Annexe 1
Manifesta 16 Ruhr Creative Mediators' Conceptual Essay

25th of March, 2026
St. Josef Kirche, Gelsenkirchen, Germany

This is not a church

Michael Kurtz, on behalf of the Manifesta 16 Ruhr Creative Mediators

We begin with the buildings — bricks and wood, reinforced concrete and stained glass.

Over a thousand churches were erected across the Ruhr Area in the twenty-five years after World War Two. Some replaced houses of worship destroyed by Allied bombs, while others served new congregations of Germans displaced from the East and migrant workers from southern Europe. As well as catering to changing demographics, church building became an important part of the ideological construction of West Germany after Nazism. Characteristic of the ambitions and mythologies of the period, it was a tangible way for communities to signal rebirth without necessarily reckoning with their complicity or engaging with the victims of the 'Third Reich'.

Even if practice lagged behind aesthetics, mid-century modernist churches represented an attempt to articulate the ideals of post-fascist society. 'The time of shiny facades is over,' one journalist wrote in 1950, 'we want the church simply to stay true to its word and provide no place for dishonesty'.[1] With this aim in mind, architects favoured practical materials, exposed and unornamented. They rejected monumentalism and sought to dissolve the barrier between altar and congregants, prizing democracy over divine authority. Orthodoxies tumbled, especially as West Germany became more prosperous and liberal in the 1960s, and every clean surface and geometric form spoke of social renewal.

Some post-war churches were less progressive. St Gertrud in Essen, for example, is a simplified version of the nineteenth-century church that stood on the same site until 1943. And even the most radical buildings are haunted by history. Liebfrauenkirche in Duisburg, with its cliffs

1 An unnamed *Rheinhessisches Kirchenblatt* reporter commenting on the opening of St Luke's Church in Worms, June 1950, quoted in Paul Betts, 'Sacred Rubble and Humble Shelters: German Church Building after the Second World War', *German History* 42:2 (June 2024), p. 262.

of concrete and diaphanous fibreglass sides, contains statues and furnishings from a war-destroyed predecessor. Meanwhile, the walls of Gethsemane-Kirche in Bochum, which follows an austere modular design, are made from *Trümmerziegel* or 'rubble bricks' salvaged by local people in the 1940s.[2]

Rubble was the most widely available material in mid-century Germany. Millions of cubic metres were sifted through and cleared in the Ruhr Area alone. This backbreaking labour was carried out partly by the famous volunteer *Trümmerfrauen* or 'rubble women' but also by former Nazi Party members as punishment, the unemployed in return for rations, and professional construction workers.[3] Bricks and stones that could not be re-used were often crushed into aggregate for concrete, so even the ultimate material of the post-war future was composed from the fabric of Europe's violent past.

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After decades of secularisation, churches in the Ruhr Area are now closing on a weekly basis. They are sometimes transformed to serve surrounding communities in new ways but are more frequently purchased by profit-hungry developers or left slowly to decay. It's a familiar scene across northern Europe. These landmarks, once central to neighbourhood life for many, have become symbols of our diminished public realm: of social atomisation and the loss of collective experience. In this respect they join the coal mines and steel factories that once made the region Europe's industrial heartland but, by the 1990s had almost all closed.

Manifesta 16 Ruhr takes place in and around a selection of these churches and responds to their precarious situation. It asks: what can we do with these underused buildings? What is their meaning and value? How might they be preserved as social spaces but also adapted for contemporary life? Can these structures, associated with domination and exclusion as well as congregational belonging, now contribute to the formation of a more just and pluralistic society?

The artistic team's approach to these questions is encapsulated in the image of the rubble bricks: those fragments of an old collapsing world that were used to build a new one. We begin with the buildings, opening every cupboard and listening to every creak. In the resourceful spirit of the *Trümmerfrauen*, artists salvage and reconfigure discarded material — superfluous benches, smashed windows, silent organ pipes — to articulate new forms and ideas. Like the walls of Gethsemane-Kirche in Bochum, our visions for the future of collective experience are built from remnants of the past. Our hopes are grounded in an awareness of immense loss, desires to transform tempered by the need to remember. Our actions are motivated by a duty to acknowledge and repair historic injustices. This dual temporality, looking back and forward at once, structures the biennial as a whole.

