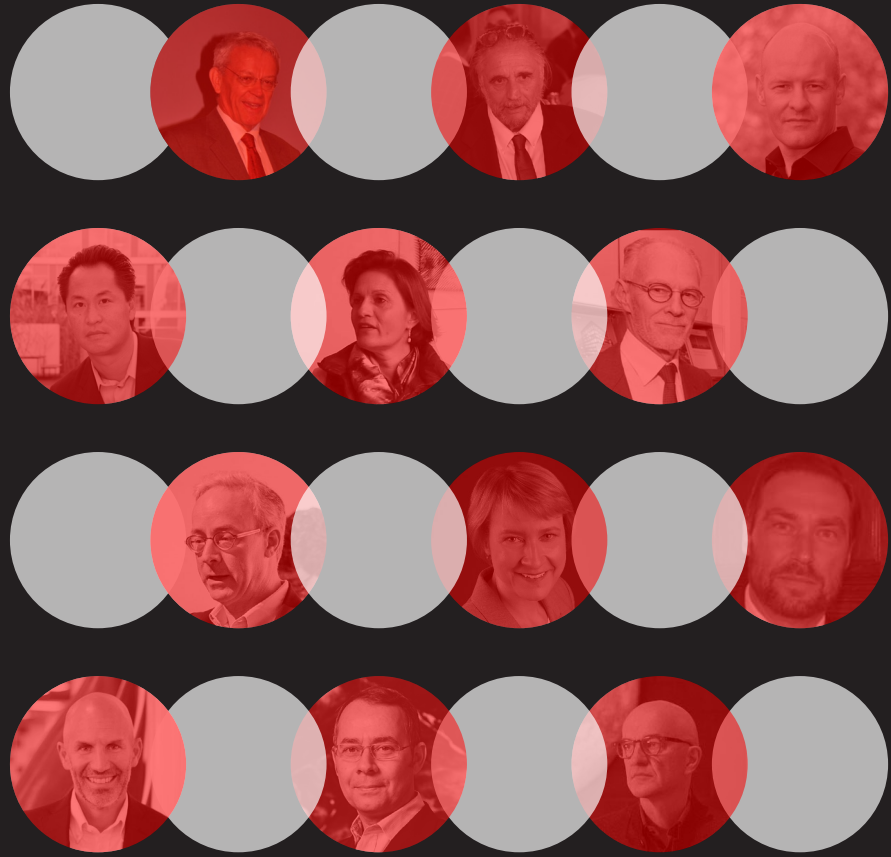February
2021

Revealing the Dots

Eleven interviews with some
of the most influential figures
in Swissnex's 20-year history

nex20 swissnex

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Whether it is how Swissnex was pitched to the Swiss government, how it gained initial backing from the private sector, or how the design of our building gave rise to a new field of architecture, the Swissnex journey isn't a typical one. In 2020, as part of our 20th anniversary campaign nex20, we embarked on a series of interviews to discover this story from the perspective of some of Swissnex's most pivotal figures. We are pleased to release our collection, *Revealing the Dots*, which gives unprecedented insights into the inception of Swissnex and its development into the global network it is today.

Swissnex in Boston and New York

Benjamin Bollmann, CEO
Jonas Brunschwig, Deputy CEO
Anour Esa, Communications Manager
Alexandra Alteio, Communications Manager

"We wanted to invent a new diplomacy"

Former Swiss State Secretary Charles Kleiber reflects on 20 years of Swissnex, and imagines a future Switzerland that tackles global challenges head-on.

In 1997, Charles Kleiber was appointed State Secretary for Education and Research of the Swiss Confederation. He remained at this post until his retirement in 2007. During Kleiber's tenure as State Secretary, the presence of Science and Technology Offices in Swiss embassies abroad increased dramatically, and he oversaw the creation of SHARE, the Swiss House for Advanced Research and Education — which would later become known as Swissnex. He spoke with us about that time, and reflected on what the future may hold for Switzerland and Swissnex.

Swissnex: How did SHARE come about? Did it emerge as a result of a need, an opportunity, or both?

Charles Kleiber: In 2000, the world was in flux with the fall of communism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the development of the internet, and with it the internationalization and the informatization of exchanges and communication. Traditional diplomacy was confronted with a new reality and new actors, and needed to invest in new instruments and new forms of cooperation. Diplomacy was less and less responsible for defending national interests, and more and more a facilitator for an exchange of ideas, for the creation of added value, and for linking different sectors of activity.

As such, there was political and economic pressure in Bern to create something new. This pressure came mainly from the Parliament, and was something which crossed over all political tendencies. There was a real effort among the MPs to unite and build something unique. But of course, there was uncertainty about what was to be built.

What motivated and led you to support the vision that became SHARE and then Swissnex?

We wanted to invent a new diplomacy. We had this idea that technology would solve all the world's problems and that science was the universal language. We believed that globalization is driven by technological and financial achievement, which induces systemic and organizational changes. But the new diplomacy that would emerge needed new places to unfold. SHARE was one of

those places, the very first of its kind. It reconciled the need to be global and local at the same time. It was a realistic and pragmatic utopia, and a bet on the future.

So this is what we did, and it was good. Xavier Comtesse, who was a Science Counselor at the Embassy in Washington, came up with the idea for SHARE and really was the builder of it. Thierry Lombard, a prominent Swiss philanthropist, saw that there was potential and gave the money in order to buy the property for SHARE. Then came Christian Simm, who helped coin the term Swissnex, and all the rest.

What are some of the highlights you remember and what are you most proud of in relation to Swissnex?

I'm proud of the fact that Swissnex exists. Because if it exists, it is only because of trust. When you are in my position, you are the State Secretary in Bern and you have people who are all over the world, the only way to manage that is to have more contact with them. So the choice of these people and all the mechanisms which link each of us to the others are very important.

The construction of Swissnex is based on trust. So based on that, I would say it's a good mechanism. I'm sure that the other people who were in this adventure had the same feeling — that it was important, and that they had a role to play, and that people like me could trust them. I think all of us can

be proud of that trust. Right now the global system is in a phase of profound transition and uncertainty. What do you see as the role of Swissnex in this new world?

Today, the question for me is what is the next step? What does Switzerland have to say about the global challenges facing humanity, like inequality, justice, climate, and democracy? There are many young researchers and artists in Switzerland tackling these challenges, and there are a lot of people in universities and institutions in Switzerland with bright ideas. For me, the purpose of Swissnex then is to be all over the world, amplifying those voices and helping to elevate questions which address these global issues.

At the time of Swissnex's founding, the rule of the game was multilateralism. We had the belief that there was progress, that humanity could be more just, that people would have more knowledge. We believed that the truth mattered. Knowledge by proof has the power to bring people together.

But this is no longer the situation today. Truth has disappeared, and multilateralism is disappearing. But Swissnex is anchored in science. So one of the most important things that Swissnex can do now is to steer back to that foundation and show that knowledge by proof is at the center of our civilization. Swissnex is the tool by which Swiss universities, researchers, and artists can be present in the rest of the world.

"Swissnex was a breakthrough idea"

Xavier Comtesse, the founding Director of Swissnex in Boston/SHARE, talks with us about building the project from the ground up, its relevance 20 years ago, and what still makes it special today.

In 1996, Xavier Comtesse was a Science Counselor at the Embassy of Switzerland in Washington, DC when he and a few other individuals came up with the crazy idea for creating a science consulate in the Boston area. It could serve as a hub for scientists, researchers, entrepreneurs, and students to gather and create new, innovative ideas.

In those years in the diplomatic community however, that kind of idea would only get you raised eyebrows and shaking heads. But Comtesse was stubborn, and made it his mission to bring that vision to fruition. And so in October of 2000, SHARE, the Swiss House for Advanced Research and Education — which would eventually become Swissnex in Boston — opened in Cambridge.

Twenty years later, some of us at Swissnex in Boston spoke with Xavier about that time, and what made Swissnex such a disruptive force in the diplomatic world.

Swissnex: How did the idea for Swissnex come about?

Xavier Comtesse: It started in 1996, when I was working at the Swiss Embassy in Washington. At that time, it was mostly diplomats in charge of science and technology affairs, and so Heinrich Ursprung — the State Secretary for Education and Research at that time — sent me to Washington to rethink what it meant to be a scientific attaché.

I quickly discovered that Washington really wasn't the right place for Switzerland's scientific attachés. It was a hub for policy, not research and innovation. I reported back to Heinrich Ursprung and informed him that our science and technology representation shouldn't be in Washington, but rather in San Francisco and Boston, where cutting edge research and innovation was taking place.

After I had sent this letter to Heinrich Ursprung, he was interested and asked me to come up with a concept. It took me a while, but I eventually developed a narrative

around brain drain. At that time, there were many Swiss scientists who left Switzerland and didn't return. There were more than two thousand post-doctoral students of Swiss origin conducting research in the US, and at an estimated cost of CHF 1 million per Ph.D. grown in Switzerland, that was more than CHF 2 billion in underutilized Swiss assets.

My idea was that we could combat Swiss brain drain by creating a position in San Francisco and Boston that would be responsible for helping Swiss scientists and researchers come to the United States for exchanges and then also incentivize them to return to Switzerland so that the Swiss government might see a return on that investment. This narrative was primarily to sell this idea to the Swiss government, because nobody wanted Swissnex at that time.

So how did you take this from idea to reality?

Well, it was a pretty unorthodox idea to present to Swiss diplomats, so I first had a discussion with some people at the US State Department to gauge their interest in the idea. They were very enthusiastic about it and offered their support if we opened a science consulate in Boston. Although we would have consular status, we wouldn't need to be responsible for diplomatic services. I had them draft a white paper with the details, and then sent it to Bern.

The Swiss government liked the idea, but

they had reservations. Christoph von Arb, the head of international affairs at SERI at that time, was instrumental in getting the formal approval from the Swiss Government. One of the other obstacles was getting funding, so I went to Geneva to see my friend Thierry Lombard, a prominent Swiss philanthropist. He was very enthusiastic about the project, and we received a generous grant. If you talked with him today, I think he would say that it has been one of the best experiences in his life.

Let's take a step back. Can you tell us how you first got involved working with the Swiss government?

When I moved to the government in 1992, they hired me because I was a startup guy. I had started three companies in Geneva in the 80s. One of my objectives was to work with the universities and the private sector to help universities to open their minds to civil society and to the economy. Our approach was to promote startups coming from universities in Switzerland, because then the professors and the universities would be invested in tech-transfer and to open up to the economy.

Today, Switzerland has made a lot of real progress in innovation, and is ranked number one in innovation in the world now. But it's more that we have gotten better at talking about innovation. In 1992, Switzerland was in the 15th rank on the World Economic Forum's Innovation Index. Finland was number one. The State Secretary wanted me to find

out how the indicators worked and why Switzerland was so low, despite being such a formidable hub of scientific research and discovery.

I went to the WEF in Geneva and soon figured out that there were something like 150 indicators that comprised the index on innovation. Forty percent were quantitative indicators, and an astonishing sixty percent were qualitative indicators. I realized that in order to get a boost in our innovation ranking, we just needed to improve the qualitative indicators: our perception. Swissnex was part of improving that perception.

