the ruhr beyond ruhr.2010

Thanks to its re-use of industrial heritage, the Ruhr is a European Capital of Culture for 2010 – and perhaps the greatest benefit of the RUHR.2010 programme may prove to be an improvement in regional self-confidence and governance, says Gert-Jan Hospers

This year, the Ruhr area of Germany celebrates its status as European Capital of Culture. Running throughout 2010 under the slogan ‘Change through culture – culture through change!’, a programme of events and activities (the ‘RUHR.2010 programme’) emphasises the cultural uniqueness of the area. For the general public, the designation of the Ruhr as a European Capital of Culture might have come as a surprise. ‘The Ruhr? That’s the place where you can’t hang out the washing to dry – it will turn black again’ is still a popular joke. But although heavy industry and pollution may dominate its image, in reality the region is changing, and the RUHR.2010 programme may be a catalyst for yet further change.
Box 1 The legacy of the industrial past

Industrial heritage is not the only legacy of the Ruhr’s traditional specialisation in heavy industries. The environmental technology, energy supply and waste disposal sectors also have their roots in the coal and steel industry. Thanks to strict environmental rules and high regional demand for clean technologies over the years, firms in the Ruhr were able to build up high levels of expertise in how to counter environmental damage. As a result, the Ruhr has grown into Germany’s centre of environmental technology research. Similarly, research in the field of renewables, resources recycling and waste combustion was stimulated in the Ruhr relatively early on – unsurprisingly, spurred on by the massive amounts of energy needed in, and the waste produced by, the mines and blast furnaces. As with environmental technology, these energy-related activities are future-oriented, although paradoxically they emerged from the region’s tradition in coal and steel.

Industrial conurbation

For many years, as the largest industrial agglomeration in Western Europe, the stereotypical image of the Ruhr more or less held true. The region has a long tradition in coal mining, steel production and associated industries such as chemicals and machine building. From the 1830s until the post-war period the Ruhr played a crucial role in the economic development of Germany. But in the 1960s came the first mine closures, followed in the 1970s by factory closures and job losses in steel production. Since then the region’s authorities have tried to diversify its economy, bring about structural change, and reduce unemployment.

Today, only a few collieries and steel plants remain in operation; service industries are now the most important employment sector, providing 71% of the region’s jobs. The labour market has improved, but unemployment is still high. Although the Ruhr’s manufacturing industry has now largely gone, the area remains one of Europe’s most densely-populated conurbations: 5.3 million residents live in a territory comparable in size with two small UK counties.

The famous German author Heinrich Böll wrote that ‘The Ruhr does not smell of manufacturing; it smells of people.’ These people, however, traditionally feel a strong association with the region, their heart generally lying with one of the 53 cities and towns that make up the area – such as Essen, Dortmund, Duisburg, Bochum and Oberhausen. Often this pride of place is symbolised by the local football club.

Today, around 11% of the residents are immigrants, half of them with Turkish origins. But despite this immigration, the Ruhr is now also a shrinking region, suffering from an ageing population and a brain drain.

Above

Schematic map of the Ruhr
From IBA to RUHR.2010

In the mid-1980s the public authorities in the Ruhr recognised that the glorious industrial past was over and done. The State of North Rhine-Westphalia therefore charged the renowned planner Karl Ganser with a simple task: give the Ruhr a new look. In 1989 Ganser and his team set up the Emscherpark International Building Exhibition (IBA). This bottom-up programme – a workshop for the future of industrial areas – was aimed at the ecological and socio-economic reconstruction of the Emscher area in the centre of the Ruhr.

With the help of the IBA the River Emscher was renaturalised, while existing green zones were transformed into landscape parks. The most important strategy of the IBA, however, was the decision to re-use the region’s industrial heritage instead of demolishing it. More than 100 mines, blast furnaces and other industrial complexes were included in the development of a so-called ‘Route of Industrial Culture’. For example, the Gasometer in Oberhausen, the Zeche Zollverein coal mining complex in Essen and the inner harbour of Duisburg were given second lives as event locations and recreational areas. New ideas for old buildings!

In 1999 the time-limited activities of the IBA programme were transferred to a new organisation founded by the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia, Projekt Ruhr, which continued to set up bottom-up projects aimed at renaturating the Ruhr area and revitalising its industrial culture. More and more industrial sites were turned into leisure parks and locations for creative entrepreneurs, such as high-tech innovators, designers and artists.

The originality of the way that the Ruhr dealt with its legacy raised interest from all over the globe. For example, in 2001 the Zeche Zollverein – one of Europe’s largest collieries – was designated as a World Cultural Heritage Site by UNESCO. And in 2006 the Ruhr was designated a European Capital of Culture for 2010. The jury responsible for assessing applications was impressed by the way the region had been building on its industrial past over the last two decades, noting that the Ruhr ‘does not breathe dust anymore; it breathes future now’. This accolade served to confirm the success of Karl Ganser and his team in carrying out the difficult task they were given in 1989: they have indeed given the Ruhr a bright new look.

The RUHR.2010 programme

Together with Pécs (in Hungary) and Istanbul (in Turkey) the Ruhr area is one of this year’s European Capitals of Culture. For the first time, a whole region instead of a city has been granted use of the title, although the official titleholder is the uncrowned regional capital of Essen, which submitted the proposal on behalf of the Ruhr as a whole. Using the slogan ‘Change through culture – culture through change’, the RUHR.2010 programme organisers aim to demonstrate the birth of a new metropolis through art and culture. Among
the Ruhr’s population the Capital of Culture designation has generated a sense of empowerment. More than 2,000 project ideas have been sent to the RUHR.2010 GmBH, which organises and co-ordinates the programme. The programme itself has three guiding strands, telling the regional story of transformation:

- ‘Mythology’ – highlighting the region’s industrial roots and its search for the future;
- ‘Metropolis’ – focusing on the quality of life in the 53 towns and cities in the Ruhr; and
- ‘Europe’ – celebrating the international and inter-cultural character of the region.