2 I am grateful to Felix Hemmers, expert on the Ruhr Area's modernist churches, for telling me about the phrase *Trümmerziegel*. Kai Kappel shows in *Memento* 1945?: *Kirchenbau aus Kriegsruinen und Trümmersteinen* (Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2008) that ruins were used in mid-century churches for a range of reasons, including practical necessity, a push for continuity and desire to express remorse.

3 Accounts of women rushing to help clear the rubble after the Nazi defeat became part of modern Germany's founding mythology, but their role has been exaggerated, as Leonie Treber demonstrates in *Mythos Trümmerfrauen* (Klartext Verlag, 2014).

On the one hand, the churches are turned into sites for sharing and contesting stories of the past. Artworks, archival collections, documentary films and photographic displays together present a kaleidoscopic history of the Ruhr Area and its people. We wander between topics, from the central role of so-called 'guest workers' in post-war Germany's revival to the rituals and dangers of life in the coal mines; from modernist urban design and international avant-garde art to post-industrial decline and the loss of communal space; from the pop music sensations and craft traditions of migrant communities to the recent influx of Ukrainian refugees.

On the other hand, participatory projects and architectural interventions redefine the buildings, often engaging with and sometimes challenging the values and aesthetics of Christianity. They include sporting arenas, reading rooms and canteens, fashion shows and theatrical performances, grief support sessions and weaving lessons, workshops for building new outdoor seating areas and for woodcut printing with old church benches, spaces for making and listening to music, a tea garden, a crowd-sourced display of locally produced artefacts, a henge of humming organ pipes and a bell-shaped bouncy castle. Instead of suggesting a single rigid formula, the biennial launches dozens of experiments, some straightforward and functional, others strange and irreverent.

At every turn, historical narratives rub up against contemporary life. Gardens grow near archives, playgrounds buzz alongside memorials. This is the overarching argument of Manifesta 16 Ruhr. Meaningful and equitable social progress is dependent on active engagement with the past: more specifically, on an understanding of how history has shaped the present, of inherited responsibilities and unfinished struggles. And the forces that threaten our public realm — marketisation, institutional decay, digital echo chambers — also untether society from its roots. The creation of new public spaces and the preservation of historical consciousness are therefore two sides of the same coin.

Back in 2023, Manifesta commissioned Barcelona-based architect Josep Bohigas to research the built environment and social conditions of the Ruhr Area, to help tailor the biennial's work to the needs of its host. In his *Urban Vision*, Bohigas identifies the closure of churches as an opportunity to implement 'a locally grounded proximity-based model' for regeneration.[4] Evenly spread across the region, church buildings could be adapted, he argues, in ways that nurture feelings of belonging and agency among residents within small neighbourhood areas. This decentralised strategy counters the sense of physical and social distance that often defines city life.

The artistic team, which includes Bohigas, has extended this analysis to prioritise temporal as well as spatial proximity: closeness to each other and to a shared and multifaceted past. After all, churches have long been places where the trials and joys of everyday life are connected to grand

4 Josep Bohigas, *Manifesta 16 Ruhr Urban Vision: This Is Not a Church* (Manifesta, 2025), especially Chapters 3, 'The Revolution in Proximity', and 4, 'Churches as an Amazing Urban Infrastructure'.

narratives of struggle and salvation — where community and history intersect, where bricks remember rubble.[5] Born between 1942 and 1998, the Manifesta 16 Ruhr Creative Mediators emerged in contexts as diverse as communist Poland, reunified Germany and Brexit Britain. Intergenerational dialogue, then, between post-war history and the twenty-first-century present, has been not only a primary thematic concern but also integral to a process driven by mutual curiosity and respect.

Our *Trümmerziegel* approach is expressed by the tongue-in-cheek title, 'This is not a church', which dwells in negativity just as it signals potential for change. If this is not a church, the phrase begs the question, what is it? Loss is entwined with possibility, the unavoidable presence of the past with the prospect of a different future.

5 In an issue of *Baukultur Nordrhein-Westfalen* about the Ruhr Area's closing churches (September 2022), several articles argue that, despite secularisation, these buildings should be preserved as spaces for commemorating important events and asking fundamental questions: for example, Ursula Kleefisch-Jobst, 'Mehr als steinerne Behälter!', pp. 14–15, and Thomas Macho, 'Neue Trauerrituale', pp. 30-31.