



(front cover)

Interior view, St. Marien, Essen, 2026.

Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Daniel Sadrowski

(right flap)

The Gelsenkirchen-based initiative Social BallerZ play Basketball inside St. Josef as part of Manifesta 16's Warm-Up Programme, 2026.

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(back cover)

Manifesta 16's Kreativmarkt as part of the Warm-Up Programme, 2026.

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This is
not a
church

Urban Vision

MANIFESTA
16 Ruhr

This is not a church. Urban Vision

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Speculating on the Civic Future of Europe's Churches

Hedwig Fijen

Director of Manifesta 16 Ruhr

For more than three decades Manifesta has moved across Europe as a nomadic biennial. Each edition settles temporarily in a different city or region, responding to the particular social, cultural and spatial questions that shape that place. This mobility has never been an end in itself. It is a method. By relocating every two years, Manifesta places itself in situations where it must listen, learn and rethink its role in relation to local realities.

Over time this approach has transformed the biennial. What began as a travelling exhibition has gradually evolved into a platform that investigates how artistic imagination can contribute to urban and civic transformation. The process always begins long before the exhibition opens. Through research, public consultations and interdisciplinary collaboration, Manifesta attempts to understand the hidden infrastructures of a place: the spaces that shape everyday life, the institutions that anchor local communities and the buildings whose future remains uncertain.

In recent years this methodology has increasingly taken on a speculative dimension. Biennials traditionally present finished works of art. Manifesta instead attempts to create conditions in which cultural actors, urban practitioners and residents can test possible futures together. Temporary interventions become prototypes. Public space becomes a laboratory. Citizens are not only spectators but participants in imagining what their city might become.

Speculative biennialism therefore operates between imagination and reality. It asks how cultural practice can open questions that urban policy has not yet dared to formulate.

For Manifesta 16, the Ruhr Area posed exactly such a question.

When the region invited Manifesta to develop its sixteenth edition, the starting point was not an exhibition theme but a societal transformation unfolding quietly across Germany and much of Europe: the gradual disappearance of the church as a central institution in neighbourhood life.

Germany currently counts more than 40,000 church buildings. Experts estimate that nearly half of them may lose their religious function within the next decade.

The implications of this shift extend far beyond questions of heritage preservation. Churches have historically functioned as much more than places of worship. They have been sites of gathering, music, education, charity and mutual care. Architecturally and socially they often occupy central positions within neighbourhoods.

What happens when thousands of these spaces suddenly fall silent? If Germany alone may face the transformation of around 20,000 church buildings, the question becomes undeniably European. Across the continent similar demographic and cultural shifts are underway. Vast networks of religious architecture are slowly losing their original function, leaving behind an unprecedented spatial challenge. Europe may soon be confronted with tens of thousands of large civic structures whose future remains undefined.

Seen from this perspective, the Ruhr Area becomes more than a host region. It becomes a testing ground for a much larger continental question.

The Ruhr Area itself offers a particularly meaningful setting for this investigation. In the aftermath of the Second World War the region experienced one of the most ambitious reconstruction programmes in Europe. Churches played

a crucial role in this process. Many were built during the post-war decades as expressions of a society rebuilding itself after devastation. They embodied ideals of democratic openness, community participation and social solidarity.

Approximately 43% of the churches in North Rhine-Westphalia were constructed after 1945, often in newly developed neighbourhoods or rebuilt city centres.

Their architecture reflected the spirit of the time: modernist, experimental and oriented towards collective gathering rather than monumental display.

Today these same buildings stand at another historical threshold.

Declining congregations have left many underused or deconsecrated. Some face demolition. Others risk being privatised or converted into commercial property. Yet their spatial and symbolic potential remains immense. Positioned within residential neighbourhoods and embedded in local memory, they continue to function as landmarks of collective identity even as their original purpose fades.

Manifesta 16 Ruhr approaches this situation not simply as a preservation problem but as an opportunity to speculate about new forms of civic infrastructure.

Together with architect and urbanist Josep Bohigas and a network of researchers, institutions and community actors, the biennial initiated a long pre-biennial research process to investigate the relationship between churches and their surrounding neighbourhoods. Hundreds of sites were visited and mapped. Citizen consultations and expectation workshops invited residents to reflect on what kinds of shared spaces they and their communities need today.

The responses revealed a striking convergence. Across different cities and neighbourhoods people expressed a strong desire for accessible, non-commercial spaces for gathering: places for youth initiatives, cultural activities, education and intercultural exchange. In many areas, former churches remain among the few buildings capable of fulfilling this role.

p. 2–3: Street corner in the Ruhr Area.

Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose

p. 4–6: Open Call Presentation, 2025.

Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Anton Vichrov



Presentation of the pre-biennial research and *Urban Vision* of Manifesta 16 Ruhr in St. Josef Church.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Anton Vichrov

This publication presents the *Urban Vision* that emerged from this research.

Rather than offering a fixed architectural blueprint, the vision proposes a framework for rethinking churches as neighbourhood infrastructures for the twenty-first century. It explores how these buildings might once again become spaces of encounter, dialogue and care, while acknowledging the complex histories and sensitivities embedded within them.

In 2026 Manifesta will activate a selection of post-war churches across the Ruhr Area as part of its programme. Artists, architects and community organisations will work together to experiment with new uses for these spaces and their surrounding urban environments. As in previous editions, these interventions will function as prototypes: temporary situations through which residents and institutions can evaluate what should remain after the biennial concludes.

Yet the ambition extends beyond the Ruhr Area.

If Germany may soon face the task of transforming more than 20,000 church buildings, the question explored here becomes part of a much larger conversation about the future of civic space – not only in Central Europe, but on the whole continent. What new forms of collectivity might emerge within these structures? How can their architectural generosity be preserved while opening them to new social realities? And how might cultural practice help societies navigate this transition with imagination rather than feelings of loss?

In this sense the *Urban Vision* of Manifesta 16 Ruhr is both local and speculative. It begins with specific neighbourhoods, specific communities and specific buildings. But it also invites us to consider whether the silent churches appearing across Europe might become laboratories for new forms of public life.

If the post-war churches of the Ruhr Area once symbolised the reconstruction of society after conflict, they may again hold the potential to shape a future of shared civic space.

p. 12–13: Andrea Henze, then mayoral candidate and, since November 2025, Mayor of Gelsenkirchen, with Dr. Frank Dudda, Chair of the Manifesta 16 Ruhr Supervisory Board and President of the RVR Ruhr Parliament, at the Manifesta 16 Ruhr press conference, September 2025.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Anton Vichrov



Kreativmarkt in St. Josef, part of Manifesta 16's Warm-Up Programme, February 2025.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose





This is not a Rust Belt: Reimagined Cultural Infrastructure as Part of the (Green) Transformation

Dr. Frank Dudda

President of the Manifesta 16 Ruhr
Supervisory Board and Chair of the
RVR Ruhr Parliament

The Ruhr Area's identity has always been shaped by its multiplicity of neighbourhoods, especially when looking back on our mining tradition. As *Ruhr-pottlers*, we are proud of both our local communities as well as the shared historical and cultural heritage of the diverse metropolitan region. Manifesta 16 Ruhr's *Urban Vision* emphasises this synergy between the local and the regional, rethinking the church as a socio-political site where contemporary issues can be reimagined in decentralised ways.

As a region, we have set ourselves the goal of becoming the greenest industrial region in the world. Understanding this transition in social terms, we welcome Manifesta's approach of genuine co-creation with the communities, institutions and people of our Ruhr Area. This *Urban Vision* is a testament to the fruitful collaboration of researchers, civil actors and artists in systematically questioning the complexities of our territory.

The question at the heart of *This is not a church* – “what becomes of our post-war churches?” – is one we cannot afford to leave unanswered. This investigation is not only about the churches themselves, but about how global issues play out in the Ruhr Area and how its unique urban characteristics can serve as a model for solving them. Manifesta 16 Ruhr's interdisciplinary approach uniquely speaks to these questions by examining how the church as an infrastructure can foster democratic participation and mitigate socio-environmental vulnerabilities.

This *Urban Vision* follows the trajectory the region has collectively embarked upon. The reinvention of our neighbourhood infrastructures, through key institutions like our churches, is not separate from the green transformation of our cities. It is part of the same question: “How do we build a sustainable future from the remnants of the past, with cultural sensitivity, inventiveness and a genuine commitment to the people who live here?”

In closing, I would like to sincerely thank the Manifesta 16 Ruhr organisation, its Artistic and Supervisory Board members, funders and initiating partners for their commitment to this important process. My gratitude also goes to the First Creative Mediator Josep Bohigas, the teams involved and to the many houses of worship and local organisations across the Ruhr Area whose openness and collaboration made this *Urban Vision* possible.

Nearness as Possibility: The Value of Proximity in Uncertain Times

Joan Subirats

Professor of Political Science and
former Deputy Mayor for Culture in
Barcelona

We live in an era in which the major problems seem to unfold in another dimension: climate change, structural inequality, democratic erosion and labour precarity. Everything is so vast, so interconnected, so elusive to any visible lever of change that the first reaction is paralysis. What can a city, a neighbourhood or a plaza really do in the face of the magnitude of the social issues that overwhelm us?

Yet, there is a trap within this question. To assume that the local is too small to matter is to renounce precisely the space where people build lives together, where conflicts become visible and where, for that very reason, they can also be managed. Cities, municipalities and the places in which we live are not on the margins of economic, domestic and social transformations; rather, they are their concrete form. Labour precarity, family fragmentation and growing cultural diversity: all of this accumulates in the spaces where people live together.

Proximity, then, is not a refuge for the vernacular. It is the place where abstract ideas become concrete and where the possibility of collectivity exists. A public space – a square, a park, a street or an underused venue – is not merely physical infrastructure. It is a resource to be shared, a common good that reflects, in miniature, the kind of coexistence we aspire to. Who can use it, how, when and for whose benefit: these questions have different answers depending on whether we organise ourselves through the logic of the market, hierarchical authority, or more horizontal forms of neighbourhood agreement. Public space, in this sense, is politics materialised in place: a site for living and inhabiting.

Cities can be more than sites for implementing policies decided from above. They can be laboratories of alternatives. Barcelona, Berlin, Rome and New York, to name only a few examples, do not merely manage services; at their best they have experimented with more participatory forms of governance, recovered privatised commons and created networks of proximity that soften social exclusion. Not because city governments are omnipotent – their limits are real and severe – but because the local scale offers something that other levels do not: the possibility for citizens and institutions to look each other in the eye and try to resolve issues together.

This does not eliminate complexity nor dissolve tensions. The diversity of uses and people generates genuine conflicts. The co-production of policies with social movements raises dilemmas about autonomy and institutionalisation. The most serious problems – housing, employment and the ecological transition – have roots that exceed the municipal level. All of this is true. But none of these difficulties justifies abandoning the local, the nearby, as a space for political action.



On the contrary: at a moment when national democracies show their limits and supranational institutions seem distant and impermeable, the scale of proximity regains strategic value. Because it is there that it is still possible to weave relationships, test agreements and learn to collectively manage the resources we share. The city we aspire to is one that commits to mixture, to include everyone in the same spaces and to accept conflict as an inseparable part of coexistence. Far from being a utopia, it is rather a practicable horizon, built at the scale at which politics is also everyday life.

Proximity and public space may not be the only place from which the world can be transformed. But it is the most immediate, the closest and most tangible – and perhaps the most necessary if we are to retain the habit of acting together.

It is precisely from this scale of proximity that Josep Bohigas' *Urban Vision* for Manifesta 16 Ruhr takes its point of departure, reimagining the region as a network of cities where shared spaces and collective infrastructures sustain everyday forms of coexistence.



- ↑ The Gelsenkirchen-based initiative Social BallerZ play Basketball inside St. Josef as part of Manifesta 16's Warm-Up Programme, 2026.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Anton Vichrov
- ← Citizen Consultation Workshop in Bochum, 2025.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Anton Vichrov

1. Introduction

Josep Bohigas

Urbanist and First Creative Mediator
of Manifesta 16 Ruhr

This publication is the outcome of a year-long process of exploration and research across the Ruhr Area, aimed at developing an *Urban Vision* for Manifesta 16 Ruhr. It builds on a conceptual framework shaped through citizen assemblies, expectation workshops, site-specific interviews, as well as archival and spatial investigations. The Bid submitted for the selection of Manifesta 16's Host City also played a key role in defining the thematic focus, particularly on the underexplored impact of abandoned post-war churches in relation to contemporary social polarisation and the growing disconnection of younger generations from both public space and collective forms of gathering following the COVID-19 pandemic.

This approach is rooted in Manifesta's broader urban research logic, which reflects the biennial's self-imposed commitment to conducting preliminary research in each host territory. Introduced for the first time in 2016 in Sicily's capital, Palermo, for Manifesta 12, this methodology involves appointing a context-specific architect or urbanist to contribute an external, holistic perspective. Working closely with the Manifesta team as First Creative Mediator, this expert engages with local institutions, citizens and the specific historical context, fostering an intensive and deliberate dialogue that informs the development of each edition's *Urban Vision*.

In previous editions, this role was taken on by teams such as Ippolito Pestellini of OMA for Manifesta 12 in Palermo, MVRDV's Winy Maas for Manifesta 13 in Marseille, Carlo Ratti for Manifesta 14 in Prishtina and Sergio Pardo for Manifesta 15 in Barcelona. Each *Urban Vision* played a fundamental role in contextualising the thematic approach. In the process of the pre-biennial research, both the Manifesta 16 team, the Director and the Creative Mediator(s) identified the themes and locations to be activated by Manifesta before, during and after the biennial through conversations, preparatory workshops, citizen consultations and various interventions.

For Manifesta 16 Ruhr, I was invited in 2023 to investigate the conceptual framework and work on a new methodology for how to contextualise the problem of abandoned churches to a new model of proximity. I was commissioned to find an alternative solution for converting these churches into community spaces, not least because of my work on the development of the Superblocks in Barcelona. I conducted the pre-biennial research that resulted in this publication. In the Ruhr Area, the theme of abandoned, closed or repurposed churches is used as a framework for a broader reflection on neighbourhood scale urban regeneration strategies, particularly in relation to the concept of proximity.

At this stage of the pre-biennial research process, the complex role of religious spaces and their relationship to cultural, social and welfare institutions have been analysed, establishing a dialogue with religious, secular and cultural stakeholders. This methodology includes tailored local studies such as Expectation Workshops, *Urban Vision* Workshops in collaboration with the University of Dortmund and Citizen Consultations.



Info session in Dortmund, 2025. Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr

“This is not a church” is the title of the *Urban Vision* for Manifesta 16 Ruhr that seeks to deepen the debate on how these deconsecrated and transforming churches can become creative incubators for neighbourhood regeneration. The *Urban Vision* includes a proposal which has been gathered together with the Manifesta team to include a series of churches in four main cities in the Ruhr Area, that will be selected as main venues for the biennial, while also incorporating their extended perimeters – highlighting the social infrastructures and networks these spaces are capable of weaving within their surrounding communities.

An Urban Vision for Manifesta 16 Ruhr

The territory is not shaped by “well-meaning” geographers, ecologists, landscape architects, urban planners or architects, no matter how technically skilled or institutionally legitimised they may believe themselves to be. Urban sprawl, gentrification, speculation, socio-spatial injustice, segregation and other destructive territorial processes occur *despite* (or even *because of*) the interventions of these well-intentioned actors. Often, they arrive too late, self-prescribing urbanist placebos consisting of endless diagnostics and clever yet unfeasible suturing projects to inoculate their reputations, while the planet and its people remain terminally ill.

Let us be clear: politicians and developers shape the territory and its cities, advancing projects driven and legitimised by economic viability or profitability. The former, because their funding capacity is limited to urbanisation; the latter, due to the inherent voracity of the market and the capitalist system, which competes ruthlessly, devouring resources without restraint. In this context, urban planning has become a discipline of repair, deploying technical expertise to stitch together the wounds of poor planning. The brutal day-to-day demands of political management reduce planners to reactive agents, leaving little room for the strategic planning that should be their core mission – a priority that, regrettably, many politicians have long abandoned.