When we opened Swissnex, we had 57 countries who sent official delegations. Many of these delegations said that Switzerland was excellent in innovation, and as such, we went up in the rankings! Something I discovered while in the States is that there are always two temperature readings: real and perceived. I think that applies in life and in business as well. Perception is often more important than reality. When you realize that, you can write your own story, but with proof. Swissnex was part of this story. Switzerland may not have been designed to have breakthrough ideas, but I think Swissnex was a breakthrough idea.

Let's jump to Swissnex in Boston's building: what made the physical space of Swissnex so unique?

One element was the architecture and interior design. The very young Swiss architects I chose, Waldvogel + Huang, elected for a lofty open office design. There was no guard desk, there were no metal detectors or protective barriers. It was very much a departure from the layout of a traditional consulate.

A crucial element of the space was that we wanted to not only create a physical space for people to gather, but also a virtual space too. And that's where our video conference wall came in. In 2000, there was no zoom, and video calling was not a widespread thing. So for us to have it at Swissnex was fantastic,

and a big sell for partners looking to utilize the space. The building actually won an award from the Associated General Contractors of Massachusetts for the combination of innovative building materials and integration of technology.

You clearly accomplished a lot in those days; what are you most proud of?

Starting it. There are more than 600 young Swiss people who one day worked at a Swissnex. That was not my vision at the time, but it was the most important result. It means 600 people have had an adventure like that. Before Swissnex, when people in Switzerland wanted to have adventures in science, there was no structure of support. It was a really lonely experience. Swissnex made it a collective experience.

I'm always proud to find out that some people who jump into the Swissnex adventure have crazy lives after that. It gives them so much opportunity. This freedom of choosing, doing, thinking, especially breakthrough thinking. It's very powerful. People would come to Swissnex and be inspired by the atmosphere. And 20 years later, that atmosphere is still there. It's a place where you can think differently. I'm very proud.

What were some funny moments for you while at Swissnex?

In the beginning, a lot of people and companies came to visit Swissnex. A big Swiss bank was one of those visits. One of their directors came and visited us in December of 2000. During his visit, I pitched the idea of an internship program to him. The bank would fund an IT intern to work at Swissnex for six months, and in exchange, we would arrange for them to take courses at MIT or wherever they wanted.

He liked the idea, so I told him I'd send him an email with the details. He told me that his secretary would read the email to him. That took me by surprise and I gave him a hard

Comtesse (back right corner of table) hosts a delegation at SHARE in 2000

time about it. At that time in 2000, most leaders of Swiss companies were still very old fashioned when it came to the internet, and viewed emails as letters. They dictated what they wanted to say to their secretary, and the secretary typed the email in a very formal manner, like a letter! But the next day, he personally sent me an email, telling me it was his first ever email he had written himself. It gave me a good chuckle.

Did you have any moments with partners that were a sort of engineered serendipity?

All the time. One very important thing with Swissnex was the contact — the physical contact. Anytime somebody traveled to Boston or San Francisco, we set up meetings. We had the right contacts, we spared time and money for everyone in science — from startups to big companies.

At that time when we started, Novartis was not established in Boston. Everyone was still focusing on San Francisco and Silicon Valley. But after a visit to Swissnex and Boston, Novartis' director of R&D mentioned to me that they had overlooked Boston, and that they had to establish a presence there.

So one of my first tasks during that year was to help Novartis come into Boston. They of course knew people, but we had the connections to the administration, and many of the big players. Now they have a big presence here.

For all these reasons we talked about, I think Boston was the best place where we could've started this. It's a land of promise.

"We developed the initial idea for a physical-digital consulate 20 years ago"

Swiss architects Jeffrey Huang and Muriel Waldvogel talk about how designing and constructing the Swissnex in Boston building in 2000 changed their lives and helped give rise to a new field of research: convergent architecture.

Architects Jeffrey Huang and Muriel Waldvogel were young professors of architecture and design when they first met Xavier Comtesse in Cambridge in 1999. A few weeks after meeting him, they officially became the architects of the world's first science consulate, a project that would win them an award, accelerate their careers, and push the boundaries of architecture for many years to come.

After building Swissnex, they founded an architecture practice in Massachusetts in 2000, and are now based in Lausanne, Switzerland. Huang is now the Director of the Institute of Architecture at EPFL in Lausanne, and Waldvogel is the Principal of their architecture practice, Convergeo. We spoke with them to hear about the process of designing and building Swissnex in Boston twenty years ago, and how it has impacted their careers since.

Swissnex in Boston: How did you first meet Xavier Comtesse?

Jeffrey Huang (JH): Muriel and I moved from Switzerland to Boston in 1995. We were both teaching at Harvard; Muriel was at Harvard College, and I was a young assistant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. We were also very engaged in the local Swiss community around Cambridge and Boston.

We were co-presidents of the Boston chapter of the ETH alumni association, and we would organize dinners, meetings, and events

Concept for virtual-physical layout inside Swissnex

to get the Swiss scientific diaspora in the area together. As a result of some of these meetings, we met Patrick Steineman, a fellow ETH alumnus doing his PhD at MIT. Together we wrote a paper where we developed a proposal for creating a virtual community for the Swiss scientific diaspora. In 1999, we sent it to the Swiss Embassy in Washington DC, asking for support.
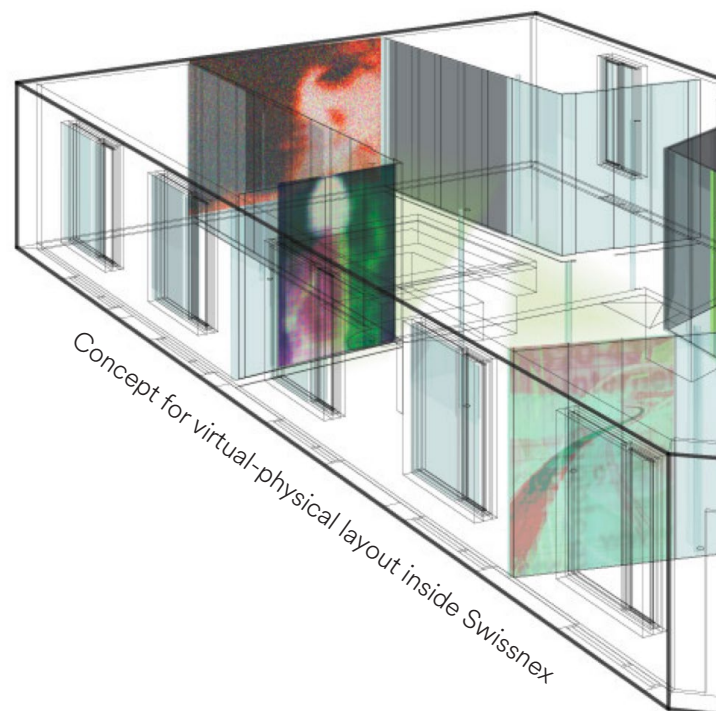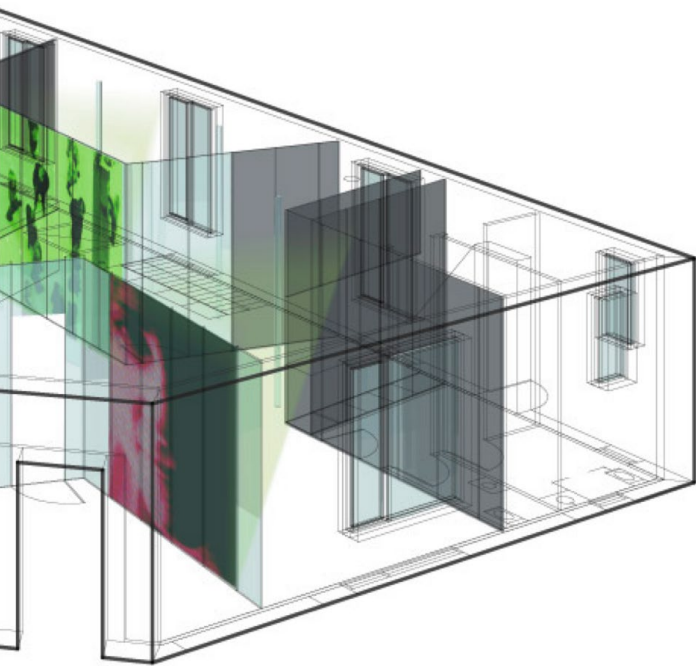
A few weeks later, I received a phone call from someone called Xavier Comtesse, who had read the report for the proposal and was visiting Cambridge and wanted to meet with us. So we set up a meeting with him in a little cafe at the Harvard Barker Center. This is a place where we later had many meetings, and it eventually became what we would call the "knowledge café." The café itself was round, with no traditional walls, lots of glass, and incredible light.

How did you wind up as the architects for SHARE/Swissnex?

JH: Our first meeting with Xavier was extremely inspiring. He talked about his plans for the Swiss House for Advanced Research and Education (SHARE), and the problem of Swiss brain drain. We discussed the possibility of joining physical and virtual communities together, the idea of building a physical Swiss house, and at the end of the meeting, he proposed that we should be the architects of the future Swiss house.

We were very young at the time and not super experienced — so the fact that he had so much faith in young Swiss talent was really quite incredible. Usually in Switzerland, you have to make a proposal in order to build a consulate. But for Swissnex, we just built it. It was quite a leap of faith on Xavier's part. We are still very grateful to him for giving us that opportunity. In the meetings that followed, we developed the initial idea for a physical-digital consulate, and integrated a notion that the Swiss House could be a "global village." We wanted a physical place where people would meet, a café, and an arena, but then also to create a virtual commons, a place to foster a virtual community, if you will.

Later, we introduced some of the first designs to Thierry Lombard and Patrick Odier, the main sponsors of the whole project, and they were very supportive from the beginning. I think they were very courageous, bold, and visionary in encouraging us to imagine a new
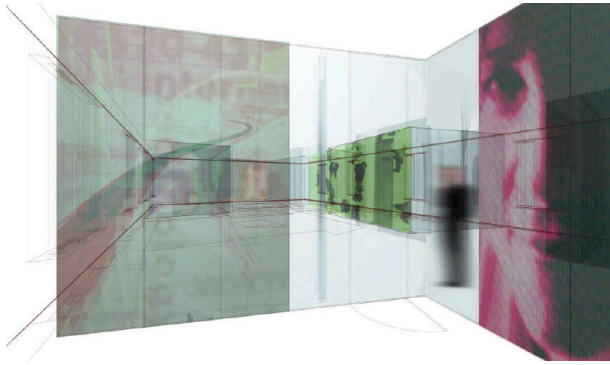
3D concept for digital lobby inside of Swissnex

kind of architecture: a consulate functioning not only as a scientific outpost, but also as an interface — a portal for the Swiss scientific diaspora to connect back to Switzerland and reverse Swiss brain drain.

What was truly innovative about it was that we didn't actually need to bring Swiss scientists physically back to Switzerland. It functioned instead almost like a wormhole: a portal where scientists could walk in, transfer their

knowledge virtually back to Switzerland via lectures, seminars, joint events, meetings, and so forth, and walk back out.

What were some of the inspirations and leading concepts in the design of the space?

