

Annexe 2 - 29th of April 2025

Manifesta 16 Ruhr Urban Vision's Initial Findings "This is not a church"

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MANIFESTA: INCUBATOR OF ALTERNATIVE URBAN VISIONS

For decades, the discourse on urbanism has privileged a "technical" approach in which geographers, architects, urban planners and ecologists occupy the principal role in shaping our cities. However, a critical perspective reveals that these actors often arrive too late, in scenarios already moulded by political and economic decisions driven by viability and profitability. The well-intentioned theoretical projects and diagnoses scarcely mitigate the formidable force of policies that perpetuate fragmentation and inequality.

In this context, there arises a need to open spaces for critical reflection and transformative proposals. The European nomadic biennial, Manifesta, thus has positioned itself, already for a decade, as far more than a series of nomadic exhibitions. In its capacity as an urban incubator, the biennial advocates a dialogue between art, culture and urbanism with a strategic approach that is sensitive to the complexities of the territory.

THE CASE OF THE RUHR AREA: A POLYCENTRIC TERRITORY IN TRANSFORMATION

The analysis of territory gains relevance when considering emblematic regions such as the

Ruhr Area. This vast area, characterised by its polycentric structure and industrial heritage, distinguishes itself from other European metropolises by not revolving around a single urban centre. Historically based on mining and steel production, the Ruhr Area underwent profound transformation following the decline of these industries. Today, its multiple nuclei – originally established through the construction of workers' districts – coexist with areas that have been subject to urban regeneration projects.

The Ruhr Area is marked by dramatic contrasts: on the one hand, neighbourhoods suffering the consequences of unemployment, segregation and socio-economic precarity; on the other, areas that reinvent themselves through substantial investments that transform former industrial infrastructures into cultural and creative centres. This dualism is evident in the transportation infrastructure, in the spatial configuration of the urban fabric, and in the local strategies adopted to address environmental, social and economic crises.

VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

There is no doubt that the Ruhr Area faces profound vulnerabilities. The precariousness of employment, the marginalisation of migrant

communities and the challenges in urban infrastructure reveal a reality that demands urgent responses. The decline of heavy industry, compounded by fragmented political decisions, has produced a territorial structure in which cohesion and resilience are compromised. Economic and social inequalities continue to intensify in neighbourhoods that often diverge from the redistributive goals envisioned by certain contemporary urban models.

The region simultaneously demonstrates a notable capacity for reinvention. Emblematic projects – such as the transformation of the Emscher Landschaftspark as one of the most relevant European projects of environmental regeneration, or the reconversion of the former colliery Zollverein in Essen – provide evidence and examples that viable alternatives for urban renewal exist. The network of associations and community bonds, inherited from a past shaped by workers' struggles, forms the basis of a resilience that has enabled the region to confront crises and assert the right to the city. Such dynamism, integrated into coordinated long-term policies, could transform vulnerabilities into competitive advantages for regional development.

Another key aspect is that the Ruhr Area is, in fact, a confluence of multiple rivers and canals traversing the region. The Rhine, the Ruhr, the Emscher, the Lippe, and the canals—such as the Rhine-Herne, the Dortmund-Ems and the Wesel-Datteln—form one of Europe's busiest inland waterway networks, spanning hundreds of kilometres of navigable channels. This extensive fluvial infrastructure is also one of the defining features of the territory, enhancing the region's resilience. Its connectivity, economy

and undoubtedly its identity are crucial factors in understanding this remarkable network of interconnected cities and neighbourhoods.

TOWARDS AN INTEGRAL PLANNING OF THE TERRITORY

The reflections emerging from these analyses invite us to reconsider the role of urban planning and to question the effectiveness of traditional models. The experience of the First Creative Mediator within Manifesta illustrates how an Urban Vision – modest and imperfect yet profoundly committed to social and environmental transformation – can catalyse new paradigms in managing complex territories. The integration of a diverse array of actors – including artists – is crucial to confronting the challenges of the twenty-first century. This comprehensive approach must include the coordination of neighbourhood plans, housing strategies, sustainable mobility initiatives and the creation of public spaces that foster social cohesion. Only through a territorial policy that recognises the interdependence between urbanism, the economy and ecology can we hope to reverse trends of fragmentation and exclusion, thus promoting an urban renewal with a forward-looking vision.