“Urbanism is dead”, declare certain self-interested voices, precisely because they know that *good* urbanism threatens their agenda. It is within this very tragedy that we must urgently reclaim the few remaining spaces of opportunity – spaces from which alternative urban models can emerge to halt the accelerating waste of land, the erosion of cohesion and the lack of resilience caused by fragmented urban development. We need technical, artistic and political spaces imbued with social responsibility and environmental foresight – spaces that offer pathways to reverse systemic collapse, reconnecting society, economy and ecology to foster structural criteria beyond short-term gains.¹

1 This recurring diagnosis – “urbanism is dead” – has been voiced by numerous authors to denounce the discipline’s disintegration. In his polemical text “Whatever Happened to Urbanism?” Rem Koolhaas famously declares: “After sabotaging urbanism, we have ridiculed it to the point where [...] we dismantled an entire discipline.[...]. Now we are left with a world without urbanism, only architecture.” Rem Koolhaas, “Whatever Happened to Urbanism?”. *Design Quarterly*, no. 164 (1995), p. 29. Echoing this sentiment, Oriol Bohigas, in his article “Muerte y resurrección del planeamiento urbano” (*El País*, 4 November 1986), explicitly refers to the “death of urbanism” not as a definitive end, but as a provocation – a metaphorical call to fundamentally rethink and reconstruct the discipline.

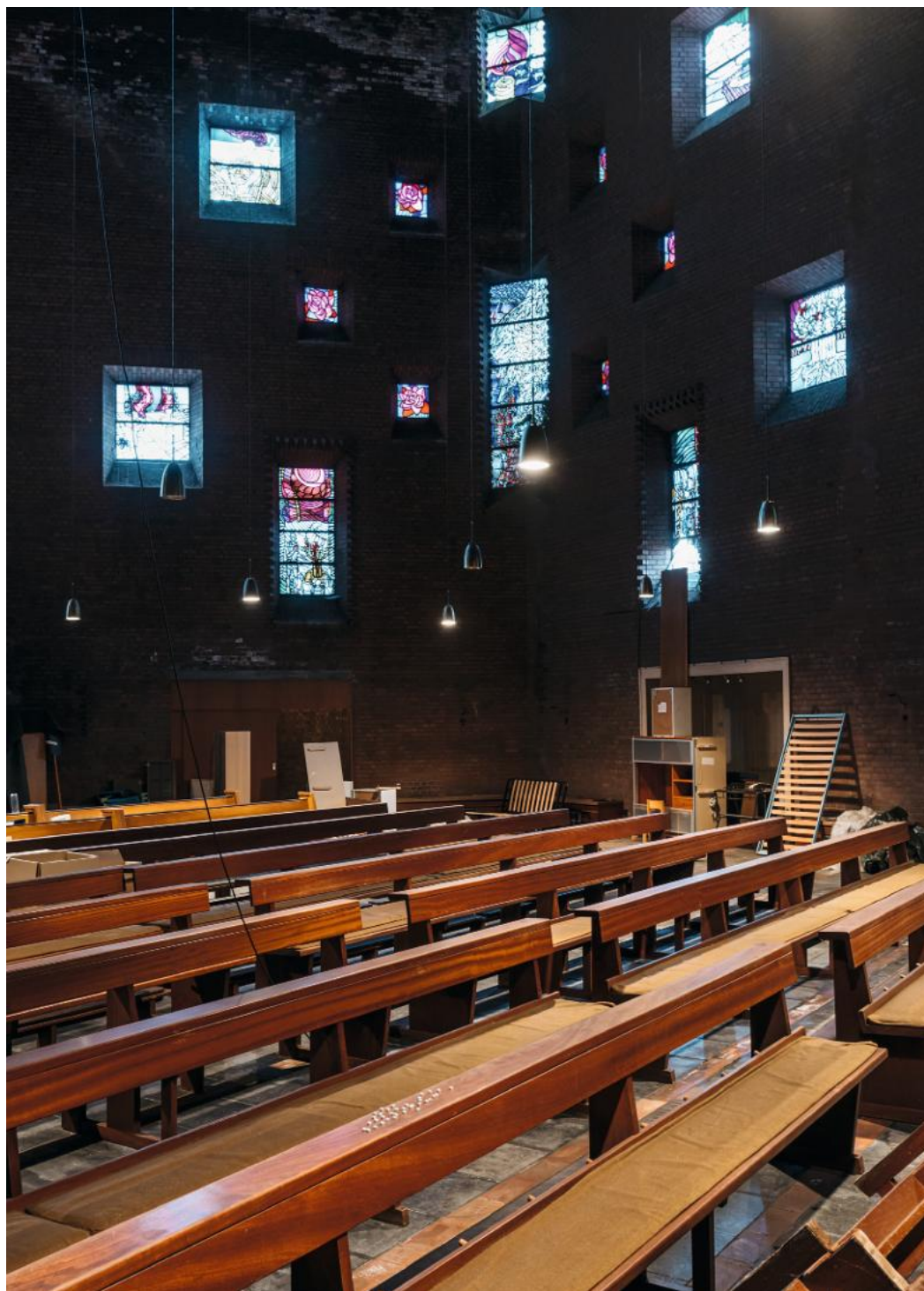
Despite its understated nature, the European Nomadic Biennial Manifesta stands as one of these rare spaces. Manifesta is not a conventional art biennial where a curator selects a venue, proposes a theme, gathers local and international artists and displays their work in prepared venues. It has become, instead, an urban incubator for change, collaborating with diverse actors to generate territorial research in which culture serves as a provocation and transformational instrument for urban rethinking.

Manifesta is the first and only continuously nomadic biennial on the continent. After the first edition in Rotterdam in 1996, it takes place in a new location every two years, deploying site-specific methodologies and forging deep, expansive relationships with local agents – all with the aim of producing an urban-focused biennial committed to leaving a legacy that sparks future transformations.

To achieve this, Manifesta engages with the respective host territory years in advance, appointing an external First Creative Mediator – an expert in strategic planning – to provoke a less predictable and undoubtedly more fraught dialogue about the transformation of the place. This deliberate ‘provocation’ lies at the heart of Manifesta’s local-international exchange.

- ↗ *This is not a church* Workshop, Essen, 2025.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Charlotte Ernst
- First Creative Mediator and urbanist Josep Bohigas
at the *Urban Vision* Presentation, 2025.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Anton Vichrov





Interior view, St. Marien, Essen, 2026.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Daniel Sadrowski

The Urban Vision as Process

The First Creative Mediator is tasked with delivering an *Urban Vision* – a deliberately subjective, partial, focused and incisive perspective on the specific territory and thematic approach based on the Bid made by the Host City and the conceptual framework by Manifesta. It is a gaze that opens new ways of seeing, serving as preliminary research for the biennial to test potential strategies, key nodes, communities and themes possibly relevant to the Host Cities. This multifaceted approach ensures a nuanced understanding of urban, cultural and social complexities, allowing for iterative learning and adjustments that may become catalysts for long-term transformations.

The *Urban Vision* is, by nature, a fragmentary and restless inquiry which resists the arrogance of final and absolute answers. Instead, it thrives on testing hunches, aiming to plant ideas that outgrow the biennial itself. This methodology has been applied in the last four Host Cities and Regions (Palermo, Prishtina, Barcelona Metropolitana and Ruhr Area), with varying impact but a shared transformative ambition.

In Barcelona, I served on the Manifesta 15 Barcelona Metropolitana Board and collaborated with the 2024 edition's First Creative Mediator Sergio Pardo. Pardo's shrewd proposal for radical decentralisation, applied across multiple dimensions, including territorial, furthered the eventual selection of venues that became crucial catalysts for debates on their fragile conditions and uncertain futures. The proposals never aimed to "solve" pressing issues but rather to deepen a critical discourse on the metropolis' structure and the ecological, social and economic futures of its key nodes.

- p. 28–29: Mülheim an der Ruhr.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose
- p. 30–31: Kiosk next to St. Josef in
Gelsenkirchen-Ückendorf
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr
- p. 32–33: Essen street view.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose







Hannen Alt

Trinkhalle



rombacher Pils

mit Hefeguss und geteilt

Diebels
Bier

TRINKHALLE

F4S

KOMM
ZUR
BLÖDE







2. Understanding the Territory

Josep Bohigas

Urbanist and First Creative Mediator
of Manifesta 16 Ruhr

Landing in the Ruhr Area

Each place demands its own methodology, each Manifesta edition requires a different profile for a Creative Mediator and each Creative Mediator arrives with their own intellectual toolkit and set of preoccupations. It would be presumptuous to claim that an *Urban Vision* could ever deliver a comprehensive or objective diagnosis. This approach proves particularly suitable yet demanding in a territory as vast and intricate as the Ruhr Area.

Manifesta's landing in the Ruhr Area was guided by the invaluable Bidding papers in 2021, drafted by the Host Region's Initiating Circle.² This document frames the New Silk Roads³ as a narrative of multiple, complementary visions, portraying a complex region and proposing a territorial investigation into the interplay between local and global dimensions across all facets of life. It sheds light on pressing questions about the region's urgent need to redefine its identity – questions that have become foundational to the *Urban Vision*'s development.

Key Questions from the Bid:

- Where are concrete shifts visible today – in the region's social and economic cycles, its political sphere or the lived environment of its inhabitants?
- How does the global manifest in the regional and vice versa?
- How does life in the region transform behind the façades of industrial culture?
- What emerging identities can be traced across the territory?
- How can a culture of practice and action gain ground against the dominance of built-space legacies?

2 Ten years after the European Capital of Culture RUHR.2010, creative artists, heads of institutions and political representatives of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and the 53 local authorities in the region jointly campaigned in 2020 for the Ruhr Area to be the location for Manifesta. The initiators (with their affiliations at the time of the BID) were: Markus Ambach (Markus Ambach Projekte, Düsseldorf), Dr. Inke Arns (Director Hardware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund), Peter Gorschlüter (Director Museum Folkwang, Essen), Prof. Heinrich Theodor Grütter (Director Ruhr Museum, Essen), Stefan Hilterhaus (Artistic and Managing Director PACT Zollverein, Essen), Olaf Kröck (Artistic and Managing Director Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen), Dr. Stephan Muschick (Managing Director E.ON Stiftung, Essen), Prof. Dr. Hans-Peter Noll (Chairman of the Board, Stiftung Zollverein, Essen), Britta Peters (Artistic Director Urbane Künste Ruhr, Bochum), Stefanie Reichart (Head of Culture and Sport Department, Regionalverband Ruhr, Essen).

3 The official name of the global infrastructure and economic development strategy launched by the People's Republic of China in 2013 as "Belt and Road Initiative". It is also known as "One Belt One Road".

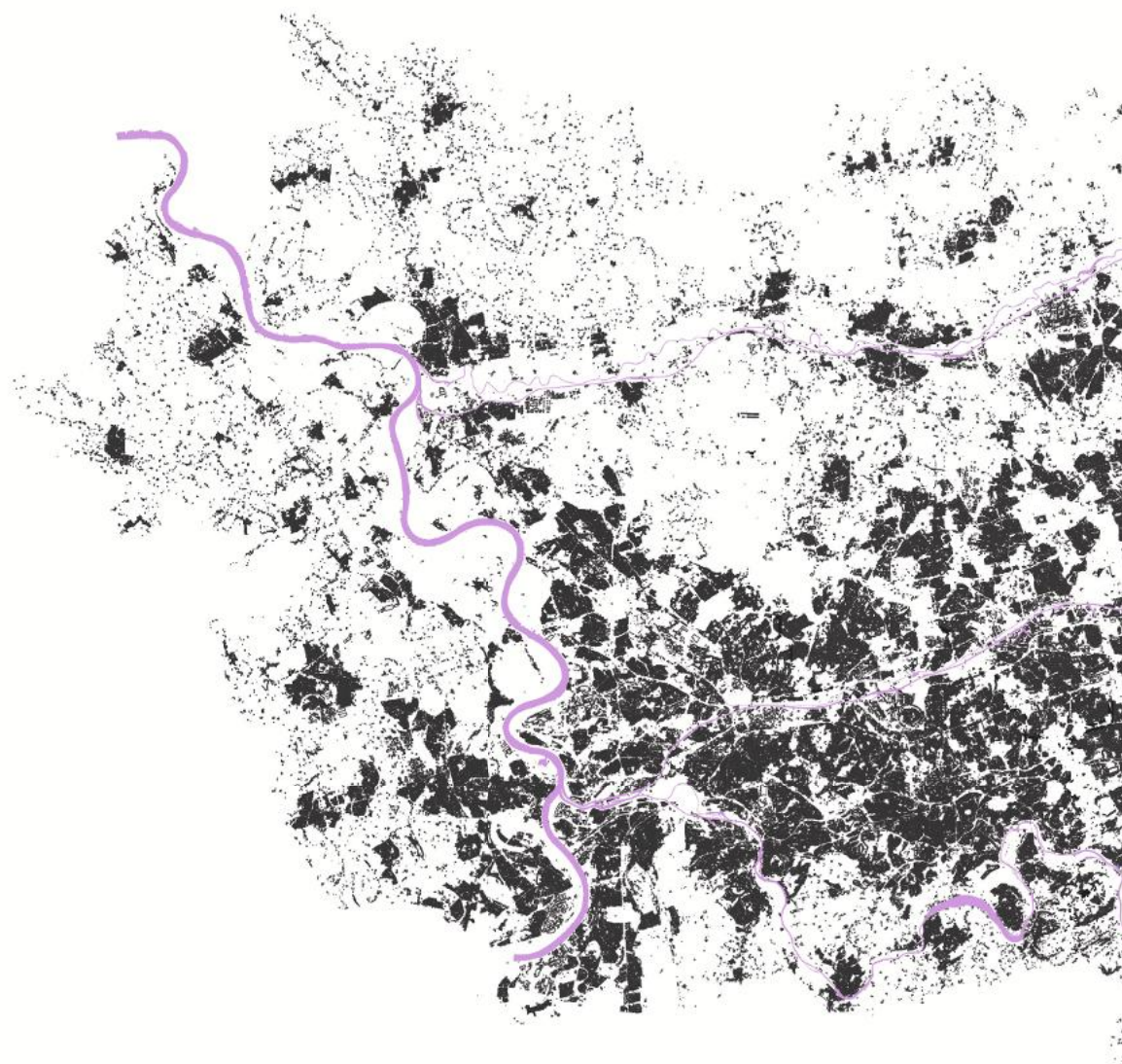
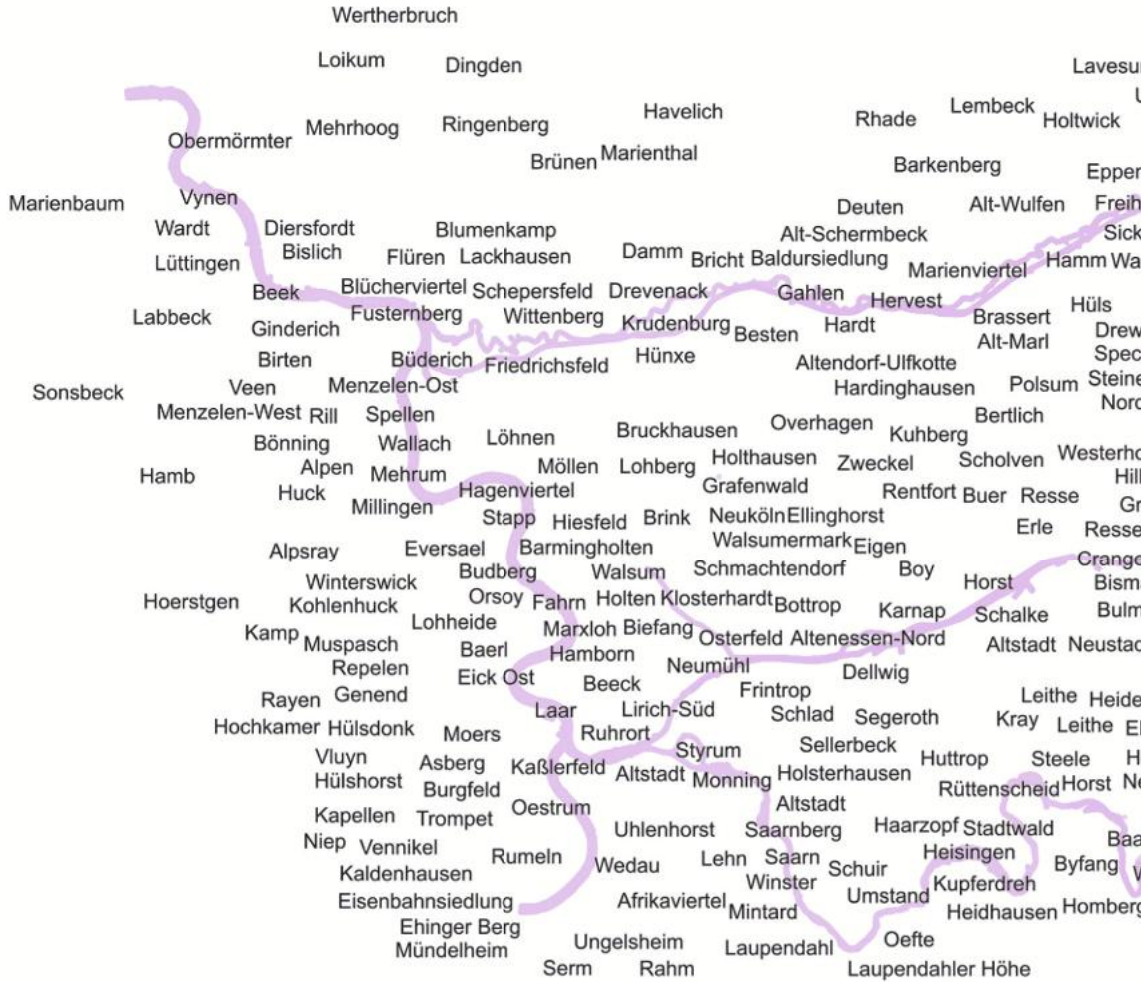