Muriel Waldvogel (MW): One concept was to put an equal emphasis on making this as much a virtual space as it was a physical space. When we made the renovations, we had to leave the facade, because it was historical. But on the inside, we ripped the building naked and made every single wall a glass "media wall." We wanted to link many of these media walls to other locations, transporting the wall to somewhere else in the world.

We didn't want to transport the people, but rather the space. It's a different thing compared to Zoom today. This wasn't people-to-people — it was space-to-space. In the entrance for example, the large first wall was sometimes linked to the lobby of ETH Zurich,
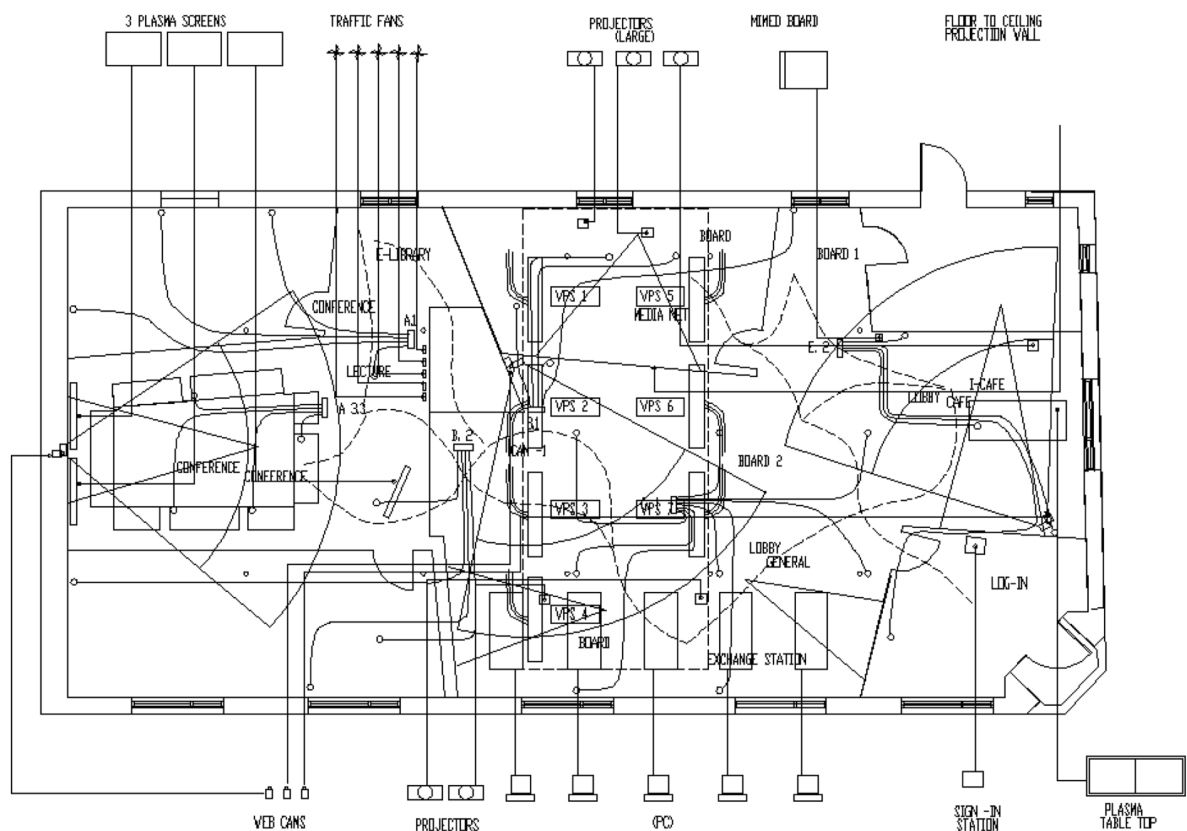
Electrical blueprint of the SHARE building in 2000

among other locations. Because of that, we had to design the geometry of the space to follow the rules of perspective and take into account how the camera viewed our space.

A second concept was intimacy, which was reflected in how we designed the layout of the building, which included a smaller alcove called the arena which would serve as a more intimate space for smaller group work sessions. Down to the smallest details, we really wanted this to be a flexible and intimate space. For example, we designed the wiring for the outlets, cameras, and the projectors at the same time as we designed the space. It was part of the initial structure, and as such it created a different level of intimacy. In the arena for example, you could just hook up your computer and work with eight people in a more intimate setting.

A third driving concept was transparency.

We wanted every wall to be transparent, and everything was in glass. At that time, it was also a symbolic gesture, because we were in the middle of the banking crisis where Switzerland was behind a lot of scandals and diplomacy was being conducted behind closed doors. So the idea of making a consulate completely transparent of course was not an easy idea to get approved, but it was something we all wanted to try, and so we went with it.

A final concept that we wanted to integrate was a sense of ambiguity. We made sure that the building materials we used would make the space unique, and non-traditional. All the materials we chose weren't something you'd ever normally choose for a consulate. The wood floor for instance is very large planks of birch. By picking wider planks of a non-traditional wood, we wanted to make the space look almost rural, something you

View from inside the building during renovation

View inside the building post-renovation
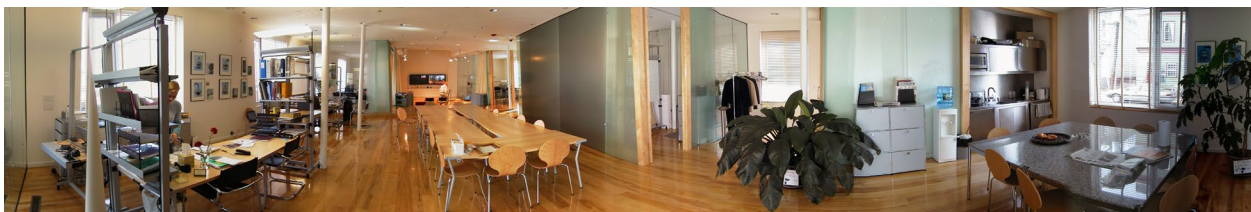
Panorama inside the SHARE office, circa 2003

Swissnex's interior in 2000 post-renovations

would not typically have in a public building. We wanted to make the space elegant and modern, and yet feel like a place where you'd want to hang out and stay.

JH: The space was also ambiguous, because it was not clear whether it was an office or a gallery, or even an exhibition room. And I think it's that ambiguity that creates this moment of estrangement: when you come in, you stop and think twice. It creates this increased perceptual moment of recognizing, "oh, this is something different."

MW: And that didn't just come from our design intent, it was also the context. The neighborhood didn't want a consulate, and Xavier really wanted openness, so even the glass walls had one centimeter gaps between them. We didn't close them so you could hear conversation. It was all this play with privacy and intimacy that was not only visual, but also audible.

You could hear everybody talking and every

Installation of transparent glass panels

phone call from Xavier's office was open to everyone. That was quite new I think, and the neighbors loved it, because they were afraid it was going to be a black box.

You've mentioned that you were involved with the second floor addition in 2008 as well. Can you talk a little bit how you were involved in that process?

MW: We got involved the second time around for the second floor addition in 2008. Christoph von Arb called me and said that they had about 200–300 events a year, and they needed more separate dedicated office space, which was a positive thing, as it indicated success and growth. So we designed a second floor in collaboration with Peter Darlow of Darlow Christ Architects.

At the beginning of the design with Christoph, we decided to do something that was again glass-heavy, like a lightbox, similar to the interior of downstairs, only turned inside-out.

Second floor addition of Swissnex in Boston

Huang (left) and Waldvogel (right) sitting inside Swissnex during the renovation process in 2000

We also incorporated a green roof with the second floor, set back a few meters so that it didn't visually crowd the street corner.

20 years later, what does this project mean to you, and how did it impact your careers?

JH: Before Swiss House, we had been working at Harvard on this theoretical idea of convergence of physical and virtual space. And Swissnex/Swiss House gave us an opportunity to apply those ideas and realize some of those ideas in a real project. Once Swissnex was built, we featured the project in an article in Harvard Business Review, which became a seminal article on future space where physical and virtual spaces converge. That concept of future space then became the foundation of our subsequent research and of our design firm Convergeo, which was really created for designing the convergence of physical and virtual space.

After Swissnex, we designed several digital-physical projects that were inspired or built on the Swissnex concept. There was a building for Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington DC, concept stores and experimental museums for Rolex, and also a series of future offices for mostly Swiss firms,

such as CreditSuisse and SwissRe, which integrate virtual and physical work. These projects were developed after Swissnex and considered futuristic.

Today, ironically, with the current pandemic due to COVID-19, the interest in virtual offices and virtual museums, in virtual stores and virtual universities, this whole idea of convergence of physical and virtual architectures is coming back full-circle, and finally becoming mainstream 20 years later.

Designing and building Swissnex became the foundation for our careers and also for our architectural practice. I'm also a professor, and the reason I'm at EPFL now is because I met Patrick Aebischer, the president of EPFL then at Swissnex in 2004–2005, and through our interactions at Swissnex, he convinced me of the uniqueness and dynamism of the EPFL he was about to create.

So the effects of this project were not just architectural, but we also met really interesting people from all walks of life. Swissnex truly was a harbinger for many new things to come.

"The idea was to build bridges between science and business"

Thierry Lombard, former Managing Partner at Swiss private bank Lombard Odier, explores how Lombard Odier's gift to finance the construction of the Swissnex in Boston building led the development of a global network championing public-private partnership.
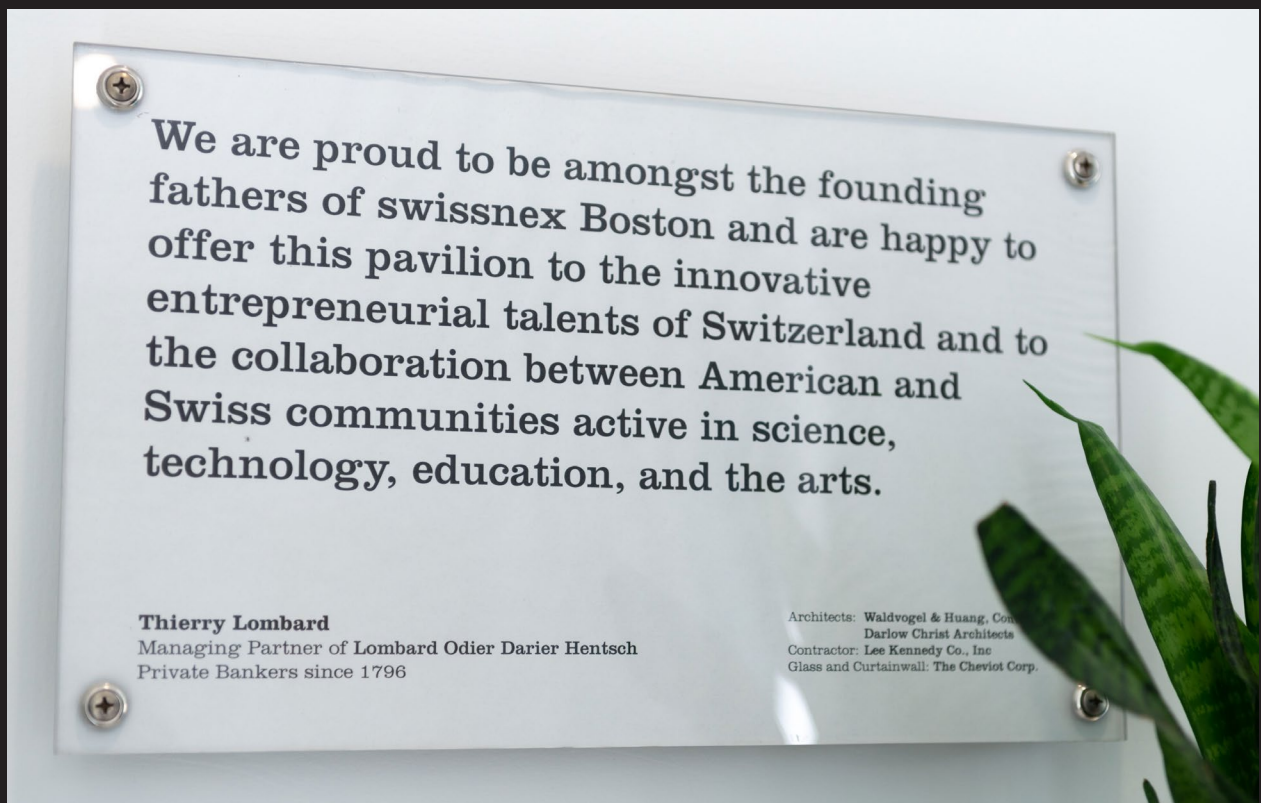
Commemorative plaque on display at Swissnex in Boston