THE REVOLUTION OF PROXIMITY

American sociologist Richard Sennett famously stated, "Distance is the pathology of the modern city," and as we enter the twenty-first century, this notion acquires renewed significance. Whereas the twentieth century consolidated the nation-state, today cities – with their diffuse structures and extensive metropolitan regions – stand as the preferred arenas for power and social transformation. Globalisation, propelled by the rise of megacorporations and

the dynamism of capitalism, has imprinted an ambiguous legacy on urban organisation: on the one hand, the global projection and competitiveness among cities; on the other hand, the revaluation of proximity and local neighbourhoods as nuclei of identity and well-being.

The global competition among cities has led many to become market brands, where the promise of economic prosperity seldom translates into a substantive enhancement in the quality of life of their inhabitants. The subprime crisis of 2007 showcased how the speculation in housing generated socio-spatial injustices and sparked social movements that demanded a fundamental right: to live in a dignified, accessible and cohesive neighbourhood. The lockdown imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point for many European cities. Restrictions forced a rethinking of mobility and the use of public spaces, thus underscoring the value of proximity. Cities worldwide widened pavements, developed networks of bicycle lanes and transformed spaces traditionally allocated to cars into areas for dining and outdoor activities. These swiftly executed, low-cost measures not only addressed immediate public health needs but also laid the foundations for an urbanism centred on everyday life and community.

Within this framework, revolutionary projects have been launched which seek to restructure the urban fabric based on the principle of proximity. Models such as the “15-minute city” in Paris, the “Superblocks” in Barcelona or the “Vital Neighbourhoods” in Bogotá, among others, have emerged as solutions to counteract socio-spatial inequalities and mitigate

environmental impact. Initiatives promoted by organisations such as C40¹, which through its “Global Observatory of Sustainable Proximities” facilitates the exchange of best practices among cities, demonstrate that collaboration and scalability are powerful strategies for addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century. The revolution of proximity also entails a reorientation in our understanding of urban rights. The right to housing is the indispensable foundation for the exercise of any other right: without a home, one cannot fully assert the right to one’s neighbourhood or the right to the city. From this premise, it is proposed that policies – grounded in local experience – must promote urban regeneration both within neighbourhoods—improving housing, public spaces and community cohesion—and in their external connectivity to a wider network that binds the entire metropolis.

The contemporary challenge, therefore, lies in integrating these diverse dimensions into a planning methodology that centres on people.

THE CASE OF THE RUHR AREA: TOWARDS A RECONFIGURATION OF PROXIMITY

Designated officially as “Metropole Ruhr” in 2010, the Ruhr Area exemplifies the tensions and opportunities at hand. This polycentric territory, born from an industrial legacy, faces the dual challenge of being integrated into the global economy while retaining a mosaic of neighbourhoods that have traditionally served as centres of community life. The urban structure of the Ruhr Area – with its historically community-orientated districts, now seeking revitalisation – offers a unique platform for implementing strategies of proximity and decentralisation that reconcile both local and

and global interests. The transformation of the urban landscape is aimed, in part, at reinforcing the social fabric, promoting sustainable mobility and ensuring that the rights to housing and the neighbourhood prevail over the market-driven logics of neoliberal urbanism.

CHURCH BUILDINGS AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

Manifesta advocates, wherever it goes, themes coupled with modest artistic interventions that can catalyse a broader urban transformation. This was successfully demonstrated in Barcelona during Manifesta 15 Barcelona Metropolitana, where significant debates on decentralisation and the future of key regional spaces was generated. The Ruhr Area has reinvented itself through the integration of culture and sustainability in the regeneration of its industrial heritage, yet a gap remains in the revitalisation of some of its most vulnerable neighbourhoods – where social cohesion is undermined by economic precarity and the closure of historic infrastructures, such as churches, starkly illustrates this fragility.