Fig. 1
Map of the built-up network (2024)

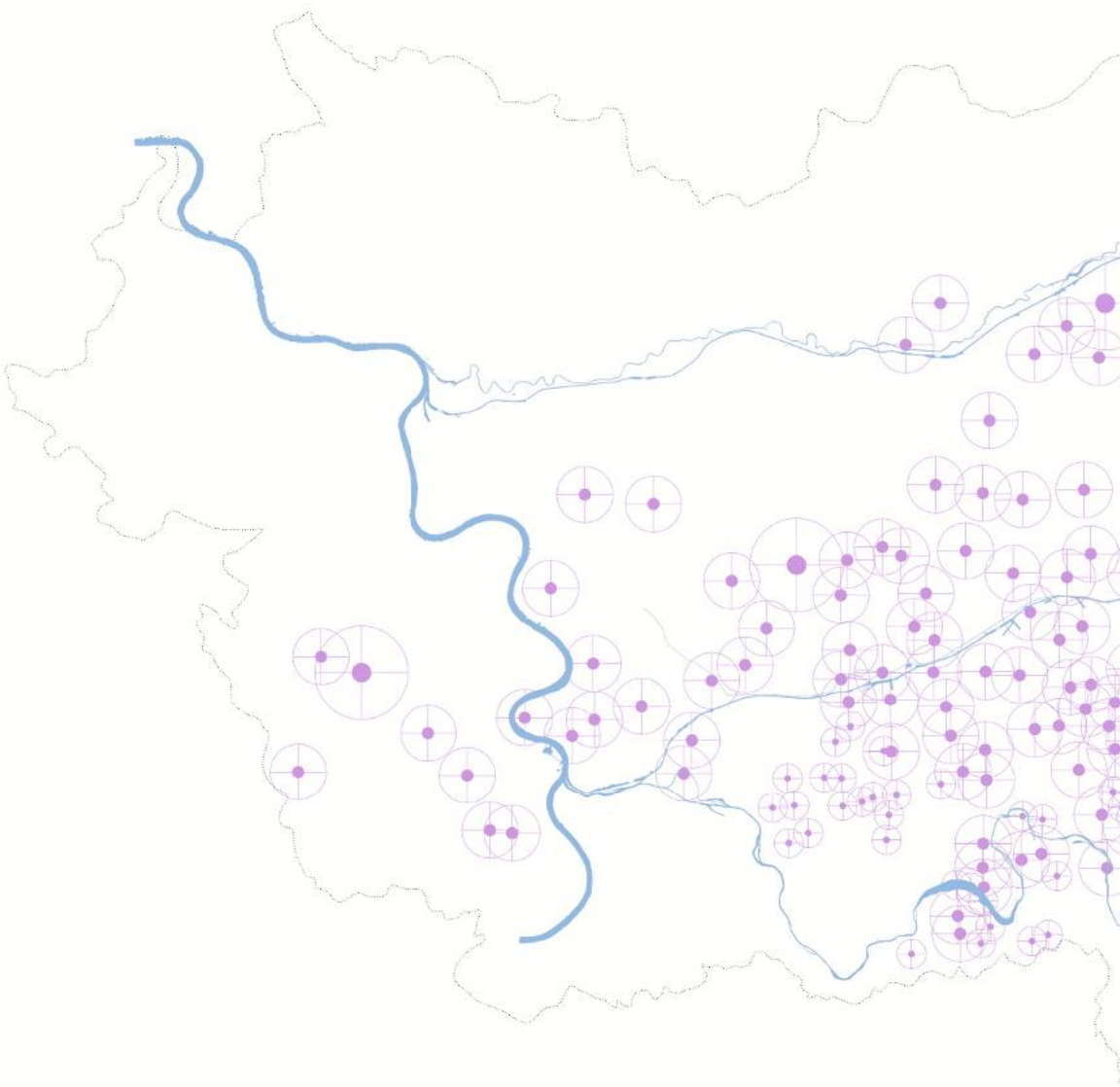
This map reveals the Ruhr Area's unique morphology: a vast constellation of urban clusters without an apparent dominant core. The fragmented distribution of built structures confirms the territory's archipelagic character – a decentralised configuration that challenges conventional metropolitan models and opens new possibilities for rethinking the contemporary city.

Own production with data from OpenStreetMap



Schee / Q
Herzkamp / Genne

Own production with data from OpenStreetMap



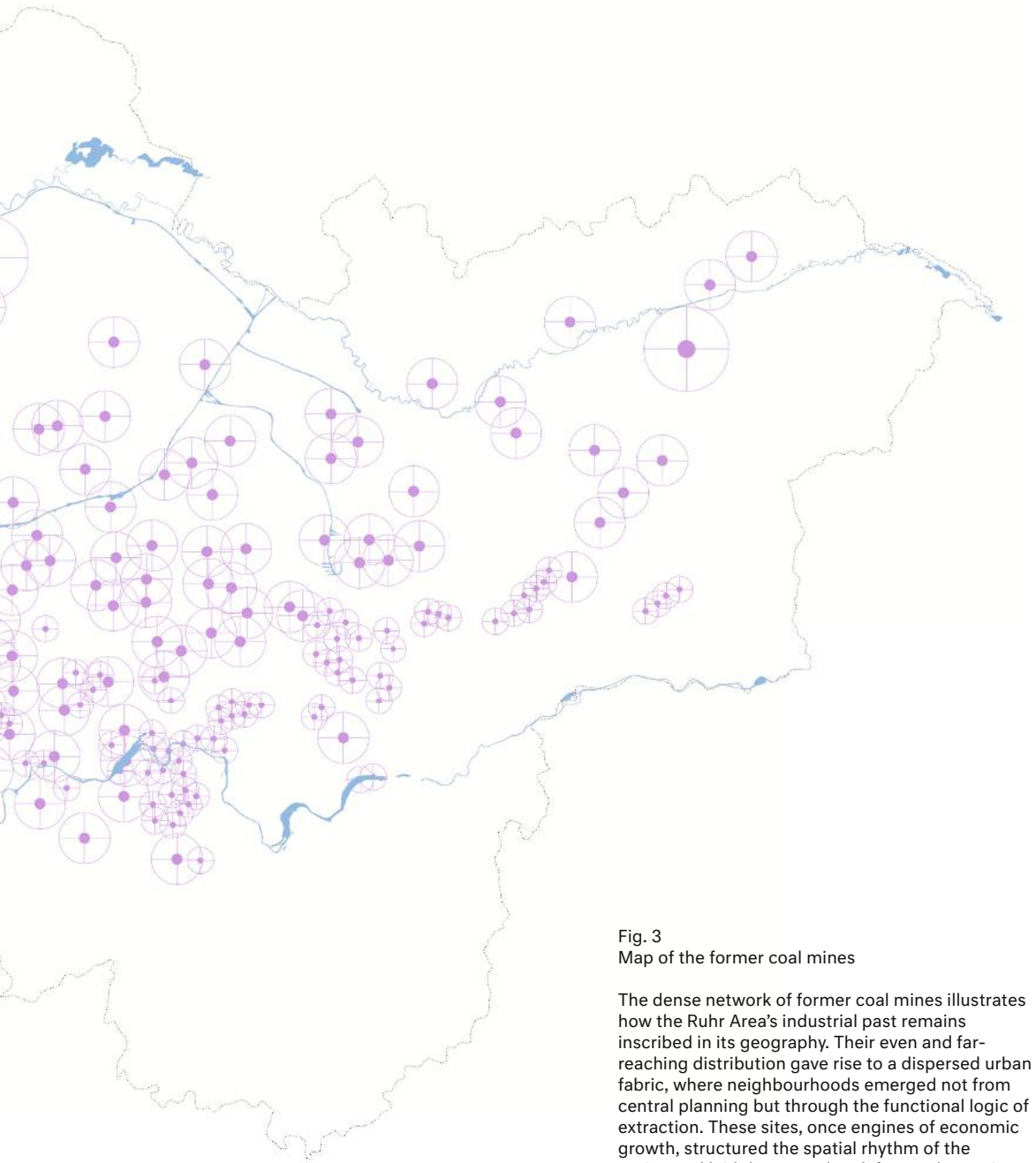


Fig. 3
Map of the former coal mines

The dense network of former coal mines illustrates how the Ruhr Area's industrial past remains inscribed in its geography. Their even and far-reaching distribution gave rise to a dispersed urban fabric, where neighbourhoods emerged not from central planning but through the functional logic of extraction. These sites, once engines of economic growth, structured the spatial rhythm of the region and laid the groundwork for a polycentric settlement model that continues to define the Ruhr's identity today

Own production with data from Reicher et al. (2011)

The Ruhr Area: A Landscape of Neighbourhoods

The Ruhr Area presents a unique territorial model. When examining a map depicting only its built structures, one can observe a distinctive settlement pattern of small, clustered formations. This urban archipelago, whose units are remarkably similar in size and configuration constitutes one of Europe's most extensive agglomerations of neighbourhoods (fig. 1, fig. 5).

This spatial and urban configuration stands in stark contrast to major European capitals like Madrid, London or Paris or global megacities such as Mumbai or Shanghai. Unlike these monocentric models, the Ruhr Area lacks a dominant urban core. Instead, it comprises multiple interconnected units without hierarchical organisation. Even the denser urban centres fail to impose a structural order upon the broader territory.

The Ruhr Area's configuration differs significantly from other European polycentric regions such as the Randstad in the Netherlands, Germany's Rhein-Main, Italy's Veneto or Barcelona's Metropolitan Area. In these cases, while multiple centres exist, one primary city typically dominates, often resulting in peripheral dormitory neighbourhoods that absorb the negative externalities of centralisation.

The Ruhr Area presents an alternative paradigm. At a time when urban planners globally struggle to decentralise congested city cores, this region already embodies an organic, decentralised structure that many contemporary urban theories advocate.

Historically, the Ruhr Area stood as one of Europe's foremost industrial centres, specialising in mining and steel production. While it has transitioned toward a knowledge, culture and service hub over recent decades, the physical imprint of its industrial past remains profoundly visible. The region's urban morphology essentially follows the logic of industrial infrastructure placement, with hundreds of working-class neighbourhoods that developed around mines, steel plants and factories (fig. 3). These communities, also populated by many migrants from diverse origins, shared a common identity rooted in labour rather than traditional urban forms.

The region's urban form was further shaped by Post-Second World War reconstruction strategies. Maps of wartime bomb damage reveal how the pattern of destruction reinforced the existing dispersed settlement model (fig. 4). Reconstruction efforts introduced new housing developments connected by highways, further weakening any potential urban hierarchy through strict functional zoning, extensive road infrastructure, widespread parking facilities and car-dependent commercial centres. This approach ultimately solidified the isolation of neighbourhoods despite their geographic proximity.⁴ Within this dispersed logic, places of worship often served as focal

4 Jeffrey M. Diefendorf, *In the wake of war: The Reconstruction of German Cities after World War II*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.



Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, 2025.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Charlotte Ernst

points for local reorganisation, structuring the everyday life of their immediate surroundings. (fig. 5, fig. 6)

The Ruhr Area's current landscape reflects this complex evolution. Some neighbourhoods represent exemplary urban models, having been designated as heritage sites and preserved as garden city prototypes⁵. However, most have undergone significant transformation, losing their original cohesion as the region transitioned to new economic models and welcomed multicultural communities.

The Ruhr Area territory reveals stark contrasts. While some areas have declined into segregation, losing vitality, social cohesion and resilience, others have emerged as new economic hubs through substantial public and private investment, transforming into modern tech centres, commercial districts or cultural parks with outstanding facilities⁶. The adaptive reuse of former factories and mines as museums, theatres and creative incubators has generated authentic cultural quarters, while universities have established cutting-edge technology parks.

These disparities are equally visible in the region's transport infrastructure, which both connects and divides the territory. Some areas benefit from excellent connectivity, while others remain isolated despite possessing robust rail infrastructure that suffers from chronic underinvestment in maintenance and operations. The tram network's incomplete coverage fails to meet metropolitan needs, missing its potential to effectively link neighbourhoods. Although bus routes extensively cover the basin, the lack of bicycle infrastructure as complementary metropolitan transport remains problematic. While the Ruhr Area boasts an impressive recreational cycling network connected to its green spaces, functional bike lanes for daily commuting are conspicuously absent, with most streets lacking proper cycling connections between public transport nodes and residential areas (fig. 7).

