

Annexe 1 - 29th of April 2025

Manifesta 16 Ruhr Conceptual Framework

By: Hedwig Fijen, Director Manifesta 16 Ruhr

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT¹

In the aftermath of the Second World War, architects in the Ruhr Area faced challenges beyond the physical devastation caused by the war. Alongside the destruction of many cities, there was a profound moral reckoning in Germany. The desire to rebuild a new society, with a growing population and expanding urban centres, drove a nationwide effort for social renewal. Architecture played a central role in shaping this new vision, symbolising both the democratic and avant-garde ideals of the newly founded Federal Republic of Germany.

In this context, architecture had a political agenda, focused on redefining the relationship between citizens and the state. The architecture of the post-war era was intended to foster a starting democratic society, with the newly built cities serving as expressions of local self-government. Notable international architects, including Alvar Aalto (FI), Arne Jacobsen (DK) and Jacob Bakema (NL), as well as renowned German architects like Rudolf Schwarz, Gottfried Böhm and Hans Scharoun, shared a common goal: to avoid monumentalism, symmetry and symbols of power. Instead, they emphasized transparency, community and modern materials like concrete, glass, and stone, reflecting the modernist ideals of the 1920s. This approach extended to public buildings—city

halls, swimming pools, housing projects—and churches.

From a historical point of view, the Ruhr Area was one of the most important East-West corridors in Europe due to its central continental location and held this transitory function for thousands of years.² In the past two centuries the Ruhr Area has been heavily associated with coal and steel. However, with the decline of mining since the 1950s, the stereotypical images have become part of the region's past. Similarly, post-war churches underwent rapid transformation as part of a broader societal renewal, responding to the need for healing and rebuilding in the wake of the Second World War. Traditional 19th-century neo-style church architecture gave way to rational, modern designs that emphasized community and innovation through space, decoration and materials. Approximately 43% of the existing churches in North Rhine-Westphalia were built after 1945, many in the destroyed city centres or new residential areas.

MANIFESTA 16 RUHR'S FOCUS

Manifesta 16 Ruhr, in 2026, will focus on the architectural and social renewal that occurred in the post-war era of the Ruhr Area, a time marked by the construction of modernist churches to address the urgent need for reconstruction

and rapid population growth. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) redefined the role of the Catholic Church, emphasizing a more democratic relationship with the congregation. Moreover the churches became a symbol for democracy during this period and were an example of citizen involvement as they were built with the physical manpower of the neighbourhood. This shift led to architectural changes, with altar rooms lowered to priest level and seating arranged to bring the community closer together, while still maintaining sacred elements like stained glass windows and high ceilings. Similarly, Protestant churches dismantled the separation between sacred and secular spaces, focusing on accessibility and community-building, creating multi-purpose spaces for schools, gardens and worship. Although many post-war churches left a significant architectural legacy, the decline in church attendance over the past 30 years has led to many of these structures being abandoned or underused. The fate of these churches—whether to be demolished, repurposed, or left to decay—requires urgent attention.

Manifesta 16 Ruhr investigates, in its pre-biennial research phase, how the abandoned houses of worship in the different neighbourhoods can be transformed into communal centres for artistic and social practices. Historically, churches and other religious buildings have not only served spiritual purposes, but also acted as civic spaces — sites of gathering, exchange, and support within communities. From a civic and urban perspective, the church inherits the function of a public space from Roman basilicas and the Agora, which were centres of community

life. Drawing on this legacy, the Manifesta 16 Ruhr collaborative process seeks to explore the potential of these vacant neighbourhood axis points as spaces for social cohesion, interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue. As a result of the current global political climate of polarisation and the rise of nationalism, Manifesta 16 is investigating how culture can help create alternative models to bring together diverse communities and to create programmes that cherish and highlight common perspectives within the multicultural society of the Ruhr Area. Vacant churches, having lost their religious function, now stand as modest icons of post-war modernist and brutalist architecture. As art historian Prof. Barbara Welzel, Professor of Art History within the Department of Art and Cultural Education at TU Dortmund University and specialist on this subject says³, half of Germany's 40,000 churches will become abandoned within the next ten years and that this shift threatens to erase a fundamental part of European cultural heritage. Working within non-functioning or abandoned houses of worship in the Ruhr Area, Manifesta 16 will attempt to reimagine these neighbourhood spaces together with artists, community organisers, and interdisciplinary professionals, exploring new sustainable potentials that respond to the needs of local communities.