These programme themes are developed through a number of projects, events and festivals in the field of the visual arts, theatre, music, language, and other creative industries. The €65 million required to finance these initiatives comes from several authorities (including regional bodies, national government, and the EU) and private sponsors such as Deutsche Bahn, RWE and Eon. RUHR.2010 GmBH is set up as a public-private partnership.

In early January, around 100,000 Ruhr residents celebrated the kick-off of RUHR.2010 and the opening of the Ruhr Museum at Zollverein. Over the course of the year, the programme features more than 300 projects – such as ‘An Instrument for Every Child’ (giving every primary school child in the Ruhr the opportunity to learn to play a musical instrument), ‘Creative.Quarters’ (allowing creative talents to rent open urban spaces), and the expansion of the Folkwang Museum in Essen.

Among the programme’s 2,500 events, interesting examples include ‘Shaft Signs’ (featuring yellow balloons hovering above the 400 former mineshafts) at the end of May, ‘1SING – DAY OF SONG’ (the largest public choral concert ever held) on 4 and 5 June, and ‘MELEZ’ (highlighting the mixture of cultures) in October. In a major event on 18 July, the A40/B1 motorway will be turned into one long picnic table, bringing together Ruhr residents from all different cultures and generations in an event which it is hoped will be ‘the emotional moment at which the Ruhr Metropolis becomes truly established’.

**Beyond RUHR.2010**

Like any such large-scale event or project, RUHR.2010 has provoked criticism in the region. Media commentators have, for instance, criticised an over-emphasis on ‘high-brow’ culture and have pointed to the important role of popular culture in the Ruhr. Some critics see the Capital of Culture programme as a waste of money, while others debate its long-term effects. Indeed, for many of the cities that have been European Capital of Culture in the past the benefits of the title have fallen short of expectations. The initial festive mood has often been eclipsed by a subsequent hangover in the form of budget overruns and disappointing visitor numbers. Only a few European cities – such as Glasgow (1990), Antwerp (1993), and Lille (2004) – have been able to turn the designation to sustainable advantage.

What, then, are the prospects for the Ruhr? The RUHR.2010 programme could well have a significant effect beyond 2010. Its impact is likely to be not so much through a desired improvement of the Ruhr’s image among the outside world and a resulting increase in tourism, but rather as a catalyst for improved self-confidence and governance in the region.

Traditionally, the inhabitants of the Ruhr have tended to take a somewhat defensive approach to their territory – until recently, for example, there was a tendency to show visitors from outside the region its museums, castles and parks with almost an apologetic attitude of ‘Look, we also have culture and nature here.’ Now, thanks to the IBA and the title of European Capital of Culture (which itself obviously stands on the shoulders of the work of the IBA), self-confidence has been boosted. The re-use and marketing of industrial heritage has made the Ruhr’s residents aware that they live in a region that stands out from other areas. Now, they guide visitors along the Route of Industrial Culture and say: ‘Look, what you see here is unique.’

**Box 2 Culture and social inclusion**

One of the goals of RUHR.2010 is ‘inclusive access to the European Capital of Culture programme for all’, to which end a number of initiatives are being organised. For example, entry fees to the events are discounted for people from disadvantaged groups, and a special ‘barrier-free visitor guide’ to the Ruhr has been designed in co-operation with local well-being organisations and the Lions Club Foundation. In Essen’s Grugapark a so-called ‘Encounters Day’ is being organised to bring together people with and without disabilities. Another example is the ‘Europe InTact 2010’ project, run by the Dortmund University of Science and Technology, which promotes active social inclusion of people with disabilities by fostering musical and creative activity, holding a concert series, and organising a conference highlighting the need for more scientific attention to be paid to social inclusion in culture.
Everyone who visits the Ruhr can see how its industrial culture has become part of everyday life. The mythology of the Ruhr can be observed everywhere – and not only in its industrial monuments: in stations, shops, restaurants and elsewhere reference is made to the region’s uniqueness. People are becoming increasingly proud to live in the Ruhr. The RUHR.2010 projects support this development and thus might strengthen self-confidence and empowerment – which in turn is conducive to regional development.

The end of parochialism?

Hopefully, the feeling of being part of a special region will take root among all the 53 towns and cities that make up the Ruhr. To date, local politicians have been inclined to strive for localised rather than regional interest. The lack of effective regional governance within the conurbation, dating from way back, is well illustrated by the traditional differences in tram gauges between neighbouring cities such as Essen and Duisburg. Intercity competition for investment and amenities has been the norm; co-operation and co-ordination the exceptions. Critics have therefore called the Ruhr ‘an urban planetary system without a central star’, or ‘an area where the cities proudly ignore each other’.

Unfortunately, this rivalry has hindered the development of a common regional strategy. Over the years, regional bodies in the Ruhr have tried to end this parochialism, but until recently without much success. In this light, the designation of the region as a European Capital of Culture can be seen as a landmark in the history of the Ruhr. The first success has already been achieved: to make the RUHR.2010 programme happen, local politicians have co-operated and set up projects together. It can only be hoped that this experience in good regional governance will set the pace for the Ruhr beyond 2010.

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