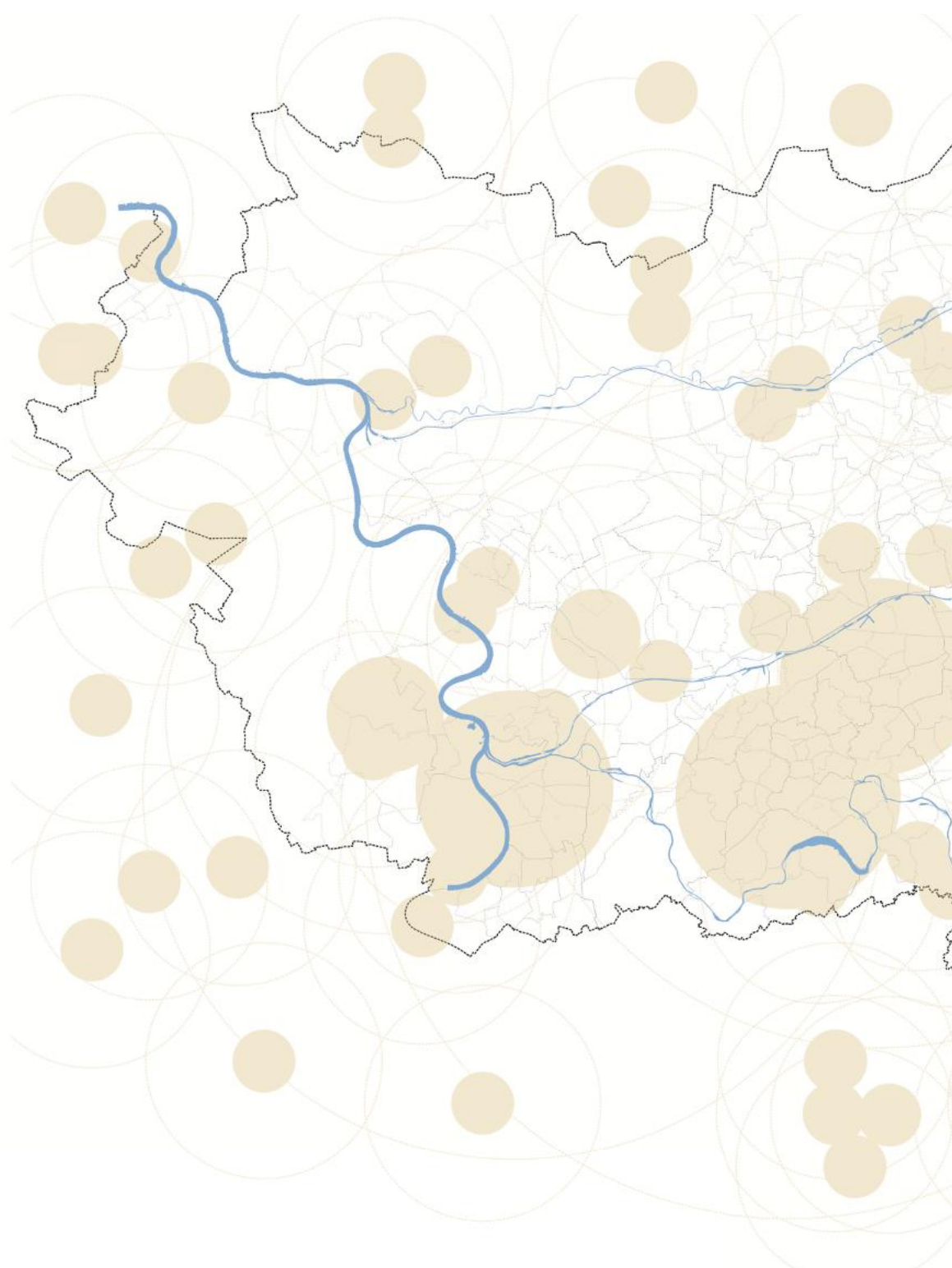
5 The Margarethenhöhe housing estate (constructed between 1909 and 1938) holds a distinctive place in the history of Krupp company housing developments or those sponsored by its philanthropic foundations. While not the earliest of such initiatives, it was among the first to apply the principles of the garden city movement in Germany with significant ambition. This planning approach was inspired by the ideas of British reformer Ebenezer Howard, who articulated his vision in the 1898 publication *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. At its core, the garden city concept sought to combine the social and economic benefits of urban life with the environmental and spatial qualities of the countryside. See Bernhard Pfeiffer, *Margarethenhöhe: Geschichte und Gegenwart einer Gartenstadt*. Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1996. ; Ebenezer Howard, *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1898

6 An example of a tech centre is TZDO (Technology and startup Centre Dortmund), which is a hub for tech startups and spin-offs, closely tied to TU Dortmund and the broader TECH5plus network. It channels innovation and connects with SMEs across the Ruhr Area. An example of a cultural park is Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex – Essen. A UNESCO World Heritage site turned industrial cultural park featuring the Ruhr Museum, repurposed conveyors and infrastructure integrated into public spaces, serving as a symbol of Ruhr's cultural transformation.



This Is Not a Church Workshop in Essen, 2025.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Charlotte Ernst

The Ruhr Area already contains all the necessary elements for a multimodal transportation system, though strategic investment remains crucial to overcome car dependency. The path forward involves densifying neighbourhoods to reduce travel distances while simultaneously strengthening public transit networks and developing comprehensive active mobility infrastructure. When implemented as an interconnected system, these measures could elevate the Ruhr Area's distinctive urban framework into a pioneering model of sustainable regional development.



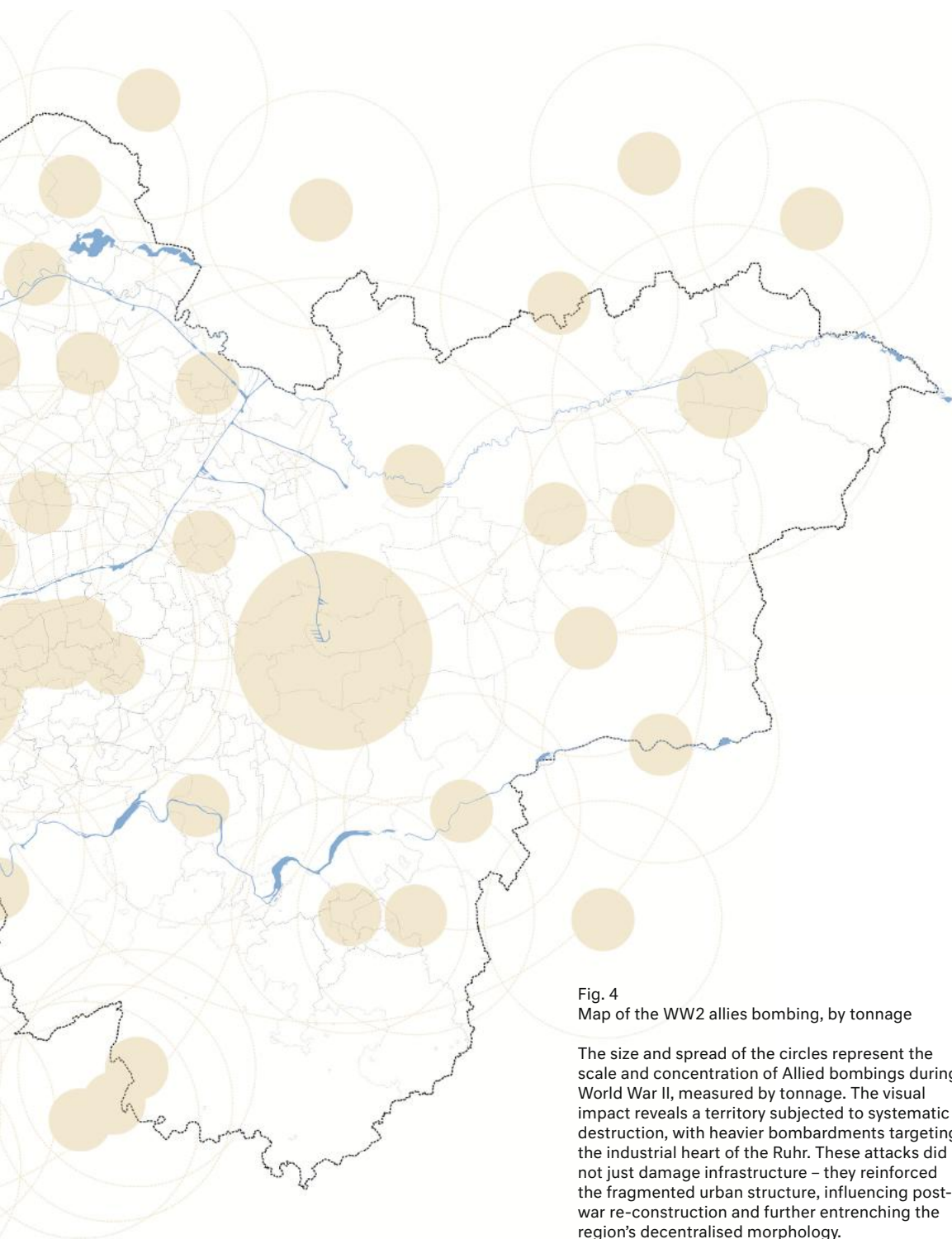
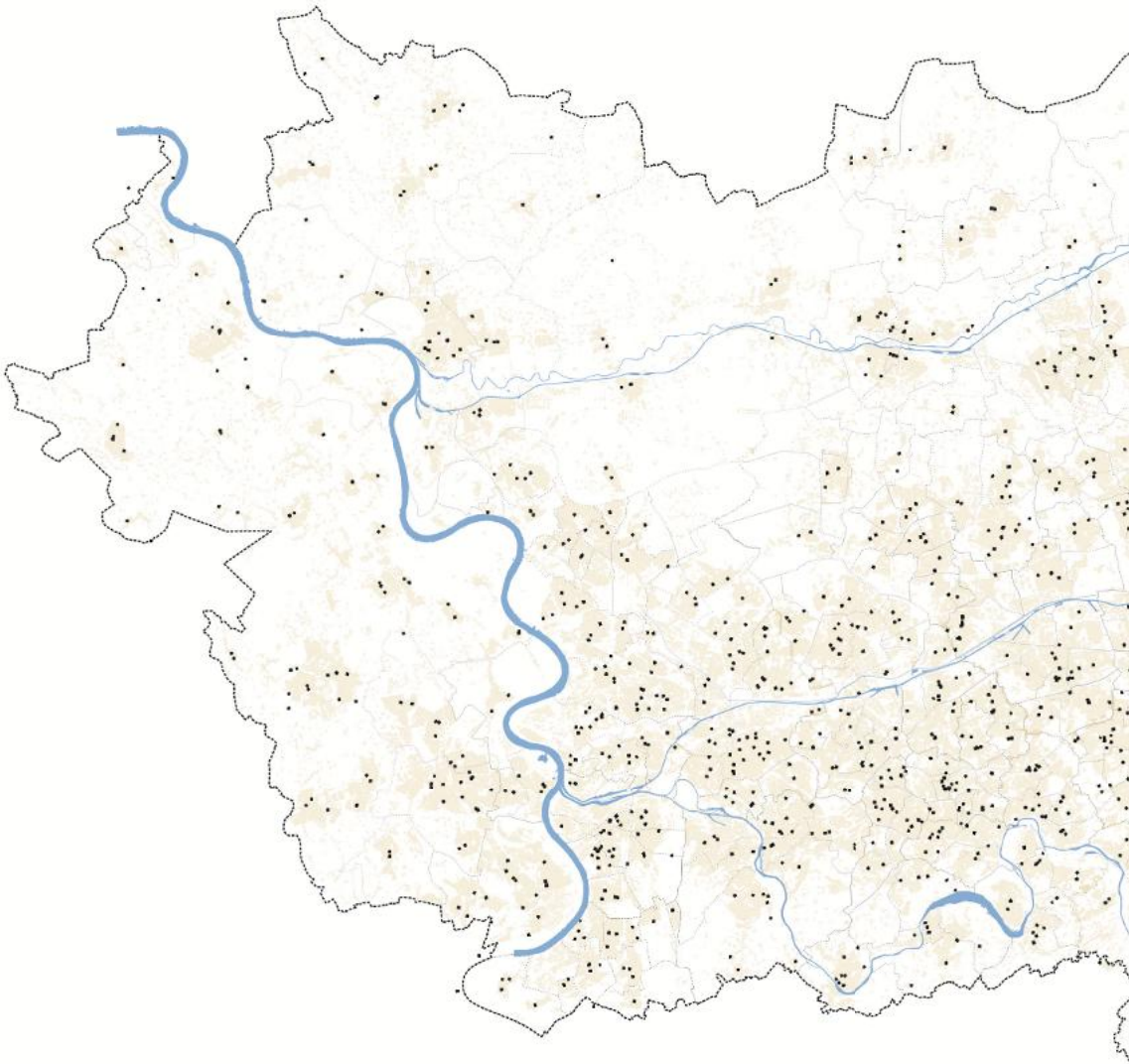


Fig. 4
Map of the WW2 allies bombing, by tonnage

The size and spread of the circles represent the scale and concentration of Allied bombings during World War II, measured by tonnage. The visual impact reveals a territory subjected to systematic destruction, with heavier bombardments targeting the industrial heart of the Ruhr. These attacks did not just damage infrastructure – they reinforced the fragmented urban structure, influencing post-war re-construction and further entrenching the region's decentralised morphology.

Own production with data from OpenStreetMap



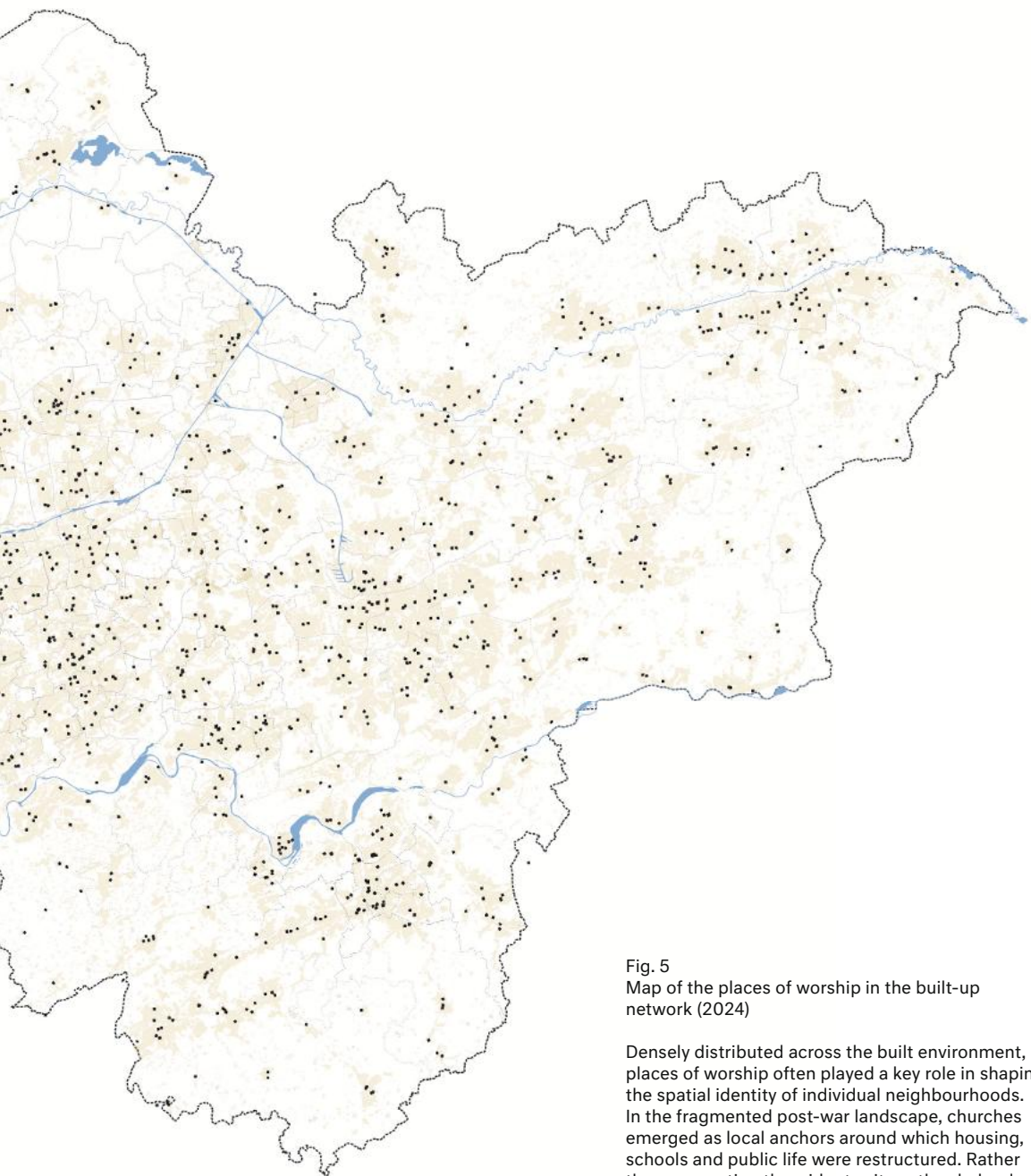


Fig. 5
Map of the places of worship in the built-up
network (2024)

Densely distributed across the built environment, places of worship often played a key role in shaping the spatial identity of individual neighbourhoods. In the fragmented post-war landscape, churches emerged as local anchors around which housing, schools and public life were restructured. Rather than connecting the wider territory, they helped organise the immediate surroundings, reinforcing the self-contained nature of each urban fragment.

