

THE PALAIS DE LOMÉ
Reinventing Natural and Cultural
Heritage to Celebrate Togolese and
African Creative Talents

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Once a symbol of power, abandoned for twenty years, the former Governors' Palace and its adjoining park have been restored and transformed to become the Palais de Lomé. The project is a bold affirmation of forward-looking Togolese identity within a venue that is steeped in colonial history. Today the former colonial building has been transformed, severing ties with its exclusionary administrative past to present the best of Togolese and African creativity to the public.

The Palais came to existence through German Governor August Köhler's wish to make the new colonial capital visible from the sea. It was built over the course of seven years, from 1898 to 1905, under the direction of engineer Ferdinand Furtkamp. It was a symbol of power and prosperity of the German colony. The building first served as the German, and later French governors' residence. After decolonization, it became the seat of the Togolese Presidency until 1970. From 1976 to 1991, it became a residence for the diplomatic guests of the Republic of Togo, then the residence of the Prime Minister in October 1991. But over the course of the last two decades, the building was abandoned and deteriorated significantly. Since 2019, for the first time in its history, the previously forbidden seat of power has been made accessible to Togolese and foreign visitors after two decades of neglect.

The pillars of Palais de Lomé's mission are: to promote culture, whether artistic, culinary, scientific, or technical; to preserve a historical heritage; to share the richness of the exceptional natural environment in the heart of the capital; to be part of the education of future generations; and to participate in the development of Togo's economy and tourism

sector. Palais de Lomé offers exhibitions, live shows (dance, music, theatre, storytelling, puppets, circus), inviting artists from across Africa and its diasporas. Local communities are included in the programme of Palais de Lomé, which provide a channel for craftsmanship and local knowledge to manifest in the creation of our exhibitions and activities.

Celebrating the past while anchoring it in the contemporary present, the inaugural *Togo of the Kings* exhibition in 2019, for instance, was co-created with the local chieftancies and kingdoms. Most of the artefacts exhibited had never before left their original territories. Their current owners gave special permission for the artefacts to be displayed in public in the interest of sharing national heritage with a broad audience. The Palais team used non-conventional (at least, in comparison to Western museums) methods to exhibit some of the objects. For example, the Nassiet daml, a spiritual protection and power attribute of the customary chief of Djanguenan in northern Togo, was exceptionally loaned for the exhibition. This object was sent back to its community for certain ritual ceremonies for fifteen days, and then brought back to the Palais for the remainder of the exhibition.

The Palais has also consolidated its local roots: thanks to an intergenerational approach, the local audience is made up of young adults (mostly between the ages of 20 and 35) and of elderly people as well. We encourage exchange and dialogue across generations. Once, a young woman visiting the Palais de Lomé came across a picture of her grandmother, back in the sixties. She returned with her grandmother to visit the exhibition, where, in front of the picture, the grandmother told captivating stories about her youth and that era.

The park around the Palais is the only urban park in coastal West Africa located in the city centre, on the seafront. Palais staff are working to bring the park's wealth of flora and fauna to a wider public, notably through workshops, and are strengthening links with the university, particularly in

the fields of botany and entomology. For example, the park is home to the hives of stingless bees, a species endemic to Africa and South America but little known to the Togolese public. Also on offer are introductory sessions in the traditional use of plants (medicine, dyeing, soaps). Ornithological walks through the park are an opportunity to admire many species of birds—forty one have been counted to date by ornithologists.

In keeping with our mission to educate children about art and biodiversity, we welcome thousands of pupils. Free access for public schools, and the fact that the Palais pays for their transport, enables us to reduce access barriers. This collaboration has been met with support, and even enthusiasm, from teachers who have been able to broaden their pupils' knowledge of issues that are often marginal in the school curriculum, namely art education and the discovery of biodiversity.