Twenty years ago, Thierry Lombard, Patrick Odier, and their partners made the decision to invest in the long-term growth and economic prosperity of Switzerland by seed-funding Swissnex — a risky but innovative idea for science diplomacy. Over the course of 20 years, that gift gave rise to a global Swissnex Network connecting Switzerland and the world's most innovative and technologically advanced cities. We spoke with Lombard about his role in helping to make Swissnex a reality.

Swissnex in Boston: What motivated you to embark on the Swissnex adventure?

Thierry Lombard: There were multiple elements. One was the Latsis Bavois Forum, in which we invited Swiss academic, political, and economic leaders to the table to discuss and debate the challenges to Swiss competitiveness. We knew that if Switzerland wanted to stay competitive, we needed to build bridges between science and business. Charles Kleiber and Xavier Comtesse were

part of these meetings and we continued to stay in touch with them.

In 1998, when Patrick Odier and I had long been thinking about the bicentennial of our bank, Xavier and Charles's idea of "scientific outposts" landed on our table. For our 200th anniversary, we really wanted to do something to support Switzerland's long-term growth and economic prosperity, to look toward the future, and not so much at the past.

The SHARE project, as it was called back then, matched that sentiment. It was an innovative idea bringing the economic, the academic, and potentially even the political together.

As we talked about it with Charles, we agreed that the project needed a boost, which seemed appropriate for us to grant in relation to our bicentennial. That eventually led us to find the small grocery store that stood where Swissnex in Boston is right now and receive, after a few legal hiccups, the authorization to transform the space for the development of SHARE.

Why do you think this project was important for Switzerland 20 years ago?

It allowed for us to continue the dialogue between these different Swiss sectors, working towards supporting Switzerland and the image and influence of Switzerland abroad. This project was also interesting in its potential to help counteract the adverse effects of brain drain, wherein the Swiss abroad found themselves not having the knowledge or the tools to return to Switzerland. What's more, it represented this desire to work on a project with younger generations, rather than the traditional side of academia, business, and politics.

We just calculated our average age at Swissnex in Boston and we're 31. It's young!

Yes, and I think that's good. In a world that changes so much, it is vital to have balance between generations. If there are three generations operating in the same company, I think all three can yield value, but I also think we should reverse the power distribution a little bit, by instead giving the power to the younger generation and relying on the older one for its experience, help and support. Today it has become a necessity to find a balance between creativity, innovation, and experience.

Do you remember a bit about the discussions around the creation of Swissnex?

One thing that always amused me was that we supported the steps and procedure of the project, particularly by giving financial support, but somehow we still had a lot of trouble coordinating or collaborating better between the various stakeholders involved.

At one point I said that while there are probably financial resources up for grabs,

they all needed to come together with a project under a common vision, or else those resources wouldn't be there. Those were easy times in the sense that I had the opportunity to put resources into the purchase of this house and in the support of this project. The ground was a little relaxed, and the landing was a little softer at the time when we moved this project forward. I have to admit that without Xavier and Charles, it would have been impossible to make the project happen.

You have been involved with Swissnex for 20 years, from near and far. What are you most proud of in the last 20 years?

What I find interesting about Swissnex is that it is an illustration of a successful collaboration between the public and private sectors. In the end the resources put forward by the private sector were able to provide a launchpad for 20 years of public-private collaboration via Swissnex.

Do you have a highlight that stands out to you?

What interested and pleased me is that after Boston there was San Francisco, and after San Francisco there was the development of the global network. I am glad that the project has developed and evolved. I think what Boston did very well at the beginning was to surround itself with local anchors. It created this dual dimension — one belonging to the Swissnex Network, and one directed more locally.

A regret for me is that Swissnex has probably been too unknown in Switzerland. Perhaps Swissnex should have a bigger presence and work on its visibility and reputation in Switzerland. People at Swissnex have information and readings of approaches and projects that potentially could be more and better highlighted in Switzerland.

Communication has always been a big topic for us. Some people think we're a consulate, some think we're a startup incubator, some

think we're an art gallery... These multiple identities allow us to attract completely different audiences and connect people in surprising ways. But this is also what makes it difficult to communicate about Swissnex.

Yes, and perhaps it should stay that way. It is exactly this diversity that allows for creativity — which may not be a bad thing after all. Looking to the future, Swissnex has the capability to be a sense-maker — a platform to read and shape the future for Switzerland. It will require staying on the cutting edge of innovation and better coordination at the network level. Let's protect the originality, quality, and continuation of this project in the next 20 years.

"It was an example of public-private partnership before the term even existed."

Paul Smyke, Senior Advisor to the Chairman at the World Economic Forum USA, recounts his time as an advisor to Swissnex in its early days.

Smyke speaking at a WEF event (photo courtesy of the WEF)

In 1998, Paul Smyke, a key figure at the World Economic Forum (WEF), moved to Boston after spending most of his adult life living in Switzerland. By chance during a meeting with the Swiss Ambassador in Washington, Smyke met Xavier Comtesse when he was developing the idea for the Swiss House of Advanced Research and Education (SHARE) that would later become Swissnex in Boston.

After hearing Comtesse's pitch, Smyke knew this was going to be a game-changer for Switzerland, and decided to get involved. The project would start small and scrappy, but 20 years later he knows that it was a winning idea. Today, Smyke serves in various roles at the WEF, including Senior Advisor to the Chairman, Head of North America, and Member of the Executive Committee. We spoke with him earlier this year to hear more about his journey with Swissnex.

Swissnex in Boston: How did you find out about Swissnex?

Paul Smyke: It was the late 90s and I had just recently moved to Boston. I went down to Washington to meet with the Swiss Ambassador at that time, and he told me about the new science attaché, who was cooking up some kind of idea for Switzerland in Boston and that I should speak with him. That attaché was Xavier Comtesse.

While I'm pragmatic and rooted in reality, I feel like I can recognize a good idea when I see one. And this seemed like a really good idea. It takes a crazy person like Xavier usually to come up with an idea like that, and you combine that with the vision and financial backing of Thierry Lombard and Patrick Odier, and it becomes reality.

Thierry told me that when they were thinking about their 200th anniversary, they felt a need to build something that would be an investment in the future of Switzerland. His and Odier's support of this project says a lot about them. Xavier of course was the disruptive and driving force intellectually and energy-wise that was needed.

So when you combined Xavier's energy, Lombard and Odier's vision and resources, and former State Secretary Charles Kleiber's support, the result was incredibly powerful. Swissnex couldn't have happened without them. It was an example of public-private partnership before the term even existed. In the WEF context, we'd long been proponents of public-private partnership, so I was happy to see that embodied in Swissnex. I give credit to the bankers but I also have to give credit to the government for saying yes, and going along with it because that took courage on their part.

So the government just said yes, just like that?

Not exactly. Of course there was hesitation. There was always a tension between the amount of disruption and just how disruptive this was compared to traditional diplomacy. While there were people inside the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) who were excited, there were others who were more reticent.

One moment I will never forget: the eyes of some of the senior officials from Bern who showed up for the inauguration 20 years ago. When one official in particular walked in the building, his eyes went wide — and not necessarily with excitement. I could imagine he was thinking, "wait, where's the guard desk? Where's the glass barrier?" You could tell that it was a bit of a shock for him. Some of us considered that a plus, but there were definitely currents within traditional government where it took a lot of adjustment.

What's a fun fact people don't usually know about your connection with Swissnex?

I was the acting director of Swissnex for about six months between Xavier and Christoph von Arb. It's a little-known fact. At that time, Pascal Marmier and the others were all 20 somethings and I had the merit of being a 30 something with a legitimate connection to the WEF.

So when there was a six month period where they needed an interim director, they had me step in. Nobody gave me a mandate, it was basically don't let the place burn down and make sure that things go smoothly. I think I signed some checks a couple times a month. It was very much a caretaker function, a figurehead if you will.

What was the rest of your involvement like?

Beyond my brief stint as acting director, I was an advisor for a few years, which gave me a bit of an internal perspective. I was able to weld together a connection with the WEF and create some networks. Together, we hosted a lot of social things, and then post-Davos Summit briefings with Boston area participants. All in all, the conditions were

created in those first few years where the rest of the story could unfold over the next 20.

I recognize a lot of parallels between life at the WEF and what Swissnex was trying to do. There was a notion of trying to gather people together, break down barriers, break down silos, and create conversations that previously weren't being had. That was some of the experience and perspective that I could bring to the table. I think that explains in part the enthusiasm that I had when I first heard of the idea for Swissnex.

What was the building process like?

The renovation of the building was a huge undertaking. You can't underestimate the legal and financial costs of it all, given how strange the architecture was in transforming the laundromat and grocery into that space. I think the architects Jeff Huang and Muriel Waldvogel deserve a huge amount of credit. They were really a visionary husband-wife team.

I must say, I don't really consider myself visionary. I'm sort of a highly pragmatic guy. My feet are firmly entrenched in reality and I tend to live my life that way. That doesn't mean that I don't have big thoughts, but Jeff and Muriel were clearly futurists and thinking on a different level.

Some of the design elements they proposed in the building process were pretty bold, to put it lightly. Jeff would hand out a slide-deck and say, "this is what we're gonna do." There were some pretty wild ideas in there. The end result was a bit tamer than some of the proposals, but it was still quite disruptive.

Can you walk us through some of the memorable activities, projects or situations that you lived through in that time?

We're talking about 15–20 years ago, but the ones that jump to mind are the ones that I was most involved in, which are those Davos events I mentioned. We would get some

pretty prominent people from the Boston area to show up to those. They were very popular. We'd sometimes pack one hundred fifty people in the building for those events. Those were always highlights because it was basically like holding a little Davos seminar, but inside Swissnex.