Own production with data from OpenStreetMap





Fig. 6
Zoom of the archipelago of neighbourhoods and
their places of worship (2024)

Own production with data from OpenStreetMap





Fig. 7
Map of the public transport network, by type (2024)

The superposition of train, tram and bus lines reveals a dense yet fragmented public transport network. Despite its territorial reach, the system lacks cohesion, with overlaps, discontinuities and limited intermodality. A partial exception is the tram network, whose structure suggests a degree of centralisation – concentrating services along a southern axis. Elsewhere, mobility remains uneven and often fails to bridge the divides between neighbourhoods

Own production with data from OpenStreetMap



Fig. 7.1
Railway lines

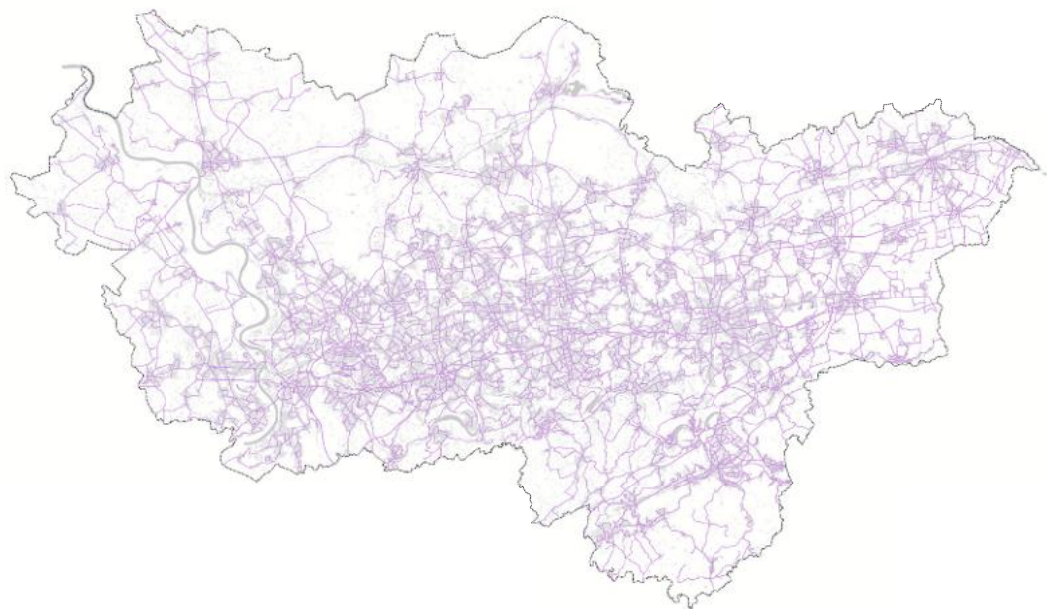


Fig. 7.2
Bus routes

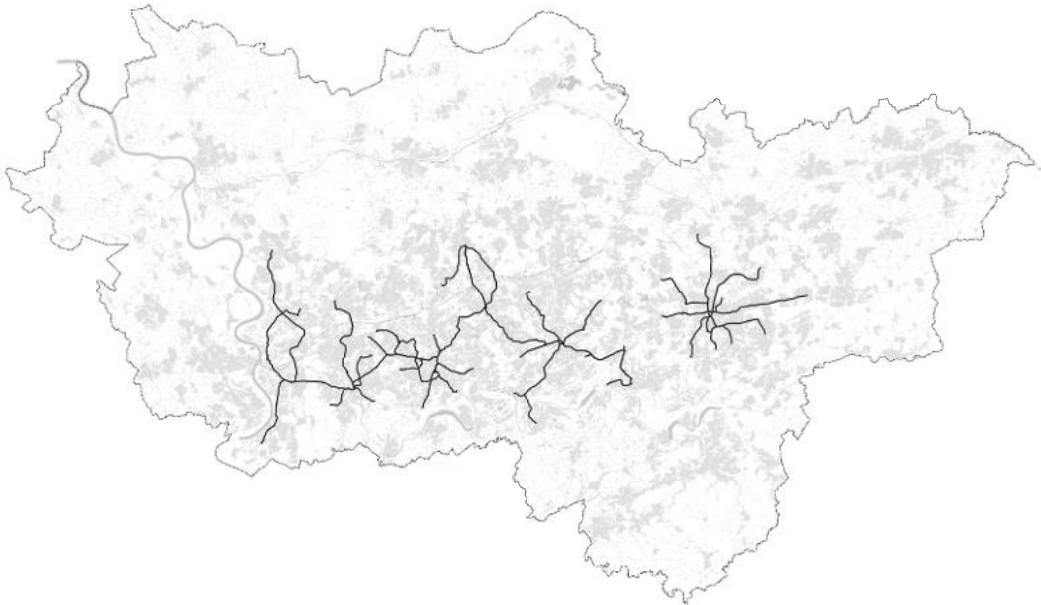


Fig. 7.3
Tram lines



Fig. 7.4
Bike lanes



Doppelbogenbrücke (Double Bow Bridge) Nordsternpark, Gelsenkirchen. Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose

Strategic Planning of the Region

Today, there is growing consensus on the profound interdependence between large cities and smaller communities. The daily lives of residents unfold across regionally interconnected spaces where traditional administrative boundaries faded in relevance, giving way to broader urban dynamics. In Europe, polycentric regions have emerged as a key model for contemporary and future urban development.

Yet translating this concept into practice presents significant challenges:

- How can such a vast and diverse territory be structured, where some areas expand while others contract?
- What strategies and tools are needed for its planning and development?
- Is it possible to maintain a functional balance between different zones?
- In the Ruhr Area's case, with its 53 independent municipalities and competing local priorities, can this mosaic of cities evolve into a cohesive urban landscape rather than remaining a collection of isolated neighbourhoods?

The Ruhr Area offers an unparalleled setting to reflect on these questions, which have already been explored through numerous attempts to craft an integrated urban vision for the territory. From Robert Schmidt's 1912 housing plan⁷, which sought to organise the coal- and steel-dominated landscape between Essen and Duisburg, to the ongoing efforts of the Regionalverband Ruhr (Ruhr Regional Association) – founded in 1920 and pioneering green space preservation and structural planning – the region has long grappled with territorial coordination.⁸

These precedents reveal the protracted struggle to establish a sustainable urban model for the region. The question remains unresolved, lacking a convincing medium or longterm strategy to harness the basin's rich diversity as an asset for development.

7 Robert Schmidt's 1912 proposal – formulated in his *Denkschrift* – is widely recognised as a foundational moment in regional planning for the Ruhr Area. Originally submitted as a planning memorandum, this document outlines the principles for a general settlement plan for the Ruhr Area. Available as a reprint: Robert Schmidt, *Denkschrift betreffend Grundsätze zur Aufstellung eines General-Siedlungsplanes für den Regierungsbezirk Düsseldorf (rechtsrheinisch)*. Essen: Klartext, 2009.

8 The Regionalverband Ruhr (RVR) was one of the first regional institutions in Europe to systematically coordinate urban development and preserve green spaces across municipal boundaries. For institutional context and the evolution of regional planning mechanisms in Germany see: Hans Heinrich Blotevogel and Bernd Schelhaas, *Raumordnung und Landesplanung in Deutschland: Institutionen, Aufgaben, Instrumente*. Hannover: Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung, 2011.

When the predecessor of the RVR lost its authority over regional development due to an administrative reform in 1975⁹, its capacity to guide the Ruhr Area's growth was severely diminished. Planning became fragmented across three zones, each following distinct territorial principles. Recent decades have seen repeated attempts to unify the Ruhr Area's cities under a cohesive "Ruhrstadt" (Ruhr City) concept. All of these initiatives failed, however, primarily because neither political actors nor economic powers demonstrated genuine interest in altering their urban or corporate strategies. Decisions continued to prioritise immediate needs over comprehensive urban redesign.¹⁰ Other initiatives to structure a vision for the Ruhr Area within the Rhine-Ruhr context also faltered. Projects like the 2002 The Region Maker: Rhein Ruhr City by Dutch architectural firm MVRDV or the 2008 Konzept Ruhr by Wirtschaftsförderung Metropole Ruhr GmbH, left negligible impacts. Even AS+P Albert Speer + Partner's 2010 preliminary study for a masterplan commissioned by North Rhine-Westphalia yielded no tangible outcomes¹¹.

Undoubtedly, one of the most notable transformation efforts was the International Building Exhibition (IBA) Emscher Park (1989–1999), which pioneered new urban approaches and delivered concrete renewal examples. These ideas found continuity in 2010's *Ruhr.2010*, the campaign that led to the Ruhr Area's recognition as European Capital of Culture – yet progress since has been incremental at best.

- 9 The Siedlungsverband Ruhrkohlenbezirk (SVR) underwent two key institutional transformations before becoming the Regionalverband Ruhr (RVR): In 1920, the SVR (Siedlungsverband Ruhrkohlenbezirk) is founded – the first legally mandated regional planning body in Germany, with powers over settlement and open space planning in the Ruhr. In 1979 SVR is renamed as KVR (Kommunalverband Ruhrgebiet) following the 1975 administrative reforms in North Rhine–Westphalia. While it continued to exist, its planning competencies were significantly reduced and its role became more administrative and service oriented. In 2004 KVR is transformed into the RVR (Regionalverband Ruhr). This marks the formal establishment of the RVR as the current metropolitan institution representing the Ruhr Area, with a renewed (though limited) mandate for regional coordination, including spatial planning, infrastructure, and landscape management.
- 10 As noted in the introduction of Christa Reicher, Klaus R. Kunzmann, Jan Polívka, Frank Roost, Yasemin Utku and Michael Wegener (eds.). *Schichten einer Region: Kartenstücke zur räumlichen Struktur des Ruhrgebiets*. Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2011.
- 11 The 2002 Rhein-Ruhr City concept by MVRDV was unveiled in conjunction with the NRW-Forum Kultur in Düsseldorf as part of an exhibition showcasing regional-scale urban investigations, though the scheme never progressed beyond the conceptual phase. The 2008 Konzept Ruhr, commissioned by Metropole Ruhr, outlined a strategic vision for sustainable urban and regional development but saw limited implementation due to institutional inertia and funding constraints. The 2010 preliminary study by AS+P Albert Speer + Partner, commissioned by the State of North Rhine-Westphalia as a preparatory masterplan, remained unrealised – underscoring the gap between strategic visioning and actual project delivery. See <https://www.mvrdv.com/publications/927/the-region-maker-rhein-ruhr-city> (accessed 18th of February 2026); as-p.com+1umweltbundesamt.de+1rvr.ruhr+5staedtebau.rwth-aachen.de+5artbook.com+5

Vulnerability

The Ruhr basin faces profound economic, social and environmental vulnerabilities that have deeply impacted its neighbourhoods. For decades, the region drove Germany's growth, yet the closure of mines and economic restructuring have left a legacy of unemployment, precariousness and social fragmentation that persists today. Data reveals stark disparities: several Ruhr neighbourhoods display poverty levels far above national averages and in districts such as Duisburg's Marxloh nearly half of all children under the age of fifteen live in households receiving SGB II benefits, with child poverty estimated to affect around 71% of minors in the area¹². Gelsenkirchen, frequently described in national statistics as one of Germany's poorest cities, records among the lowest average household incomes in the country. These alarming trends coincide with Germany's recent economic slowdown and the escalating climate crisis, factors likely to exacerbate an already fragile situation.

This fragility is also spatial: mobility across the region remains deeply uneven. While the road network is expansive, it often reinforces territorial imbalances – favouring car-centric patterns and leaving vulnerable neighbourhoods further disconnected from opportunity (fig. 8).

The transition from heavy industry to a service and technology-based economy has been profoundly uneven. Ruhr Area cities like Duisburg, Essen, Gelsenkirchen and Bochum continue to report unemployment rates exceeding national averages (fig. 9, fig. 10). Job insecurity has fuelled rising poverty, particularly among generations of former mining families.¹³ Despite state subsidies and retraining programmes, inequality remains entrenched, with wealth concentrated in the basin's southern neighbourhoods and deprivation pervasive in the north.

Social cohesion poses another critical challenge. Migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, as well as from other regions and countries including North Africa and Syria have enriched cultural diversity but also exposed systemic exclusion (fig. 11). Migrant communities face disproportionate barriers to well-paid employment, often relegated to neighbourhoods with crumbling infrastructure and inadequate services. Discrimination and limited opportunities fuel tensions, undermining integration and community stability.¹⁴

12 Stadt Duisburg, Bericht zur Lage von Familien mit Kindern in Marxloh (Duisburg: Stadt Duisburg, 2018), which reports that 2,230 children under 15 in Marxloh live in SGB II households and that, when combined with children living in extreme poverty, child poverty affects approximately 71% of minors in the district.

13 Janka Lengyel, Stéphane Roux and Seraphim Alvanides (2022). Multivariate analysis of socioeconomic profiles in the Ruhr area, Germany. *Journal of Maps*, 18(3) (2022).

14 Ibid.

These vulnerabilities are mirrored in the demographic evolution. Population density and migration indicators, both in their current and long-term trends, highlight the stark asymmetries between cities: while some urban areas have experienced moderate growth or continued inflows, others have stagnated or declined steadily over the past fifteen years. (fig. 12–15)

The Ruhr Area's education system struggles to break cycles of disadvantage. In high-poverty areas, limited access to quality schooling perpetuates low social mobility. School dropout rates outpace other German regions¹⁵, leaving younger generations ill-equipped for the labour market (fig. 16).

The industrial legacy lingers environmentally. Though initiatives like Emscher Landschaftspark's greening project showcase ecological renewal, soil and water contamination persist. Water management reveals the region's vulnerability most starkly: over 600 pumping stations work perpetually to prevent flooding in densely populated areas (Fig. 17). Ground subsidence¹⁶, exceeding 15 meters in places due to abandoned mine networks, has destabilised entire neighbourhoods, prompting planned demolitions in parts of Gelsenkirchen.¹⁷

The Ruhr Area's international reputation portrays a region that has managed to transform itself from a harsh, polluted mining landscape into an ecological model, best exemplified by the remarkable metamorphosis of the Emscher: a waterway that only decades ago functioned as an open sewer.

Yet this surface-level success masks a precarious reality. Beneath lies an enormous, ongoing effort to maintain an artificial balance under fundamentally fragile conditions. This delicate equilibrium could collapse at any moment, with particularly devastating consequences for the most vulnerable neighbourhoods. The combination of impending economic crises and the escalating climate emergency threatens to dramatically worsen living conditions for disadvantaged populations, who remain concentrated in areas with the poorest housing infrastructure.

15 Ibid.; Christa Reicher, *Schichten einer Region: Kartenstücke zur räumlichen Struktur des Ruhrgebiets*. Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2011.

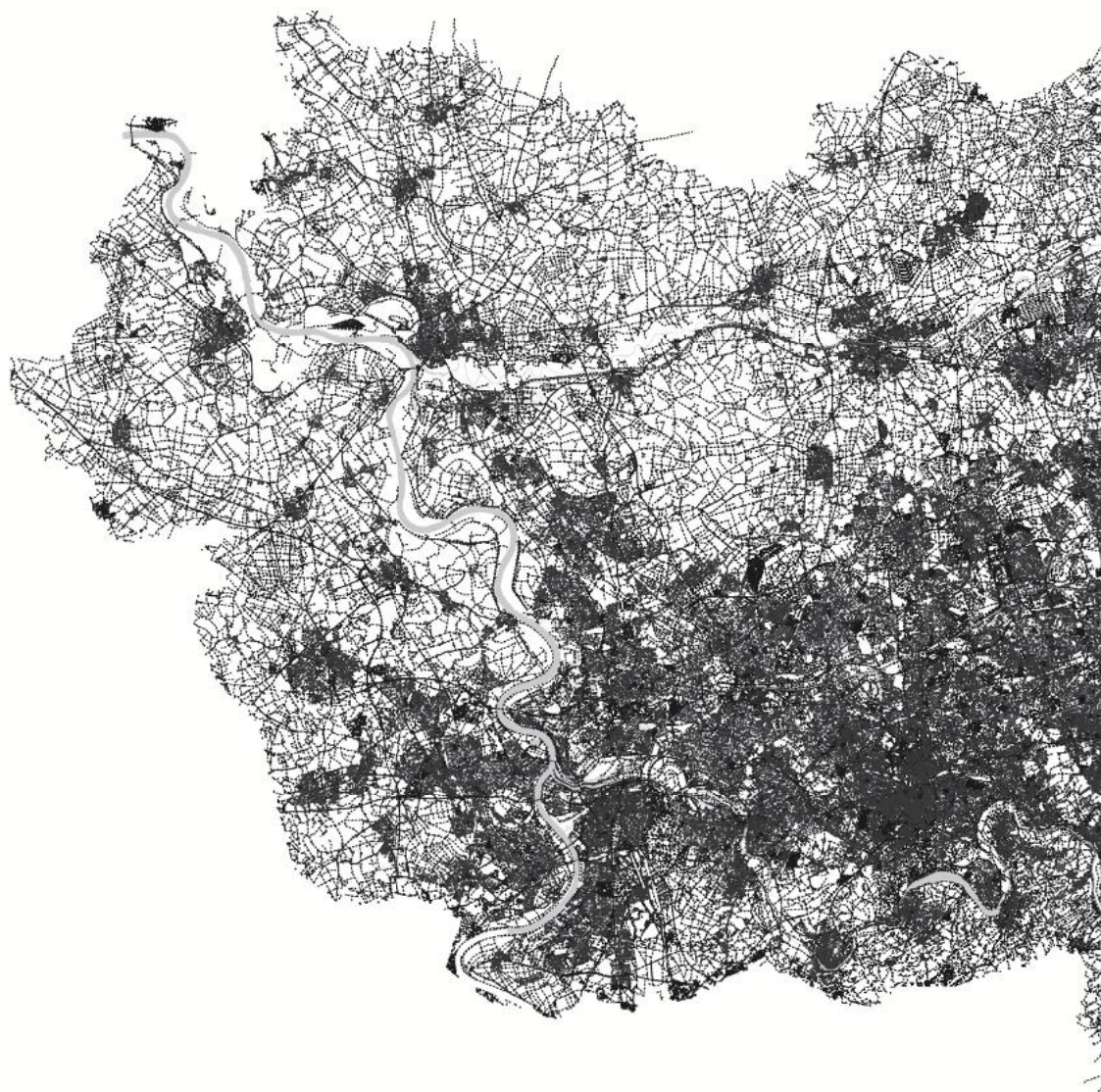
16 Ibid.