The biennial will open a dialogue on how to redefine these churches in a way that addresses societal needs for connection, social cohesion, and spiritual reflection, while rethinking their roles in a rapidly changing urban landscape. As Professor Barbara Welzel argues, churches have never been solely religious spaces—they have historically served as public venues for social, educational, healing and cultural activities.

Churches should not only be understood in isolation but in their relation to other cultural, symbolic heritage, as well as religious, social and welfare institutions. Manifesta 16 Ruhr would like to explore how churches could become beacons for democracy within their neighbourhoods once again. Crucial for the public perception and political fruitfulness of the project will be a differentiated and extensive dialogue and collaboration with local actors and mediators from other religious communities, secular stakeholders and cultural initiatives, made by bridgebuilders who will have the trust of the communities.

Manifesta 16 Ruhr's appointed First Creative Mediator, Josep Bohigas, is conducting holistic urban research on the relationship between houses of worship and their surroundings, focusing on their proximity and the socio-spatial fragility of the adjacent neighbourhoods. His work aims to develop new perspectives on revitalising and regenerating these areas, positioning churches as central cultural catalysts. The Manifesta 16 Urban Vision is expected to be presented in June 2025.

At this early stage of the pre-biennial research process, it is pivotal to emphasize and recognise the historical relevance and the complex interplay of the houses of worship. Through the pre-biennial research process—including Manifesta 16 Expectation Workshops and Citizen Consultations—Manifesta 16 aims to explore cultural sensitivities, social challenges, and potential conflicts present in public discourse, academic narratives and everyday neighbourhood life. This process will help artists, collectives, mediators, and social practitioners to approach collaborative work with care and

a multi-perspective contextual understanding. During the biennial phase, there is a crucial role for artists, creative collectives, mediators and social activists to approach these sensitive processes with historical contextualisation and multifocal perspective.

Overall, Manifesta 16 Ruhr's conceptual framework is building on a fundamental development, that rarely finds its way into the public discourse (in the Ruhr Area, Germany and Europe), where healing and caring can be used as a social connector and where the position of deconsecrated houses of worship can act as cultural mediators. Through transforming and revitalising these venues, Manifesta 16 Ruhr positions itself from an art biennial into an incubator for positive social change. Manifesta 16 Ruhr could become a tool for inclusive implementation of new ideas and practices in relation to the transformation of these neighbourhoods. The Manifesta 16 Ruhr conceptual framework represents the conclusions of the Urban Vision by the First Creative Mediator, Josep Bohigas which investigates the parameters and perimeters of neighbourhoods in the Ruhr Area.

¹ This historical context is written drawing from the research made by Tim Rieniets, Christine Kämmerer from StadtBauKultur NRW “Architektur der 1950er bis 1970er Jahre im Ruhrgebiet, 2019”, “Big Beautiful Buildings. Als die Zukunft gebaut wurde”, a cooperation project by StadtBauKultur NRW and TU Dortmund University published for the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018, “KERKGEBOUWEN – 88 inspirerende voorbeelden van nieuw gebruik – van appartement tot zorgcomplex” published in 2016 by Blauwdruk with articles by Albert Reinstra, Frank Strolenberg, Jaco Boer, Jeroen Westerman, Karel Loeff, Mascha van Damme, Richelle Wansing, Lilian Grootswagers, Marchje Schaap and Miranda Megens and Religion@Stadt_Bauten_Ruhr. Published by Kettler in 2021 and written by Hans-Jürgen Lechtreck, Wolfgang Sonne, Barbara Welzel. Lastly research was drawn from the petition initiatief kirchenmanifest.de

² Taken from the Manifesta 16 Ruhr Area Bid Book “Two European Stories” written by Manifesta 16 Ruhr Initiating Circle.

³ Published in an article written in welt.de and published on 04.12.2024 <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article254686502/Kirchen-gehoren-nicht-nur-den-Kirchen-Sie-sind-Gemeinguetter.html>