The thing about those seminars though, is they sometimes are more valuable at a smaller scale. I fairly quickly became a convert to having smaller handpicked audiences rather than sending out an email blast to the general public. To me, it was moreso a question of how to get a handpicked audience one third the size of those Davos events, but where the conversation may be more valuable.

Xavier used to make a really fascinating point. He would say: "if Switzerland has five hundred postdocs in the Boston area working at different institutions, each of those cost on average a million francs to educate. That's half a billion francs of Swiss taxpayer money that's sitting in the Boston area. How do we create the return for Switzerland?"

In many ways, Swissnex was his answer to that question. It's not only a bridge between that pool of Swiss talent in the US and Switzerland, but also a platform for elevating that talent and creating a tangible return on investment for Switzerland.

"I hope there will be more inititatives like Swissnex."

Evelyn Lager, the first employee of Swissnex in Boston, talks about the early days at Swissnex in Boston, from her initial meeting with Xavier Comtesse to implementing the first few major projects at Swissnex.

Lager at the 15th anniversary celebration of Swissnex in Boston in 2015

Evelyn Lager was the first hire at Swissnex in Boston, back when it was still known as SHARE, the Swiss House for Advanced Research and Education. Lager helped translate Xavier Comtesse's vision for a Swiss science and technology hub in Boston into a reality. Twenty years later, she is Senior Director at Babson Executive Education. She looks back on those "fast and furious" first two years of Swissnex in Boston in this interview.

Swissnex in Boston: How did you first hear about Swissnex in Boston?

Evelyn Lager: It sounds very old fashioned right now, but I, along with all the Swiss citizens who lived in New England got a letter in the mail, informing us that this new "Swiss House" would open up. There really wasn't a lot of information in it, but it had Xavier Comtesse's email address in it.

I emailed him and got this one liner back saying, "here's my number, call me and we can talk." I called him, and what I thought would be a five-minute chat turned into a very intriguing thirty-minute conversation.

After that, Xavier said, "well, if you have this many questions, then we should meet." So I got on the subway, rode out to Cambridge and met with him. It was just very intriguing. It became very clear, very quickly, that this initiative had a big vision but that the building blocks were not yet there.

Was this when Swissnex already had the building at 420 Broadway?

No, this was before. Our meeting famously happened in the garden of Xavier's residence in Cambridge. He kept saying, "you know... Broadway, Broadway." But when I walked by on Broadway, I only saw this old, run-down building with a supermarket and a laundromat. When I told my friends about it, they said, "so this is the Swiss consulate? Are you sure this guy is for real? Have you fallen prey to some scam artist here?" It was really not how you would envision your first interaction with a diplomatic figure, let's put it that way.

Where did it go from that first meeting?

When I left the residence that day, Xavier said: "Well, this is great. I can't hire you right now, but I'll let you know when I hire you." And I said "Oh, but I wasn't interviewing." And he said, "Yeah, well, I was." That gave me sort of a

really good sense of what the rest of the days would look like.

After a few months, Xavier did call me and left a voicemail. It seemed they had worked through some of the kinks in the budget, and got the budget approved, because he left me a voicemail saying "well, I'm ready. Are you going to come or what?" So I became the first employee, and we started working out of Xavier's residence until the renovations of our building at 420 Broadway were finished.

What were you doing at the time?

I was working for an outplacement company and finishing my bachelor's degree part-time. I had three night classes a week and a job that essentially supported my studies. After I joined Swissnex, that dynamic changed quickly.

So at some point you move into the new building, and Swissnex starts to become operative. What were those days like?

Crazy, but invigorating. It was fast and furious in 1999 and 2000 — a bit like the wild west. When we opened, it was very much like an open startup. It was a community platform. As we got more and more attention in both Switzerland and the US, however, there was more of a spotlight on us, so we had to mature very quickly.

I remember that the Governor of Massachusetts came for the opening night.

His security detail came by to look at the premises beforehand and wanted to know in every little detail what the Governor was going to do. One of the things was to sign the guestbook, to which his security agents said the Governor did not touch any provided pens and would need to bring his own pen. It was just that level of detail, that at the time, nobody on our staff had gone through. We were a little bit like fish out of water, and so we had to do a lot of improvising and thinking on our feet. And it was a lot of fun.

Was there a lot of attention from the press?

Yes. Because the concept was so novel at that time, we got a huge amount of press. There were times where it seemed like we were exclusively organizing tours of the space for the press. One of my highlights would be running around with the Swiss TV crew. We even had a visit from the French Senate — that wasn't the press, but all these high level visits surprised us with how much attention we were garnering.

I think we got so much press attention because we were at the forefront of setting up something completely different and new, and it wasn't what people expected from the Swiss.

There were bigger European countries with more traditional consulates that couldn't believe we, the Swiss, were the ones to be on the cutting edge. I actually think there's a great entrepreneurial spirit in Switzerland.

Maybe it's because the country is smaller, there are a lot of opportunities to be at the forefront for similar initiatives like Swissnex. I hope there will be more initiatives like Swissnex that Switzerland is going to cook up.

What were some projects and activities you are proud to have worked on at Swissnex?

With the Gerbert Rüf foundation, we established a program called NETS, "New Entrepreneurs in Technology and Science," working with Swiss entrepreneurs, getting them acquainted with the US ecosystem. I was in charge of that. It was an incredible program that lasted for over 10 years, and parts of it live on through the Venture Leaders Program. Looking at the alumni of these programs, it's very rewarding to see how much impact that has had.

Another activity that sticks out to me was when I arranged a visit for diversity and inclusion officers from Swiss universities and academic institutions. At that time, there was a radical initiative by a few women faculty at MIT who wanted to become more data-driven in fighting for equal access for women at MIT.

They conducted a scientific study and ended up suing MIT on the basis of the findings of that study. So it was very interesting to arrange that trip for a Swiss constituency that was not quite that far along. It was important for them to see what was happening here and to discuss among themselves what would realistically work in the Swiss context.

You're now at Babson Executive Education. What was the impact that your time at Swissnex had on your career?

My first job at Babson was a new role and very undefined. It was to set up an institute that would build relationships and programs with European Partners, but there wasn't a grand plan to make it work.

My time at Swissnex prepared me really well to tackle this challenge — to see great ideas and opportunities, but to think critically about how to translate that into tangible outcomes. How were we going to go about capturing that value, and how were we going to anchor it in the existing ecosystem?

These days at Babson I'm working with companies to develop leadership capabilities, especially around entrepreneurial leadership and innovation. What's become clear is that there are always different stakeholders, different objectives, a different context, and different characteristics.

I think that's the story of Swissnex: work from experience, but keep an open mind, be flexible, and know how to take curveballs. The experience at Swissnex sharpened my attention to all stakeholders, it frequently turns out that they actually needed something completely different. Sometimes they know it, and sometimes they uncover it in open conversations.

"Something new and different could emerge"

Christoph von Arb, former Director of Swissnex in Boston/SHARE, recounts key moments in the organization's establishment and development.

Christoph von Arb leading a video call session between Cambridge and Switzerland in 2003

In a way, Christoph von Arb's Swissnex experience began in 1990, when he was first appointed as a Science & Technology Counselor to the Embassy of Switzerland in Washington, DC. After his time in Washington, von Arb served as the Head of International Affairs at SERI from 1995–2002, during which he helped expand the presence of Science and Technology Offices abroad and helped establish SHARE. In 2002, he moved from Switzerland to Boston to run SHARE/Swissnex in Boston as Director until 2008.

Swissnex in Boston: You spent some time as a Science & Technology Counselor in the United States and then oversaw a rapid expansion of the field from Bern. What was the motivation behind this expansion while you were Head of International Affairs at SERI?

Christoph von Arb: After I came back from Washington as a science counselor, I worked at the State Secretariat for Education,

Research and Innovation (SERI) under Charles Kleiber. My time in Washington had shown me that there was not a great enough emphasis on science and technology. I knew that had to change, because it was far too important for Switzerland to not include science and technology in our diplomatic work and relations. In 1995, when I returned to Bern, there were only three science counselors: one in Washington, one in Tokyo and one in Brussels. So my first approach was to expand the network of Swiss Science and Technology Offices in various embassies, which required a lot of goodwill from Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

Since there was never enough money for anything, we had to get creative to finance the expansion. For example, the ETH board sponsored the science counselor position in San Francisco, of which then Christian Simm was the first to receive that posting. He was at EPFL in those days, and then I hired him to go to San Francisco and he stayed there for a long time. After a few years, we had expanded

to about 15 science counselors across the world. It was a very important first step. After expanding the network of Science Counselors came something bold and new.

How did you contribute to the founding of SHARE and Swissnex?

After expanding the presence of science counselors in the late 90s, I knew we needed to do more. We wanted to have our own platform, our own consulate under the jurisdiction of SERI. It could be a place to not only foster high-level relationships, but also to broaden and widen the scope of our work to include a larger community, from students to professors, to executives in government and others. The idea was to bring these diverse groups of people together, sparks would fly, and perhaps something different and new could emerge from those gatherings.

At first, there was a significant amount of resistance, both from the diplomatic and university communities in Switzerland. It was seen as a waste of money that could otherwise go towards research. I pushed back, underscoring the enormous potential of such a platform. At the Federal level, I was able to secure the tentative support of the Federal Councillor, Ruth Dreifuss, but without any promise of funding. So we had to look elsewhere for the cash to support this venture.

With the help of my colleague Xavier Comtesse — who was my successor as science counselor in Washington — we negotiated a deal with Lombard Odier, the private bank in Geneva. They had recently celebrated their two hundred year anniversary and wanted to give back to Switzerland. They gave us a generous grant, but on the condition that the money would not be used for operational costs, and that the consulate would stay running for at least 10 years.

Fast forward to setting up this new initiative in Boston, what was the local reception of SHARE when you first established it?

As soon as we bought the property in Cambridge and began the process to establish SHARE/Swissnex, some of the neighbors immediately went to court against us. They didn't want a foreign consulate in their neighborhood, with people standing in the streets applying for their passports.

And so we had to fight them in court. That was the first roadblock before we could ever get anything accomplished. Fortunately, the mayor of Cambridge liked the idea of having a consulate in his city, and so he supported us. We made our case to the judge, and he ruled in our favor and allowed us to establish our location.

After the ruling, I thought maybe we could find a way that we could settle with those neighbors, because I wanted a good relationship with the community. So we settled and all seemed well. But on the day of the inauguration, after we had finished renovations and unveiled the transformed space, there was a demonstration on Broadway. People had banners saying, "Switzerland go home." When I saw the demonstrators outside, I went outside, offered them food and drink, and we were able to talk through things with them. I think things kind of calmed down after that.

While all of this was happening you were still in Bern at SERI. How did you then become Director of SHARE/Swissnex in Boston?

After our first Director, Xavier Comtesse, moved back to Switzerland, I decided to take on the role myself. This was a pilot project, and I wanted more Swiss Houses across the world. I knew that if it failed in Boston, we'd never have a chance again. I wanted to do everything I could to get this solid on the ground and get it airborne. And so on very short notice, my wife and I decided that we would sell our house in Switzerland and go move to Boston.

We understand that fundraising was a big part of your job when you arrived. What was the importance of public-private partnership for SHARE/Swissnex in Boston?