17 These developments demonstrate how mining-induced ground subsidence and widespread urban degradation have compelled the municipality of Gelsenkirchen to implement a range of legal and administrative interventions – including emergency evacuations and court-mandated demolitions – with the stated aim of safeguarding public safety and promoting neighbourhood regeneration. However, this policy remains highly controversial and has been criticised by various civic groups and associations, such as lala.ruhr, who argue that the underlying agenda may be one of gentrification. According to these critics, such measures risk revalorising the existing built environment, reducing the availability of social housing and accelerating housing cost increases in affected districts.



Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, 2025.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Charlotte Ernst

Addressing these vulnerabilities demands a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach. Truly effective solutions must combine inclusive economic policies with robust social integration strategies and system-wide sustainable urban development. Such an approach needs to work simultaneously at multiple scales: from improving basic housing conditions at the neighbourhood level to implementing coordinated territorial planning across the entire region. This dual focus, balancing hyperlocal interventions with strategic regional coordination, could form the basis of what might be termed an “Integrated Neighbourhood Development Strategy”.



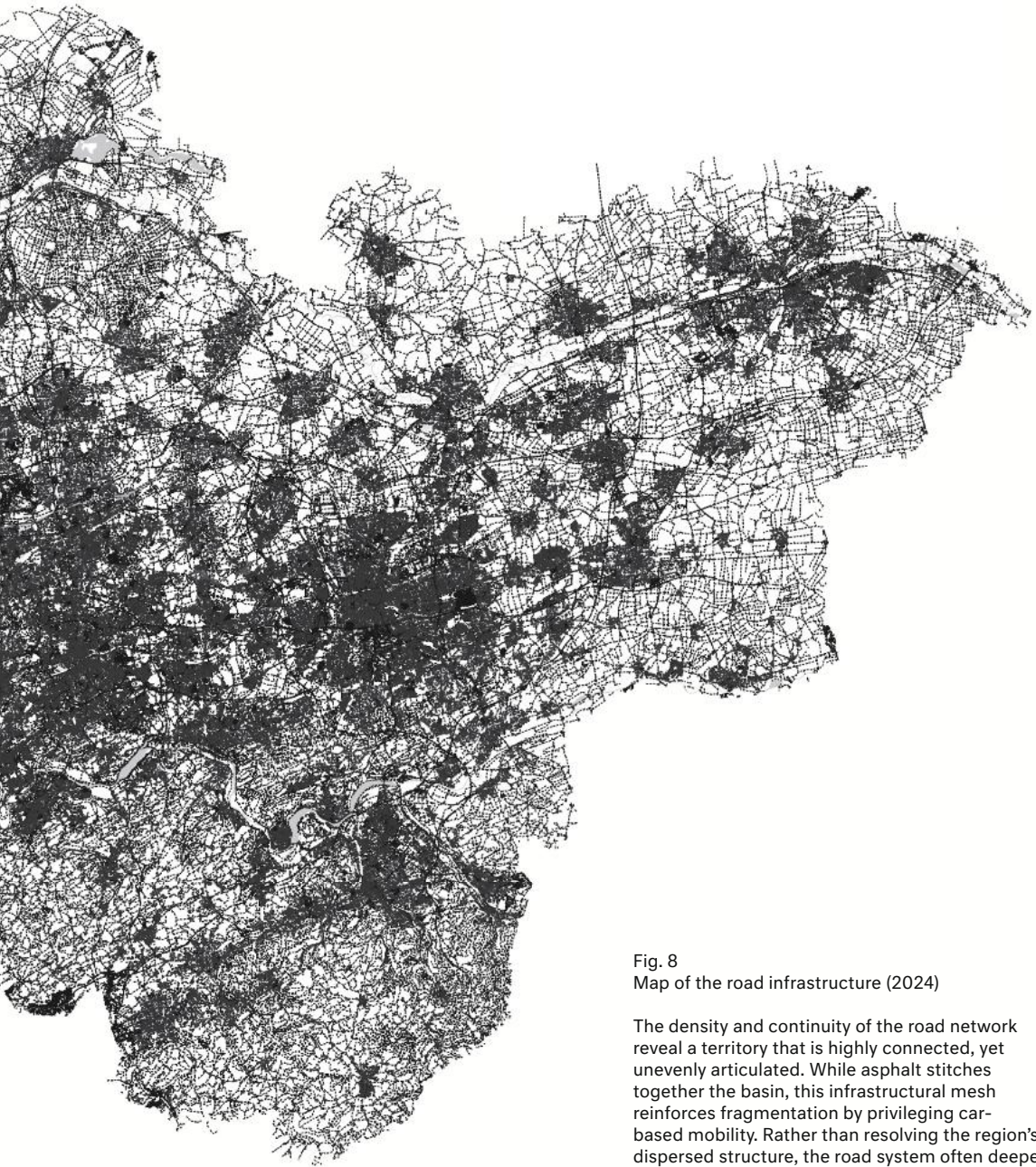


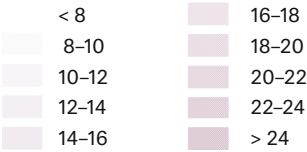
Fig. 8
Map of the road infrastructure (2024)

The density and continuity of the road network reveal a territory that is highly connected, yet unevenly articulated. While asphalt stitches together the basin, this infrastructural mesh reinforces fragmentation by privileging car-based mobility. Rather than resolving the region's dispersed structure, the road system often deepens local isolation – posing critical challenges for future models of metropolitan accessibility and integration.

Own production with data from OpenStreetMap



Unemployment rate (%) in 2022



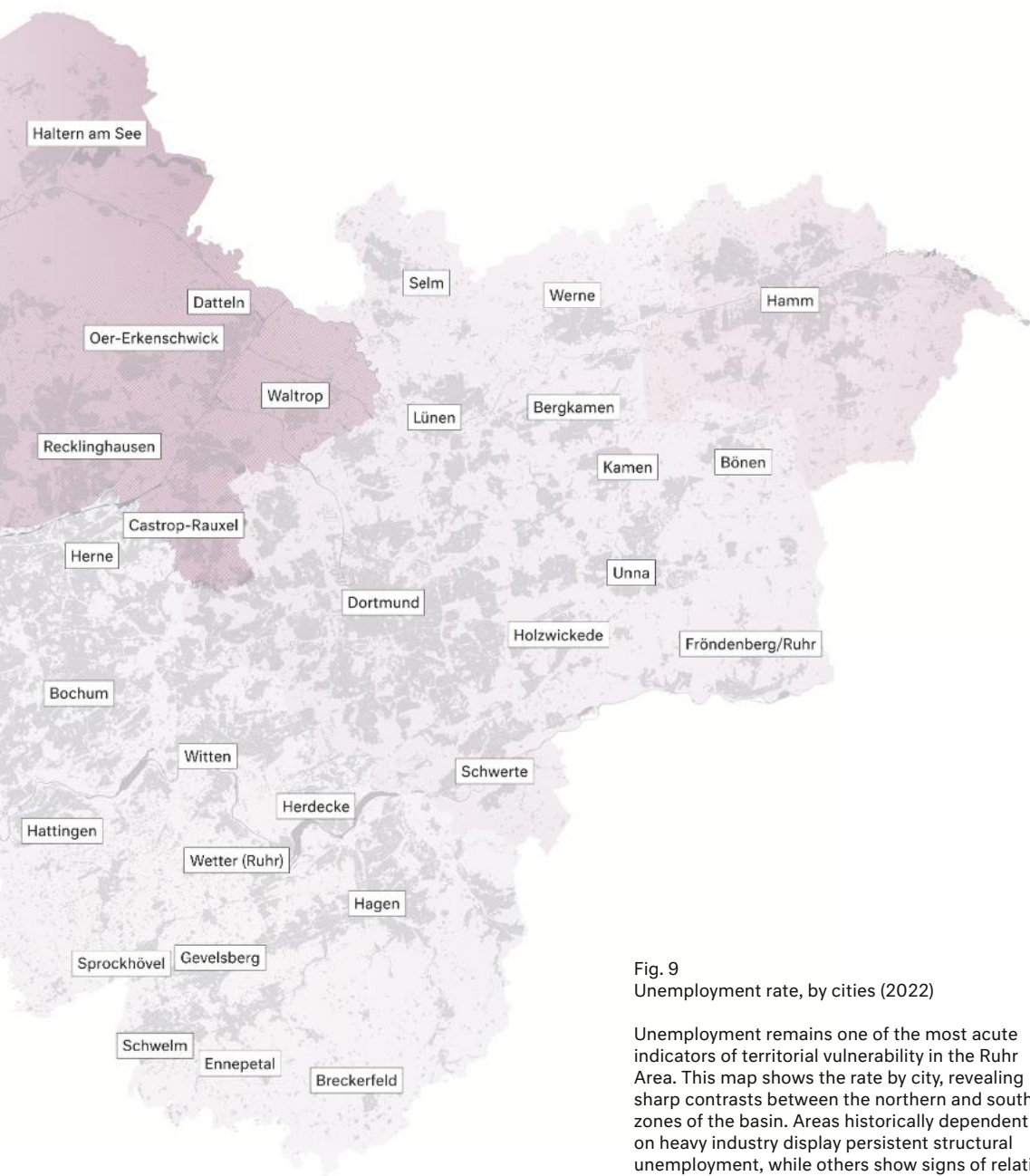
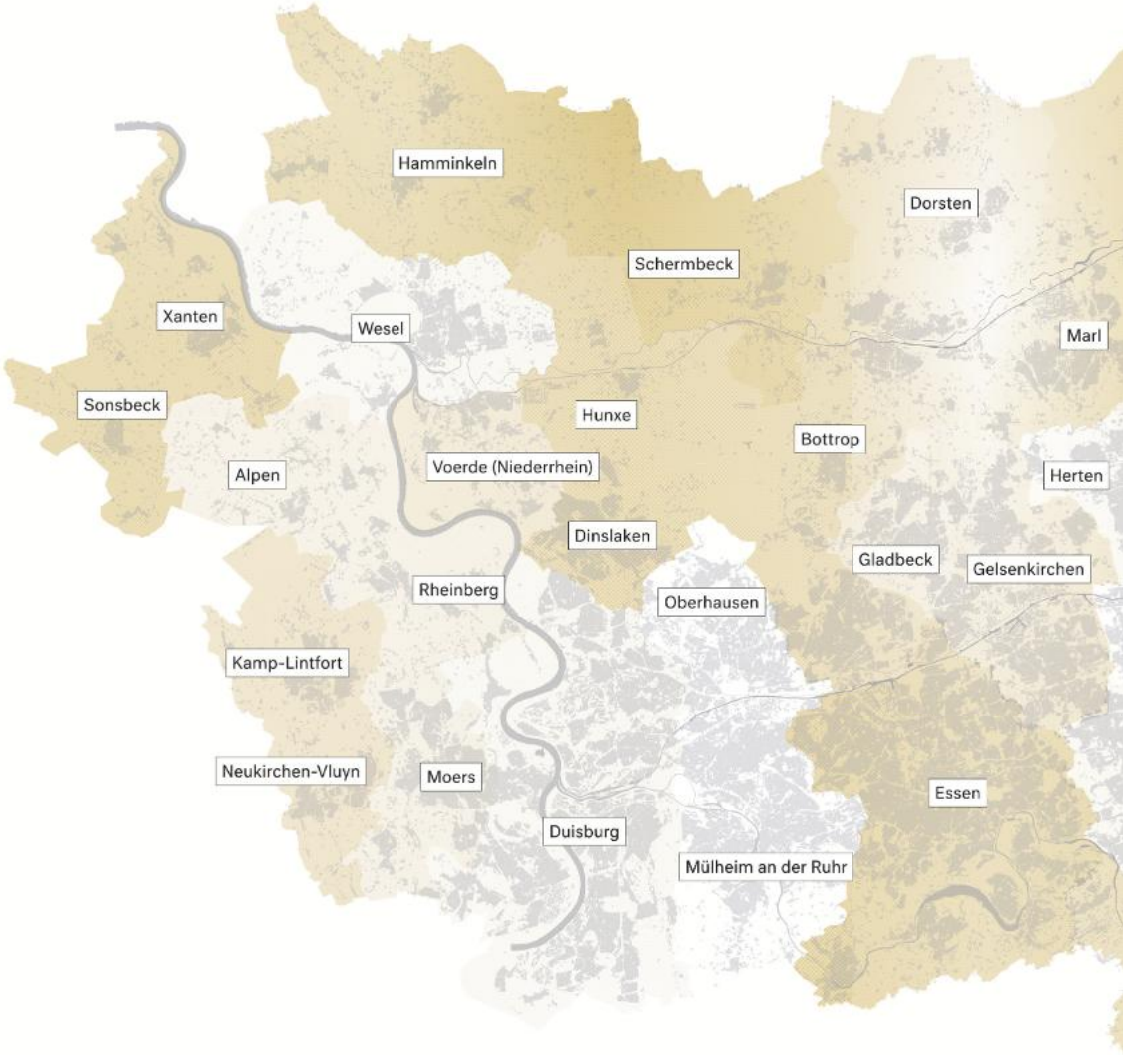


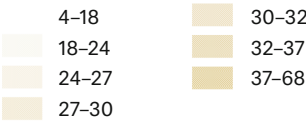
Fig. 9
Unemployment rate, by cities (2022)

Unemployment remains one of the most acute indicators of territorial vulnerability in the Ruhr Area. This map shows the rate by city, revealing sharp contrasts between the northern and southern zones of the basin. Areas historically dependent on heavy industry display persistent structural unemployment, while others show signs of relative recovery. These disparities expose long-standing socio-economic fault lines, cutting across the region's fragmented urban fabric.