CHURCH BUILDINGS AND THEIR SURROUNDINGS: A 5-MINUTE CITY MODEL

Church buildings serve as a revealing example of urban evolution in the Ruhr Area. Historically, these buildings were centres of community cohesion and the identity of the working class. We could argue that the strategy of constructing neighbourhoods around churches, along with certain commercial and social amenities organised around them (such as schools, nurseries, community centres, retirement homes, small shops, and bus or tram stops), created a series of small, local hubs. These effectively shaped the territory into what

we might today refer to as “five-minute neighbourhoods”—spaces with a functionality extending far beyond the Sunday mass service, fostering integrated, walkable communities.

Today, however, these buildings face a profound reconversion process. The decline in congregational attendance, the ageing of the community and a generational shift have posed substantial challenges. The notion of the “Pantoffelkirche” (or ‘slipper church’) emerged in the post-war period as a strategy to create accessible neighbourhood meeting spaces; yet demographic and urban changes have relegated these churches to an increasingly marginal role. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the Ruhr Area, as across Europe there is an ongoing debate over the reconfiguration of religious buildings, balancing heritage preservation against adaptation to contemporary community needs.

The central question driving this approach is: what is the most appropriate future use for these urban monuments, given the profound social significance they have long embodied? Churches, in particular, have not only served as places of worship but also as community nuclei that helped structure industrial-era neighbourhoods. With the passage of time, many have become closed or abandoned, leaving a void in certain areas already afflicted by segregation and a lack of cohesion. Manifesta 16 Ruhr’s proposal is premised on transforming these spaces into centres of opportunity and social regeneration, integrating them into a strategy that reinforces the urban fabric both locally and within broader regional networks. The convergence of research on the vulnerability of neighbourhoods and the abandonment of

churches has enabled the initial mapping and modelling of intervention strategies. This urban and social reality specific to the Ruhr Area could form a new model for a “revolution of proximity” and a catalyst for scalable transformation. By recovering these building, it is possible to reactivate the social and cultural functions of communities, thereby preserving an essential legacy before these monuments are demolished or sold.

PARTICIPATORY AND INTERDISCIPLINARY METHODOLOGY

The strategy developed within Manifesta 16 Ruhr is underpinned by an iterative methodology that combines fieldwork, participatory workshops and collaboration with academic institutions and local experts. Over the past year, more than fifty churches and neighbourhoods have been studied, and workshops have been organised involving local students, professors and professionals from disciplines such as architecture, urban planning and design. One noteworthy workshop organised for students guided by international and local experts, was entitled “This is not a church”² and focused on an in-depth analysis of four emblematic churches and their surrounding contexts. Using plans, sketches, interviews and models, participants assessed the condition of each building and devised urban strategies to reintegrate these infrastructures into the civic life of their neighbourhoods. The insights gathered not only reinforce the viability of this methodology but also creates the foundation for extending it through further courses at the TU Dortmund University, with the aim of examining additional churches and creating a network of coordinated interventions.

The complementary vision proposed for Manifesta 16 Ruhr is conceived as a modest “revolution of proximity”, wherein targeted actions in each neighbourhood can catalyse broader transformations. Reconfiguring church buildings as centres for community engagement and cultural production does not imply imposing predetermined solutions but rather opening up an array of possibilities emerging from a deep understanding of local realities. This meticulous, empirical process is akin to detective work that uncovers the latent potential within each structure and community.

The outcomes will contribute to the global debate on urban regeneration by integrating sustainability, social cohesion and the adaptive reuse of spaces. The experience and findings will prove essential in defining the strategic selection of Manifesta 16 Ruhr’s venues, which will underpin future artistic and civic interventions, thereby contributing to the reconfiguration of neighbourhood dynamics in the Ruhr Area and, potentially, other regions facing similar challenges.

¹ C40 is a global network of nearly 100 mayors of the world's leading cities that are united in action to confront the climate crisis.

² Organised by Manifesta 16 Ruhr, together with the TU Dortmund, was hosted in the ChorForum Essen from the 4th to the 8th of March 2025.