When I left for Boston, Charles Kleiber told me that we needed to raise money to keep the project running, and that Swissnex would need to be made possible by public-private partnership. So in my job description it stipulated that 50% of our expenses and expenditure would need to be raised from third parties. The federal government would fund 50% of our budget, which would basically pay the salaries of 3 people and some of the operations.

So I had to develop strong relationships with key individuals, institutions, companies, and even universities to keep Swissnex running. For me it was an opportunity to prove our success, because if clients liked our work, then they would support us financially. And over time that developed quite nicely. We got to more than half of what the running costs were.

What were some of the highlights of those partnerships?

Because of our government status, we did not position SHARE as a place to promote or advertise Swiss businesses. We offered SHARE as a place to conduct R&D, technology development, and take part in the innovations taking place in Boston. Some of the first partners that came on board were related to or were companies that had subsidiaries in the Boston area already. They were interested in taking advantage of the platform, the location, and hosting something.

One of the partnerships was with Lindt and Sprüngli, which was north of Boston in New Hampshire. When I asked them about getting chocolate — because we had a high need for chocolate at our events — they sent us a package with several thousand pieces of chocolate every so often. The FedEx delivery man couldn't believe it was all chocolate. It came in handy. The chocolate would disappear very quickly. People would come, and then you'd see them fill their pockets.

We had 30–40 private partners that would pay us for our work, including major Swiss universities. I would go to Switzerland five or six times a year just to see people, sit with them, and listen to what they wanted and what their interests were. That helped me understand where their needs were, and then try to embed them in the community in the Boston area.

What was your favorite part of working at Swissnex?

I really enjoyed the networking and interaction with people that happened there. It very quickly became a hub and a gathering place for Swiss professors and scientists in the area. Many of the topics and events that we organized were so fascinating and interesting, it really contributed to our success.

For me, it was a continuous education because I learned new things all the time, and never ceased to discover fascinating topics and trends people were working on. That was really what made this one of the most profound experiences in my entire career: that I had an opportunity to be there.

von Arb and the SHARE team in 2003

"We were seeding relationships that very often grew into successful partnerships"

Pascal Marmier, former CEO of Swissnex in Boston, on entrepreneurial beginnings and key partnerships.

Marmier at Swissnex China

When Pascal Marmier began working with Xavier Comtesse on what would become Swissnex in Boston, he didn't know it at the time, but it would be the start of a lifelong journey. Over the course of two decades, Marmier would serve as one of the first employees at SHARE, CEO of Swissnex in Boston, as well as CEO of Swissnex China. His Swissnex experience speaks to the possibilities that come from working at the world's first science consulate.

Marmier is now SVP of Strategy, Life, and Health at iptiQ by SwissRe, and is a member of the Swissnex Committee, which advises the State Secretary for Education, Research, and Innovation on strategic issues relating to the Swissnex Network. This is our conversation with him.

Swissnex in Boston: What is your Swissnex story and what different phases did you live through?

Pascal Marmier: Getting involved with Swissnex from the beginning was a life-changing experience. I grew up in Switzerland, went to law school, and thought that I would simply go back to work in Geneva or Lausanne after a year in the US. Then, my wife got a job here in Boston and wanted to stay a bit longer, so I had some time on my hands.

Right at about the same time, my grandmother sent me a little newspaper cutout in the mail that basically said that the Swiss government was opening a science consulate in Cambridge. So I called their number, thinking it was a big organization, and met Xavier Comtesse. To make the story short, he offered me a job, I joined the team, and off we went, hungry for success. It was all about building, trying, experimenting and creating what Swissnex is today. That was how phase one started.

My role was heading the innovation and entrepreneurship desk at the time. It took all kinds of efforts to try to create a business angle in Switzerland for folks who wanted to sponsor companies and wanted to come here. We started this tiny program, New Entrepreneurs in Technology and Science (NETS) which was financed by the Gebert Rüf Foundation, and the office wasn't even open yet. We were in Harvard Square, literally Xavier and I in front of a blank sheet of paper

calling a couple of Swiss people. So just a lot of entrepreneurial, startup-like mindset and activity. We continued with that mentality for a while until Christoph Von Arb took the helm.

Was that the beginning of phase two?

I think so. Coming from Bern, Christoph naturally came with more formal structure and processes to guide Swissnex and ensure stability. During that time, I was working on exploring the ecosystem and how to develop our network and community in Boston and Cambridge. Thinking about how to work with MIT, the Mass High Tech Council, and others. There was a real focus on being a community organization. We tried to create events and activities with whomever we could. Sometimes we would have high-level visits with government officials. We became pretty good friends with a lot of the Cambridge officials for example, and slowly transitioned to becoming more traditional in a sense about our structure and presence.

How did you become CEO of Swissnex in Boston?

I was navigating through different things. I was working the innovation desk and I decided that I wanted to explore MIT. So I got the blessing of the State Secretary, who said, "Hey, why don't you do a bit of education, we'll help you out with a tiny stipend," and I obviously went for it. This was the launch towards getting access to the CEO job at the time. I actually didn't think it was possible, but State Secretary

Charles Kleiber appointed me as CEO before he retired. As CEO, I don't think I dramatically changed the model, but rather went about consolidating academic partnerships, recruiting a strong team, and beginning to look more into offering services.

What was the reception like at Swiss universities?

I think Patrick Aebischer, the President of EPFL, was one of the first people to come here and be wowed about what we were trying to build. We needed people like him—ambassadors for Swissnex to bring our voice back to Switzerland. An iconic example I like to share is one of a complete 180 turn. At the time of our founding, universities in the Deutschschweiz (the German-speaking region of Switzerland) saw us through the lens of what is called the Röstigraben, which refers to the divide between the French and German speaking parts of Switzerland. They felt that our activity at the start was not fully reaching the German speaking part. There were even articles in the press that criticized us and called into question the legitimacy of the "Swiss" aspect of our mission, as they felt that we were only interested in serving the interests of Suisse Romande (the French-speaking region of Switzerland).

But interestingly enough, some of the same skeptics on the German side eventually changed their minds. The reason for it was that they couldn't find value in something they didn't understand. Swissnex was a completely novel creature of an entrepreneurial nature. This image of us lingered until professors at Harvard and MIT would come to Swissnex and be blown away by what the Swiss government had done. The element of surprise was tangible when people realized that a small, quiet country like Switzerland was able to build something like this. They were ecstatic to come over, meet interesting people, experience great content, and get a feel of Switzerland. These professors would go back to their friends at Swiss universities and say, "wait how come you never mentioned this

place? It's right next door to us!" That was when we reached a turning point with the Swiss universities. They ended up becoming the core of Swissnex's support network.

How did the Venture Leaders program start, and what was your and Swissnex's role in its creation?

Early on at Swissnex, I started getting into technology transfer. It was really something on the rise at that time, especially in the Greater Boston area. The first real position I had after having been an intern and entrepreneur was sponsored by the Swiss network of innovation, which paid me to study developments in technology transfer.

Within this context, we realized that one of the key elements of technology transfer was entrepreneurship. We had to ask ourselves, "how do we take science leaders and transform them into technology leaders who will then create startups and spin-offs?" The answer was the aforementioned NETS program, which later evolved into the Venture Leaders program that still exists today. It was a smart use of money, and we didn't have much trouble finding partners.

Any big milestones for you as CEO?

There are many that come to mind. The 10 year anniversary was a lot of fun. My wife even got involved in the planning. It was a massive undertaking. EHL, the hospitality School of Lausanne came for a whole week, and it was the first official visit of the former federal Federal Counselor, Didier Burkhalter. So that was great. Another milestone was certainly when we celebrated the second floor addition. We had Al Gore come to speak at the ceremony and brought in many interesting people on the Swiss side.

Another special moment was right before I left for China. We started working with the Universities of Applied Sciences, who were underrepresented internationally in the Swiss education system. Although it wasn't

Marmier speaking at a Swissnex's annual "Back to School" event in 2010

vocational by design, it certainly wasn't supposed to be international, but yet there was a group of nurses, physical therapists dancing in the middle of Swissnex residence because my son, who at the time was probably five or six, decided that he wanted to plug in his iPod and DJ during their visit. It was unforgettable moments like this that stick out to me. You couldn't have planned or engineered it even if you wanted to.

What are you most proud of in your time at Swissnex?

What always stood out to me was the quality of the exchanges and the relationships I developed at Swissnex. When you have some of the brightest entrepreneurs, artists, and academics from the US and Switzerland coming through your doors, great things are bound to happen. In a way, we were seeding relationships that very often grew into successful partnerships. That being said, for

me the metric number one was always within the team: "did we create a team that goes on to do great things and use their time at Swissnex as an experience to kind of grow and develop?" To me, the answer is a resounding yes. Without fail, spending time at Swissnex changed the mindset and sometimes even the career trajectory of many people.

So really, my proudest achievement was having had the chance to work so closely with so many amazing interns, colleagues, and leaders. It's been so nice to see the growth of that community throughout the years. Collectively, I know that Swissnex had an impact on all of us. I'm confident that will continue for the next 20 years and beyond.

"A two-way exchange for innovative ideas between Switzerland and the US."

Felix Moesner, former CEO of Swissnex in Boston and current CEO of Swissnex China talks expansion, acceleration, and key partnerships.

Moesner speaking with Ban Ki Moon at an ICRC launch event in 2017

Felix Moesner has had an array of professional experiences. Before starting his Swissnex journey, he worked in top-tier academia, at a startup, and one of the largest financial institutions in the world, to name just a few of his endeavors.

Moesner eventually made his way to the Swiss Embassy in Tokyo, where he established and ran Japan's first Swiss Science & Technology Office. Nine years later, he came to Cambridge to become the fourth CEO of Swissnex in Boston. During his tenure, Moesner rapidly expanded Swissnex's presence and accelerated partnerships in both Switzerland and Boston.

Today, Moesner lives in Shanghai where he is the CEO of Swissnex China. We had a chance to chat with him and hear about the Swissnex journey that has taken him across the globe.

Swissnex in Boston: What you were doing before joining Swissnex in Boston?

Felix Moesner: It's been quite the journey because science is at my heart. I was in academia in the robotics' field, but shifted to the private sector for a couple of years after my postdoc at ETH Zurich, working for a startup and then several blue chip companies. I had been running the IT department of Credit Suisse Life Japan, when I saw there was an opening as Science Counselor at the Swiss Embassy in Tokyo.

I was ready for a change back to my curiosity-driven roots and so I seized the opportunity. One of my first accomplishments in Tokyo was launching the Science and Technology Office. I stayed at that job for nine years, very closely linked on the science side with the government, but also experimenting with new formats.

How did you wind up going from Tokyo to Boston?

I saw what Swissnex was doing in Boston and SF and found it really cool. Unfortunately though, there was no Swissnex in Japan, but there was an opening in Boston. Mauro Moruzzi, the head of the Swissnex network, called me and said, "How about Boston?" I naturally jumped at the opportunity. For me, Boston was kind of a dream destination, because it's full of science and home to some of the brightest minds in science, innovation, and academia.

Within a 90 minute drive, you have 200–300 colleges, universities, and research institutions. It's simply a hotspot. And of course New England is an extremely charming part of the United States. When I arrived it almost looked like a part of Europe, in a way. What fascinated me the most, however, were the people. They were very open, but also serious. It's a very unique corner of the United States.