Own production with data from StatistikPortal Ruhr



Marginal jobs rate (%) 2019–2023



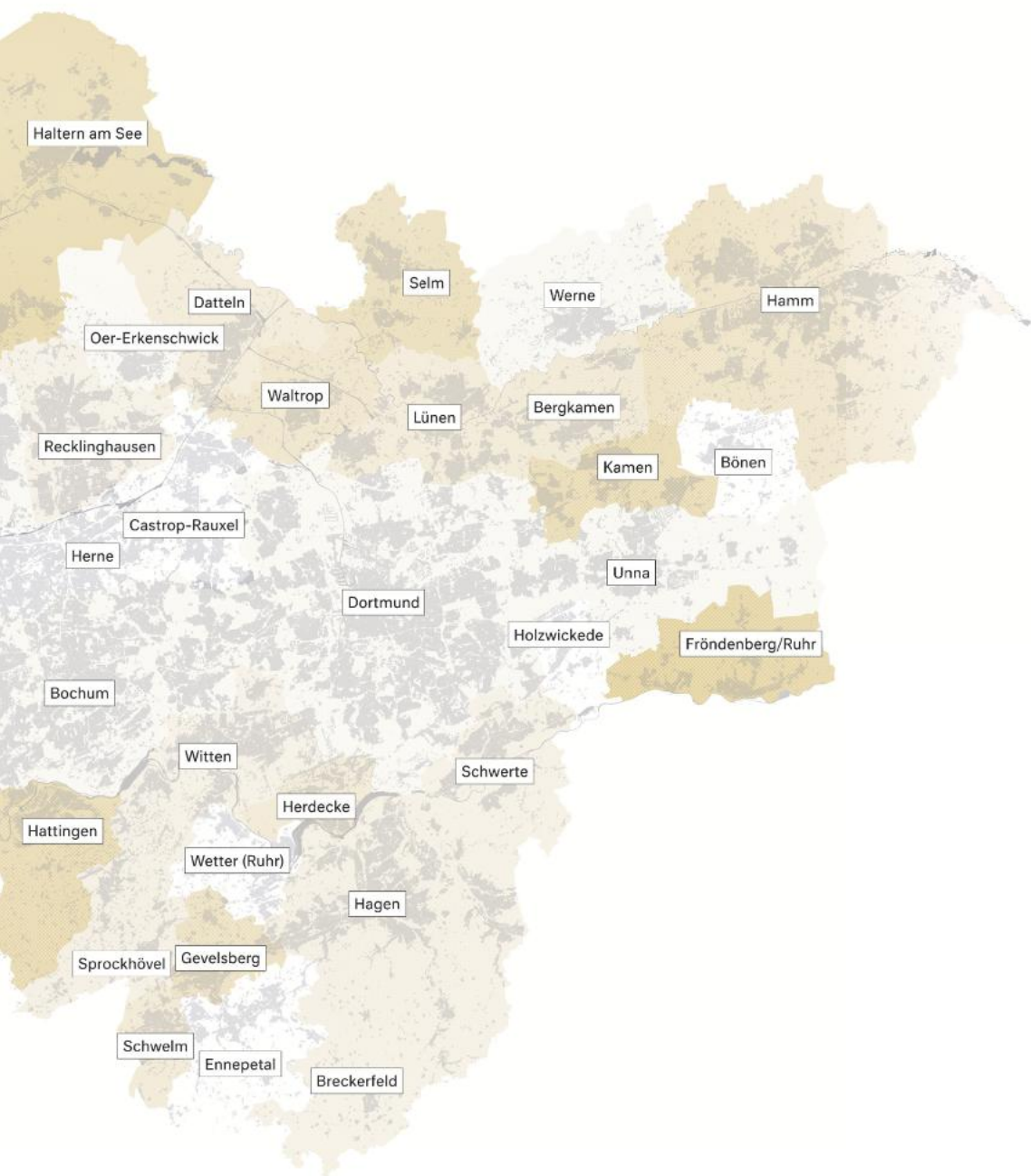
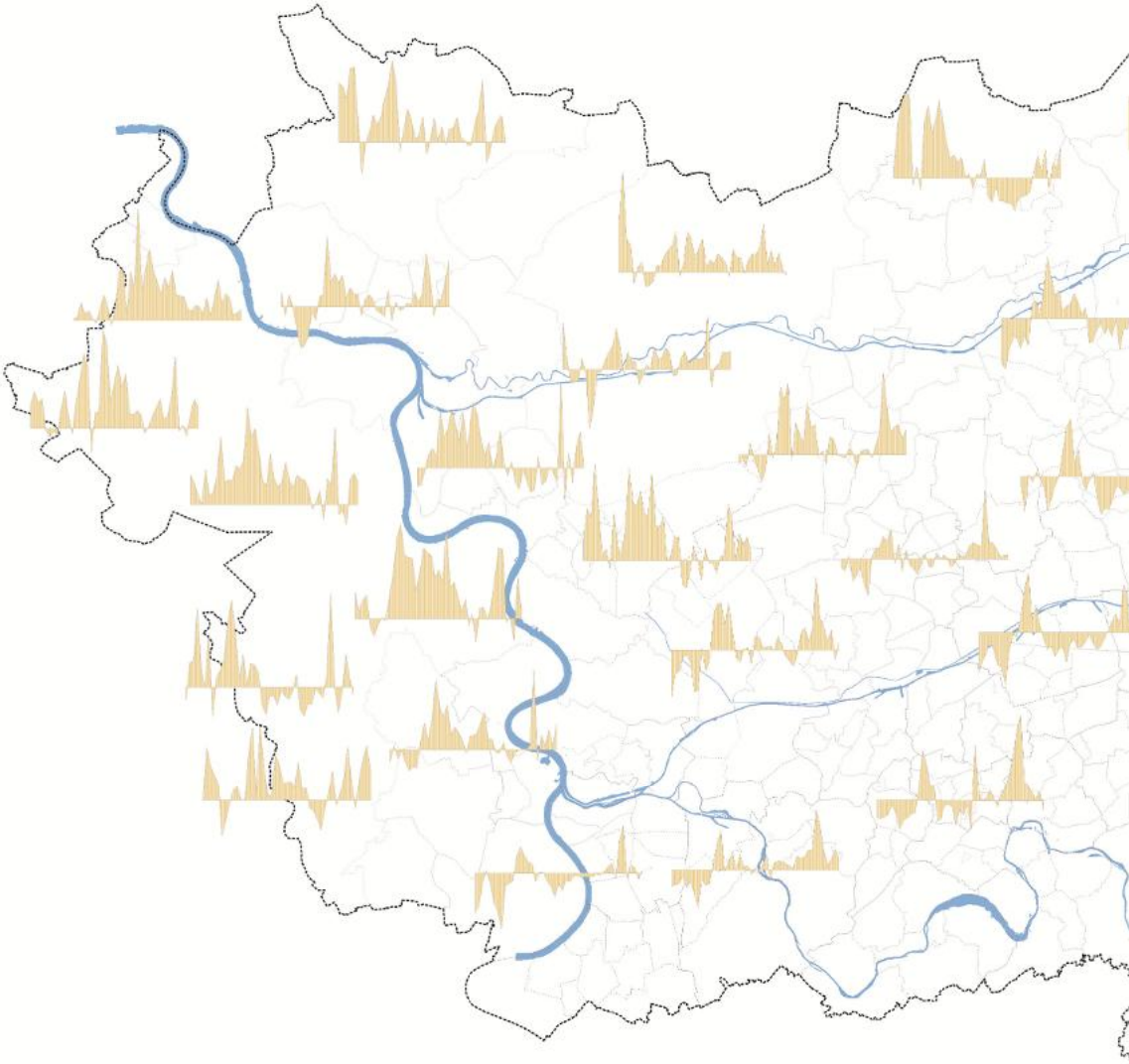


Fig. 10
Marginal jobs rate, by cities (2022)

Own production with data from StatistikPortal Ruhr



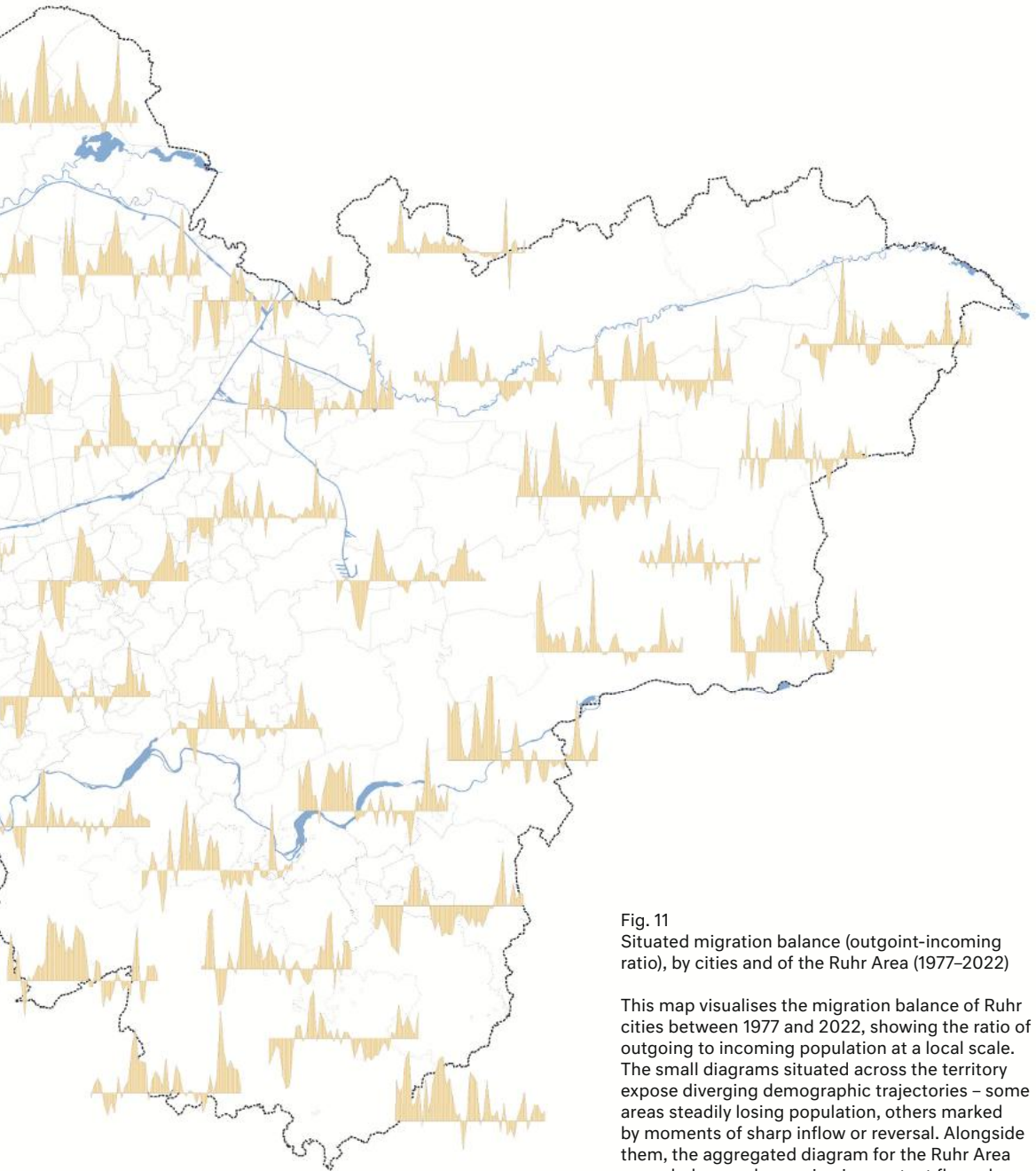


Fig. 11
Situating migration balance (outgoing-incoming ratio), by cities and of the Ruhr Area (1977–2022)

This map visualises the migration balance of Ruhr cities between 1977 and 2022, showing the ratio of outgoing to incoming population at a local scale. The small diagrams situated across the territory expose diverging demographic trajectories – some areas steadily losing population, others marked by moments of sharp inflow or reversal. Alongside them, the aggregated diagram for the Ruhr Area as a whole reveals a region in constant flux, where patterns of mobility have played a decisive role in shaping urban identity.

Own production with data from StatistikPortal Ruhr

Resilience

Yet it is not the case that everything should be viewed negatively. The positive aspect is that the Ruhr Area is well-equipped to confront these challenges: drawing on its inherent strengths and remarkable resilience. Much of its capacity for reinvention has already been demonstrated through exemplary projects like the environmental restoration of the Emscher River or the conversion of industrial heritage into outstanding cultural facilities such as the Zollverein UNESCO World Heritage Site. Hundreds of well-distributed urban regeneration initiatives have successfully reshaped the region's image and purpose, attracting major international events including the IBA exhibition (1989–1999), the European Capital of Culture (2010), Manifesta 16 Ruhr (2026) and the upcoming International Garden Exhibition (IGA Ruhr 2027).

Beyond these bold institutional efforts, the territory is also enriched by a robust ecosystem of community associations and networks that have played pivotal roles in social integration, urban revitalisation and building resilience against economic and social crises (fig. 18).

Since the late 19th century, the Ruhr Area has been an epicentre of Germany's labour movement, with strong trade unions and community organisations tied to mining and steel production. During industrialisation, these groups not only defended workers' rights but also fostered community welfare through cooperatives, social housing and local services. Following the closure of mines and factories in the last half of the 20th century¹⁸, the region's associational landscape has transformed. While unions remained key players, new networks emerged focused on social integration, migrant support and cultural-urban renewal.

This vast organisational system displays diverse approaches at different scales. Associations and networks like Plan B Ruhr, IFAK e.V. and Diakonie Ruhr facilitate migrant inclusion through education, employment and social cohesion programmes. Neighbourhood networks and citizen participation initiatives, such as "Ein anderes Duisburg" or "Nordstadt Together" in Dortmund, engage residents in improving public spaces and organising communities. Cultural and creative associations, ranging from the institutional PACT Zollverein to grassroots organisations like kitev (Kultur im Turm e. V.) in Oberhausen and Pottporus e.V in Herne, collectively drive urban regeneration through the transformative power of regional culture.

18 Kerstine Appun, Germany bids farewell to domestic hard coal mining. Clean Energy Wire, 2018. <https://www.cleanenergywire.org/news/germany-bids-farewell-domestic-hard-coal-mining#> (accessed 18th of February 2026).



The Ruhrdeich bicycle path in Duisburg.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose

Religious institutions also play a central role in this; the spatial distribution of worship spaces reveals the layered presence of different faiths across the Ruhr Area, reflecting how plural identities have become embedded in the territory.

This multifaceted civil society fabric, combining historical depth with innovative approaches, forms the living backbone of the Ruhr Area's ongoing transformation; this proves that its communities remain the ultimate source of resilience against the challenges ahead.