What were the priorities that you tried to set in your time and the opportunities that you tried to go after?

At the most basic level, it was simply creating a lasting impact for Switzerland in Boston. This was actually my main task: to raise the visibility to the max. When I came to the team, I often said that staff members were one of the most important resources we had. Each person fit their position incredibly well, and there was a huge diversity of skills within the staff. The only thing I needed to do was say, "the sky's the limit."

We ramped things up, expanding the team, increasing the number of events and delegations, and we even remodeled the office space. I really tried to make the office as efficient as possible, while maintaining good communication amongst the staff. After having laid the groundwork for success, we were then ready to achieve a few goals.

Are there any milestones and key moments that stand out to you?

One was organizing the first-ever Swiss-US Energy Innovation Day in 2014. It was the beginning of a very nice series that is still going strong on both sides of the Atlantic. That year, we were extremely lucky to have Federal Councillor and Energy Minister Doris Leuthard visit with a very large delegation. While she visited, we also took the opportunity to introduce her to MassChallenge, which she liked so much that she wanted a MassChallenge location in Switzerland. Today, there is a thriving MassChallenge location in Lausanne, and I think that was a big achievement for Swissnex, because we wanted to create a two-way exchange for innovative ideas between Switzerland and the US.

Were there any university partnerships that Swissnex facilitated?

The MIT-ETH partnership is the first that comes to mind. It was a much easier sell because MIT already considered ETH and EPFL as its peers. When we began focusing on the energy sector, it gave MIT and ETH an excuse to begin working together. MIT was very clear that ETH could bring a lot to the table to proceed with this agreement. Of course there were many discussions, but I think from the beginning there was a mutual understanding that collaboration should happen. I think the solidifying moment came when Doris Leuthard gave a speech at MIT about the activities in the fields of energy and energy innovation. It really set the mood for that partnership.

Another big initiative under your tenure was the establishment of the Swissnex in New York office. How did that come to fruition?

We established the New York office in 2013, and I'm really glad we did. We began to notice a large amount of demand for Swissnex programming in New York, so we first tested the waters with startups. We sent out a questionnaire to two hundred Swiss startups that had come to our office in Boston, asking if they thought it would be useful to do programs in New York. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. It really was the right place to be. It is the financial epicenter of the United States, number 2 for venture capital, and home to more than one hundred universities.

It was obvious that if we could create opportunities for startups and universities there, it could only succeed. As such, our first two major activities in New York were the Innosuisse startup camp and supporting Swiss universities. When we were planning the opening, Susan Kish, who at that time was Head of Cross Platform Initiatives at Bloomberg told me, "if you start in New York, you have to set the tone at the right level." So it only made sense to celebrate the opening of the New York office in the headquarters of Bloomberg, with high visibility and a lot of momentum.

What are some of the memorable projects or activities that you remember most fondly?

One that is really close to my heart is the founding of the Science & Technology Diplomatic Circle (S&TDC) of Boston. I have to say it was kind of an experiment, because I wasn't sure if there would be enough diplomatic staff dedicated to science in the Boston area. The diplomatic circle started small, but it quickly expanded to include more than 50 diplomatic missions. I think it's something that really improved our relationship with the diplomatic community in Boston and generally contributed to our positive reputation in the region. Governor Baker actually gave

Swissnex a letter of commendation for our work in forming the diplomatic circle. That meant a lot to me. Meanwhile, new S&TDC's were set up in Shanghai, Singapore and New York, all following the Boston pattern.

Another was when we helped launch the ICRC Collaborative Platform in 2017. UN Secretary General emeritus Ban Ki Moon actually came and gave the keynote address at the launch event at Novartis. He was doing research at Harvard at that time, and we reached out to him to see if he would be interested in the platform. He immediately accepted. From the start, he was very passionate about supporting this initiative. The project as a whole was a great way to foster collaboration and exchange with people in Geneva. It was a perfect example of us connecting the dots.

What made Boston so special for partners and stakeholders back in Switzerland?

Well, geographically it's a no-brainer. Boston is the closest place in the US which you can reach from Switzerland. Luckily, it's also one of the most innovative places. That's why I think it's obvious that you have frequent and repeat visitors coming to Boston and Swissnex. There's a lot of value in this region and stakeholders want to be connected to it.

Take university alumni for example. We launched something like 12 alumni chapters and maintained them as much as possible. I think there's a lot of joy and warmth in these groups and I think that definitely radiates back to Switzerland. We always wanted to welcome visitors from Swiss universities, startups and organizations and make them feel at home in Boston.

"The only constant at Swissnex is change"

Christian Simm, founder of Swissnex San Francisco and former CEO of Swissnex in Boston, talks about his 20 years at Swissnex and how it changed the way he sees Switzerland.

Simm at the Boston Museum of Science during Swissnex in Boston's "Swiss Touch in Space" event in 2019.

In 1997, Christian Simm became the first Science and Technology Counselor (STC) in San Francisco, at the height of the tech boom in Silicon Valley. In 2003, he founded Swissnex San Francisco, and stayed on as its CEO until 2017, when he moved to the East Coast to take the helm of Swissnex in Boston. This year, after dedicating 20 years to Swissnex, Simm moved back to Switzerland to head the University of Zurich's International Relations Office. We sat down with him to reflect on those years.

Swissnex in Boston: Let's start at the beginning. How did you get started as a Science and Technology Counselor for Switzerland in San Francisco?

Christian Simm: It was an interesting moment in time in the mid-nineties. The first internet browser had become available a few years earlier, and all of a sudden Silicon Valley was exploding with activity. In Switzerland, it quickly became clear that if you were young

and you had a computer science degree, the best thing to do was to go live and work in Silicon Valley. As a result, the concept of "brain-drain" was starting to become a big discussion in Switzerland. People wanted to find out how we could take advantage of this tech boom in the US and link it back to Switzerland. That's why, under the leadership of State Secretary Charles Kleiber — who was very much a visionary person — Switzerland created the Science and Technology Counselor position in San Francisco. It was actually the first STC position outside a capital city.

At that time, I was running the Industrial Liaison Office at EPFL and had connections in many different sectors and organizations in Switzerland and in Europe which proved to be very useful in the US. So when the new STC position in Silicon Valley was advertised, I jumped at the opportunity. I think it might have been the coolest and the most exciting job description I ever had, because it was completely open. So that's how I ended up as the first STC in San Francisco.

How did you develop the concept of Swissnex after you started as the STC in San Francisco?

After starting in San Francisco in 1997, I quickly discovered that the US is a very transactional society, and that collaboration would be crucial to properly position Switzerland there. And we had to do it differently from the others to even be noticed. At that time, all the new digital tools had many people dreaming about working remotely and doing everything virtually. I saw it as an opportunity to take the opposite approach of creating a physical place for the exchange of ideas that would be open to the public and could quickly adapt to stay on the cutting edge of science diplomacy.

This concept struck a chord with many people and organizations, a number of which ended up becoming invaluable supporters of Swissnex. So in 2003, with the generous support of key sponsors and the tireless efforts
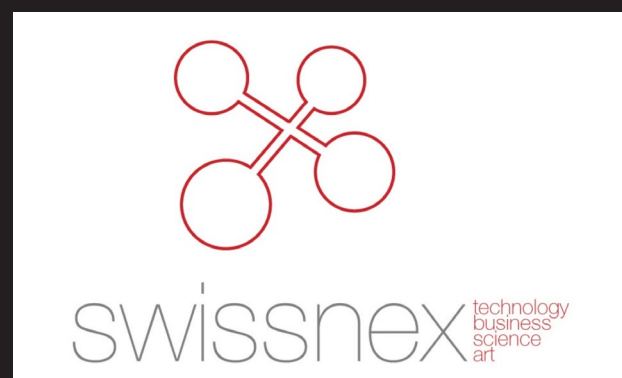
of many, I was able to open the Swissnex office in downtown San Francisco and it was a hit. In 2016, we marked another milestone by reinventing Swissnex SF and moving our location to an innovative and experimental space on Pier 17, along with the Consulate General of Switzerland, the Swiss Business Hub and Switzerland Tourism.

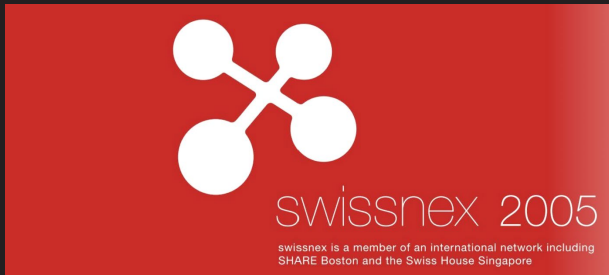### Who were some of the key sponsors in the early days in SF?

There were several: EPFL, the Y. & I. Oltramare Foundation, various companies and individuals offering time and consulting. Another founding sponsor was SwissRe, the big Swiss insurance company. They had booming activities in San Francisco and were leading the efforts to link the cities of Zurich and San Francisco as sister cities. We bundled all these energies and ideas. The city partnership was inaugurated the day before Swissnex, a symbol of how Swissnex would bridge higher education with innovation, science with art, and technology with public diplomacy.

What was the process of developing the brand identity and design for Swissnex like?
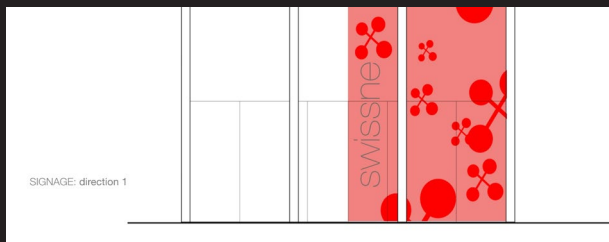
I was able to create the name, logo, and branding identity with the invaluable help of two key figures: David Placek, founder of Lexicon Branding, and Yves Béhar, founder of fuseproject. David came up with the name and branding and Yves came up with the design. David's intention was to find words that defined us well, but general enough to allow

Early version of the Swissnex logo

swissnex 2005

swissnex is a member of an international network including
SHARE Boston and the Swiss House Singapore

Back cover of Swissnex's annual report in 2005

concept for the Swissnex office in SF

ENVIRONMENT: direction 1

concept sketches by Béhar for inside Swissnex SF
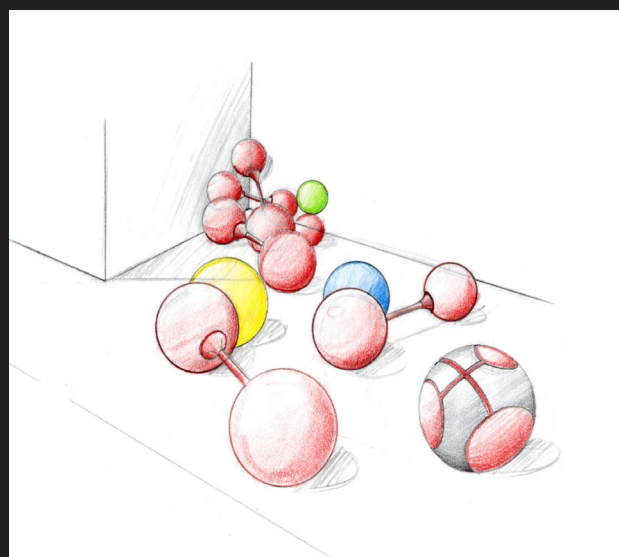
for different interpretations. He knew that the word "Swiss" had to be in the name because this initiative was clearly coming from Switzerland. But our name also needed to imply connections and links with the rest of the world, so David took "nex," from the word nexus, which means central link or connection. Thus, we landed on "Swissnex," and it stuck.

For the design, Yves wanted something that was light, joyful and mobile. In one of his first proposals he used the metaphor of soap bubbles. While that wasn't the final concept, he did stick with spheres, because as he said it was the only geometrical object that you can connect to without any preference from any side. He then added crossbars between the dots, and that's where our slogan "connecting the dots" came from. An added bonus was that the Swiss cross was subtly contained within those crossbars, because back then it was actually a white logo on a red background.

How did the branding of Swissnex make its way to Boston and the rest?

In around 2007 or 2008, we had SHARE, the Swiss House of Advanced Research and Education in Boston, just "Swissnex" in San Francisco, and the Swiss House in Singapore. Charles Kleiber saw three separate

organizations with similar objectives, and thus the opportunity for unifying our branding and identity and creating a network. We all agreed, and then he created a working group which determined that instead of reinventing the wheel with the new branding, we should build on the work already done by professionals like Yves and David. So the branding was slightly modified to a red logo with the Swiss cross in it, and now a location in the Swissnex name.

What was the transition from Swissnex in SF to Boston like?

When I took over as CEO of Swissnex in Boston in 2017, the Swissnex network had grown and matured, while the world was

changing at an increasing pace. By being small and agile, nimble and very creative, Swissnex had always succeeded in staying ahead of the game and providing meaningful contributions to society. At the same time the techno-optimism of the early 2000 was giving way to techno-skepticism if not techno-pessimism.

Very early on, as it is expected from an organization believing that the future is already here, the Swissnex network cared about the societal impact of technologies and the way we consume them, and continuously adapted its services. The only constant at Swissnex is change, and the fact that we work with so many amazing people all around the world. That's what I love about Swissnex, and that's why I stayed for so long.

What were some highlights of your time in Boston?

It was another "adventure", another discovery for me. For instance, a city with a unique concentration of universities and research brainpower. A region in which long and in-depth conversations are more frequent compared to Silicon Valley and its sense of permanent urgency. A strong relationship with state and local governments, and with the representatives of other countries engaging in science diplomacy. The East Coast seasons and their wide range of temperatures. The proximity of New York — where Swissnex in Boston has an office — and its completely different and very vibrant ecosystem. The activities we did all along the East Coast, from Montréal to DC to the South.

What do you value the most about Swissnex?

We truly lived sayings like "Shoot for the moon, because if you miss it, you will reach the stars" or "ask for forgiveness not for permission" or "it is easier to do the impossible because there is less competition." This attracted out-of-the-box thinkers and doers into the team and all around us, people with passion, favoring the mentality of "Why not?"

instead of "Why?" in pursuit of our ambitious mission to create impact. This Swissnex spirit created and continues to create a huge community of colleagues, clients, friends, partners, supporters all around the world: a wonderful and amazing human experience.

20 years later — how do you see the impact of Swissnex on Switzerland as a whole?

Swissnex is often described as a "foresighter," a connector or a facilitator. Some say we are curators of immersive experiences, guides in co-creation processes or stage directors. In fact, it is all that and more. Hence why I like to use metaphors.

Before digital photography, images were captured on film. The film then had to be chemically developed in a darkroom before being projected very subtly on photosensitive paper that, in turn, needed to go through a revelator bath. It was a lengthy and somewhat "magical" process requiring deep know-how and creativity.

Swissnex is like a modern version of that. With a very specific photographic eye we aim our lenses at faint signals from the future which, taken individually and just by themselves, might be hard to read and to interpret. That is when co-creation with our partners and clients starts in the darkroom. By adding to the revealing bath context and content, creativity and a diversity of perspectives, images emerge from the empty photosensitive paper. Through dialogues with multiple parties these images are then sharpened and become not only guides to better apprehend the future, they show opportunities to act and create impact.

"We call Swissnex our base camp. It was really the foundation of it all."

Jordi Montserrat of Venturelab talks about the value of having Swissnex as a base camp for their Venture Leaders program.

For the past 20 years, Jordi Montserrat has been active in the vibrant Swiss high-tech scene, contributing to the development of innovative businesses and stimulating the Swiss start-up ecosystem.

In 2004, Montserrat co-founded Venturelab, which supports Swiss entrepreneurs and startups on their path to build successful ventures. One of their flagship programs, Venture Leaders, started with a two-week trip organized and hosted by Swissnex in Boston.

The program has expanded globally via the Swissnex Network, bringing Swiss entrepreneurs to global business hotspots like Boston, San Francisco, New York, Barcelona, and Shanghai. Jordi tells us how the Venture Leaders program first got started, and how Swissnex in Boston became the foundation for it all.

Montserrat and a Venture Leaders cohort in New York

Swissnex in Boston: how did Venture Leaders begin, and how did you begin working with Swissnex?

Jordi Montserrat: Swissnex originally had a program in 2000 called New Entrepreneurs in Technology and Science (NETS), which was supported by the Gebert Rüf Foundation. It was basically organized as a contact point to illustrate the type of value and content that Swissnex could bring and could deliver.

I only came in contact with the NETS program because I was actually invited in 2002 to interact with them as an entrepreneur in Switzerland. That's how I got in contact with Swissnex in Boston. In the very early years, I think it was a good illustration of the up-and-coming concept of science and technology diplomacy. At that time, embassies had started to have science counselors and technology officers but Swissnex was still pushing it one step further.

In Switzerland, Venturelab was launched in 2004. We sprung out as a national entrepreneurship training program deployed in Switzerland in a broad-based fashion.

There was a big educational aspect in entrepreneurship, but a lot of it was about changing the mindset.

There were a lot of investors and business dimensions, which were brought into these types of programs. The idea was of course to leverage what had been established as a foundation in Switzerland. So that's how, in 2006, Venture Leaders was born.

What made Venture Leaders different and innovative?

What was new is that we made it a nationwide competition, creating the "Swiss startup national team." The Swiss soccer team was participating to the World Cup in the US, and we were there with the Swiss startup team. The goal was to create a very competitive process to select and expose the best participants.

Originally, Venture Leaders kept the foundations from NETS of taking 20 entrepreneurs to the US to strengthen them through an early exposure to an executive education.

The main goal of going to the US is of course for startups to gain contacts and exposure to the ecosystem and build the "think big" mindset, because investment was not so strong in Switzerland. In 2007 we started to launch related programs like Venture Kick and other support mechanisms. I think the key philosophy for us has always been that when you want to have a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem, entrepreneurs lay at the core.

From the chicken to the egg and everything in between, you need entrepreneurs. If you don't have entrepreneurs, you have nothing to finance, there aren't people transforming and creating value for investors. Investors need entrepreneurs, and that's a strong ecosystem.

What role did Swissnex play in the development of Venture Leaders?

When the program was born, Swissnex was the foundation, it was the key partner that really organized the program. The program was originally supported by the Gerbert Rüf Stiftung, and then by the Swiss government through the Swiss Commission for Technology and Innovation (CTI), now Innosuisse. When that support stopped after a few years, we managed to move to a fully private sponsoring base with a lot of support from Swissnex in Boston and China. It wouldn't have been possible to build such a program without Swissnex. The network and individual locations were really crucial in helping us on that front.

We learned to rely heavily on the credibility of Swissnex and its network — particularly in Boston, where the network and presence is really strong. It was really the foundation of it all. We called Swissnex our base camp. When we came to Boston, I literally had pin on Google Maps where the Swissnex office was labeled as "base camp." It was really our home base as entrepreneurs.

Having Swissnex as a local partner allowed the entrepreneurs to tap into the network and participate in all the programs in the different hubs. Startups in the program could also then connect to a broader network of Swissnex locations around the world to continue their expansion.

How has the program evolved since it began?

We constantly had discussions around the strengths of this program: what was bringing the most value to the entrepreneurs? It's about putting a team together, which is essential in creating this strong link between entrepreneurs. It's about exposing them to a new ecosystem, expanding their skills and mindset, and helping them get the right business connections.

Now long term, I think the biggest value-added of the program is the lifelong link that is created within that team. They will tell you that the experiences and memories they make at Venture Leaders are moments they will cherish forever. It's a great time.

During those two weeks, the teams create this unique bond that is hard to recreate in the real business world. It's almost like entrepreneurial friends. The latest batch that went to Boston in 2019 actually organized a team lunch a few months ago by themselves to have the opportunity to meet again.

In Switzerland, the ecosystem was evolving, education as a whole was strengthening. So we decided to decrease the size of the educational component over time, and strengthened the business and investment component. We then expanded to the West Coast to better fit the needs of startups applying.

We saw that with the strengthening of the startups' quality and maturity, there was the need to have smaller, more specialized teams based on sector. That helped better organize investors' visits. We decided to split the groups, with Technology going to San Francisco, Fintech going to New York, and Life Science staying in Boston. Then in 2013, we opened a China trip.

Montserrat and a Venture Leaders cohort at the Swissnex Global Pitchfest in Boston in 2016

Were there key figures from Swissnex in the development of Venture Leaders?

For years, we worked with Pascal Marmier. One of the big strengths of the network was when Pascal went to China. That really triggered the implementation of the Venture Leaders program in China. Being a more complex market, we had more mature teams and different topics, such as Cleantech, materials or Medtech. And that's how the platform evolved.

Today we have five teams. Mobile in Barcelona, Life Science in Boston, one Fintech in New York and one Fintech in Hong Kong, and Technology in San Francisco. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, there was no 2020 trip except for the Barcelona program in February. But we've done some very nice online events.

Are there any other "Swissnex moments" over the years that stand out to you?

There are so many. Lunches with Felix Moesner at the Residence, VIP events with Pascal and Felix where we met incredible people, and so much more. We got to meet some really high-level investors where one visit gives you a very strong feeling of the environment.

There was also the visit from Joe von Rickenbach, the founder of Parexel, a company valued at almost $5 billion. For the teams and myself, meeting somebody who built a company from scratch and growing it to more than 20,000 employees is definitely something that you don't get to do every day.

One thing that has to be emphasized was the events and how extremely nice they were. They harnessed this incredible spirit that you're able to share one another. It's a simple moment, but one of my favorite highlights was being on the terrace of the Irving House B&B in Cambridge, seeing participants very intensely discussing their businesses. I was witness to discussions in which some of the entrepreneurs literally reshaped their businesses during that week.

Thank you to all of our interviewees for their time and dedication to Swissnex throughout these years. There are countless others not featured in this collection who also have contributed a great deal to Swissnex over the past 20 years. We thank them as well.

Benjamin Bollmann
CEO of Swissnex in Boston

Interviews	Benjamin Bollmann
	Jonas Brunschwig
	Alexandra Alteio
	Anour Esa
Transcriptions	Anour Esa
	James Moore
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Proofreading	Johanna Lemon
Design	Anour Esa