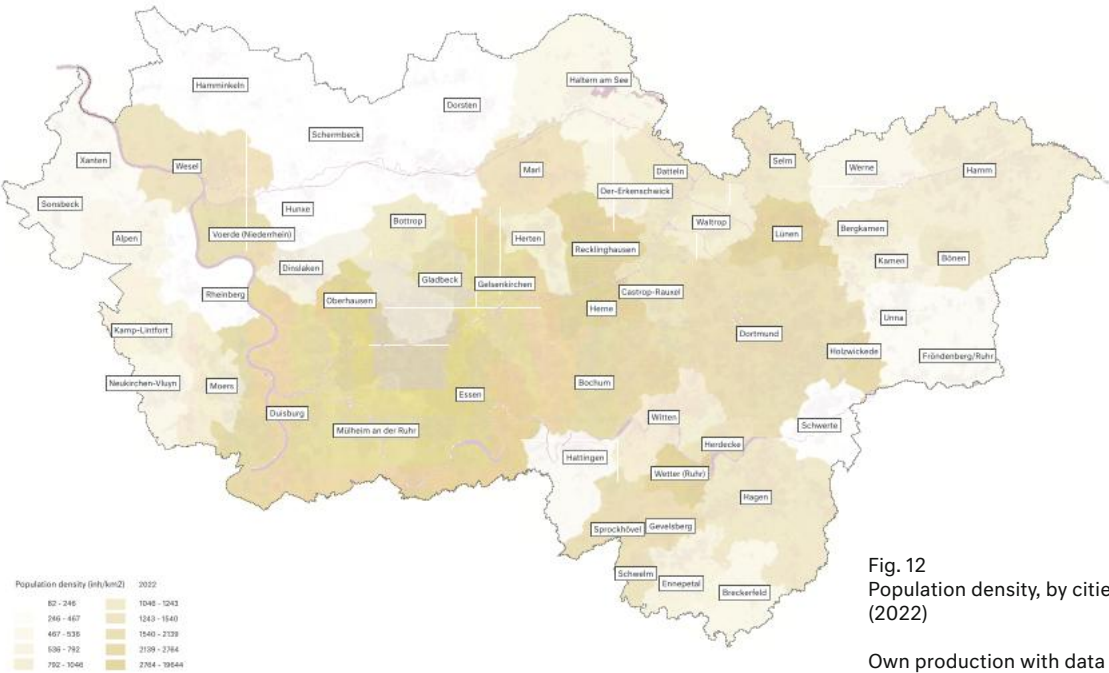


Fig. 12
Population density, by cities
(2022)

Own production with data
from StatistikPortal Ruhr

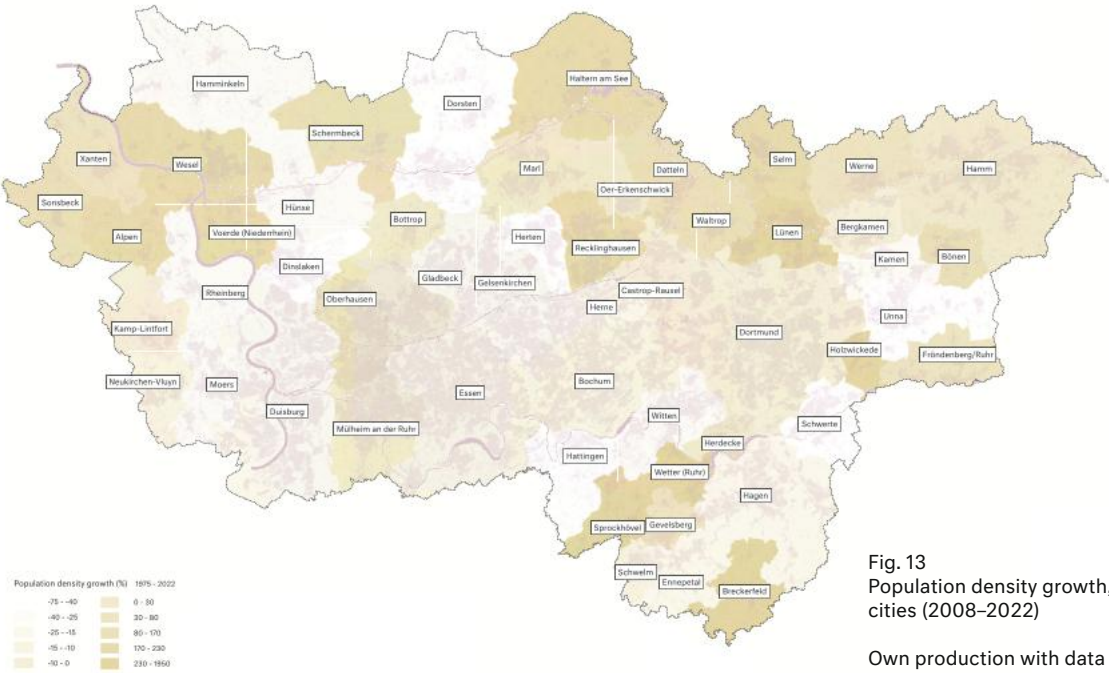


Fig. 13
Population density growth, by
cities (2008–2022)

Own production with data
from StatistikPortal Ruhr

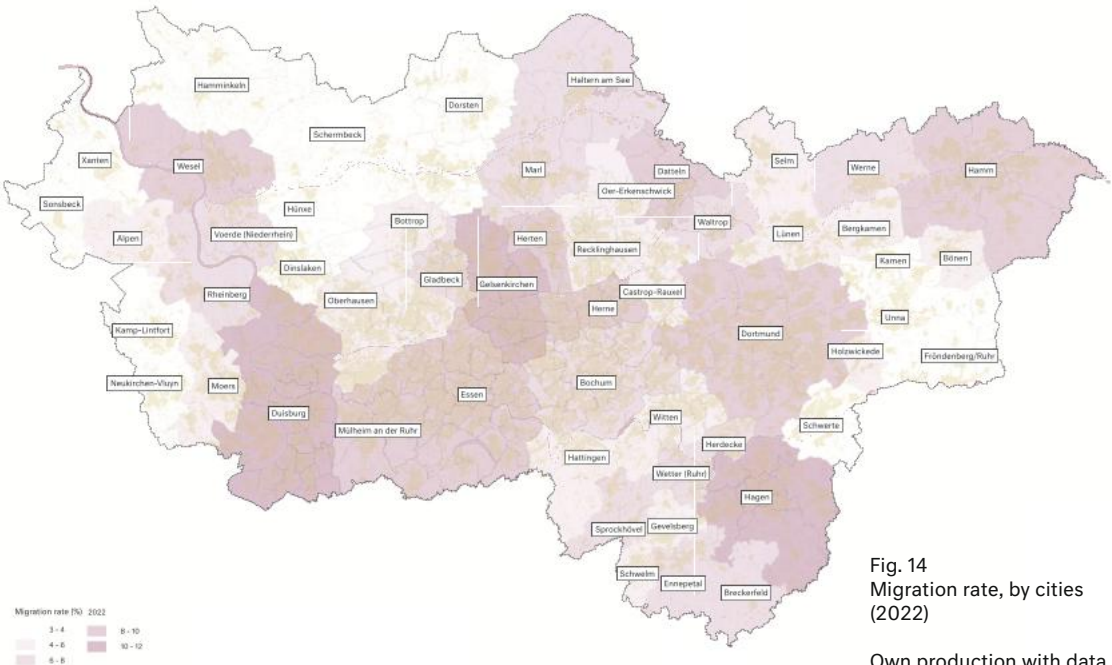


Fig. 14
Migration rate, by cities
(2022)

Own production with data
from StatistikPortal Ruhr

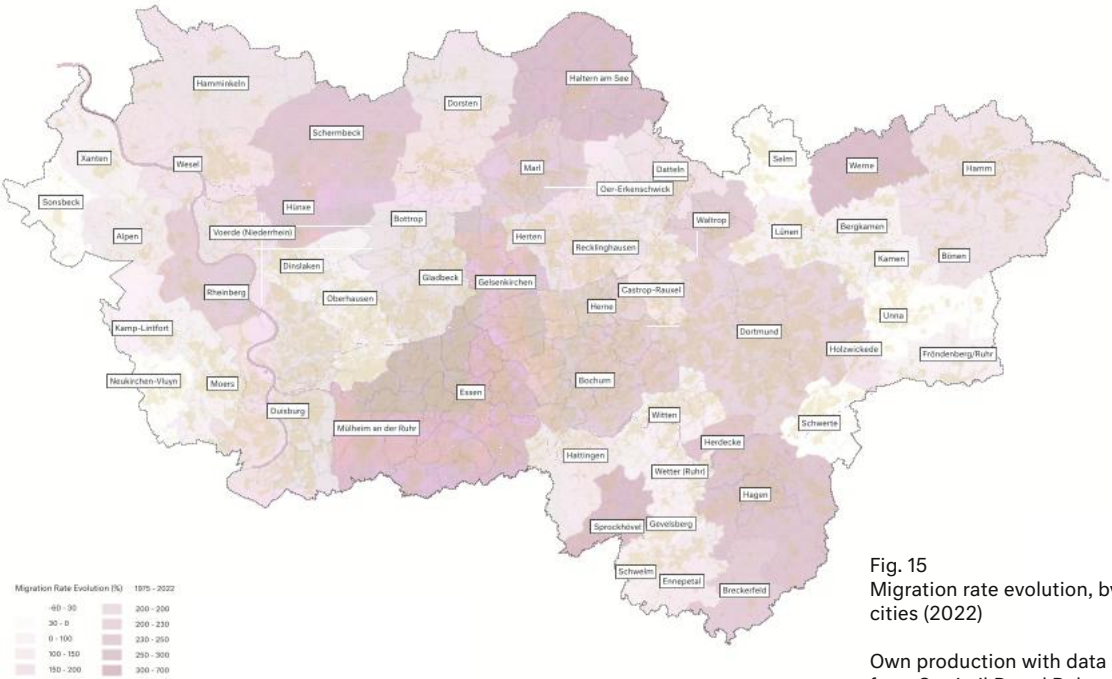
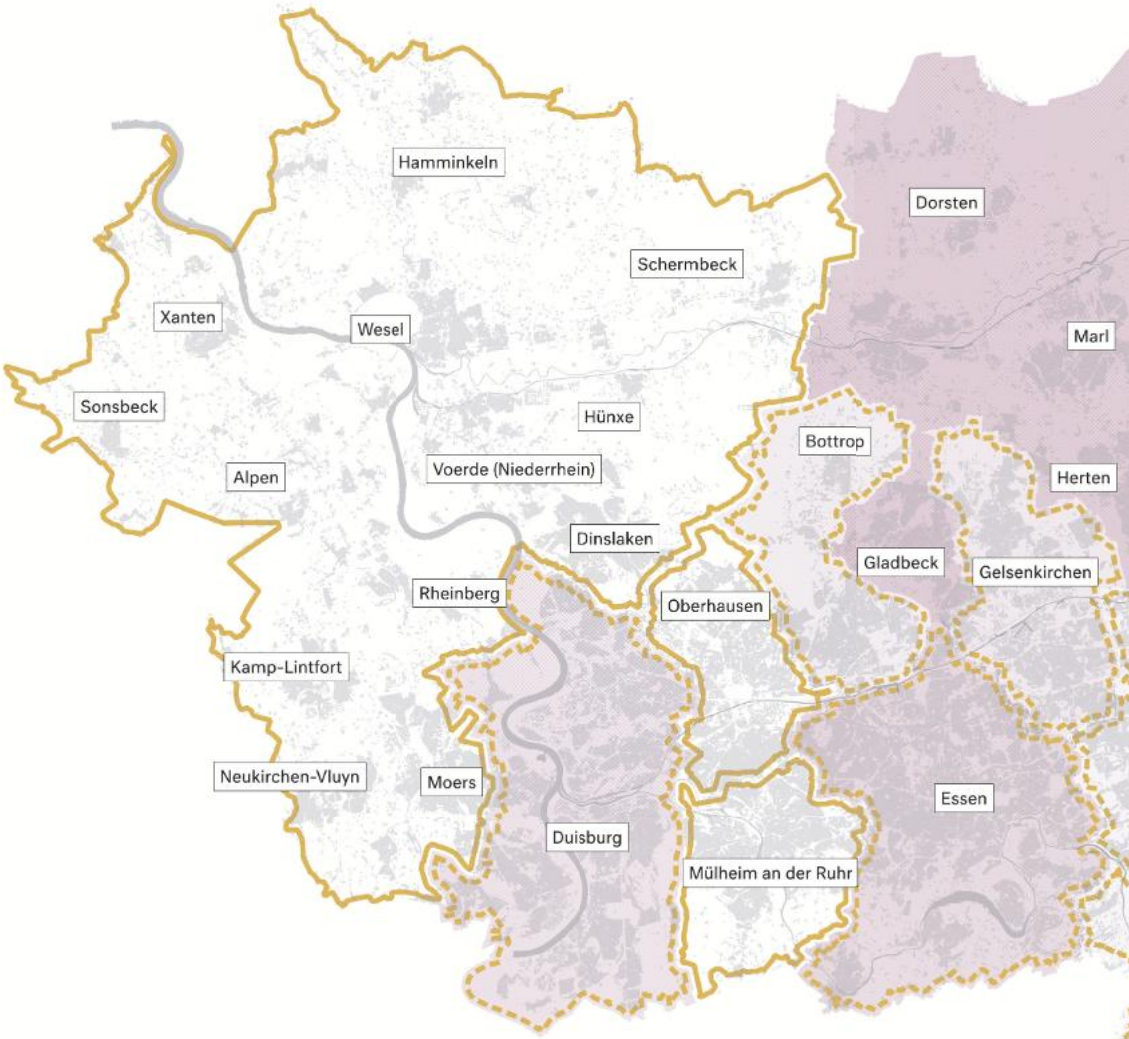
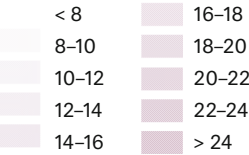


Fig. 15
Migration rate evolution, by
cities (2022)

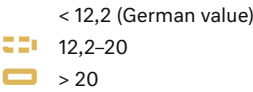
Own production with data
from StatistikPortal Ruhr



Labour and education
Unemployment rate (%) 2022



Secondary school leaving (%) 2018–2012



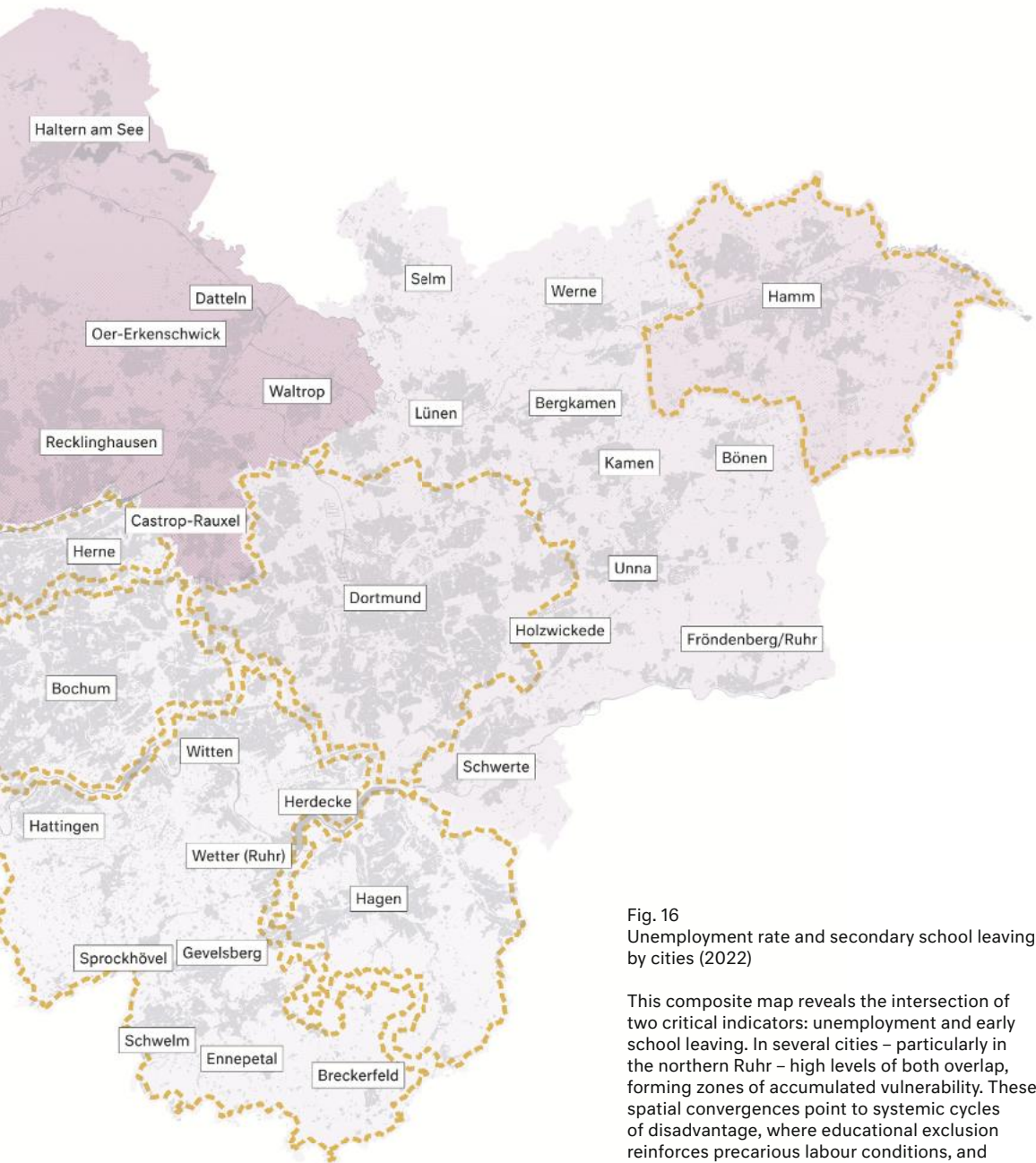
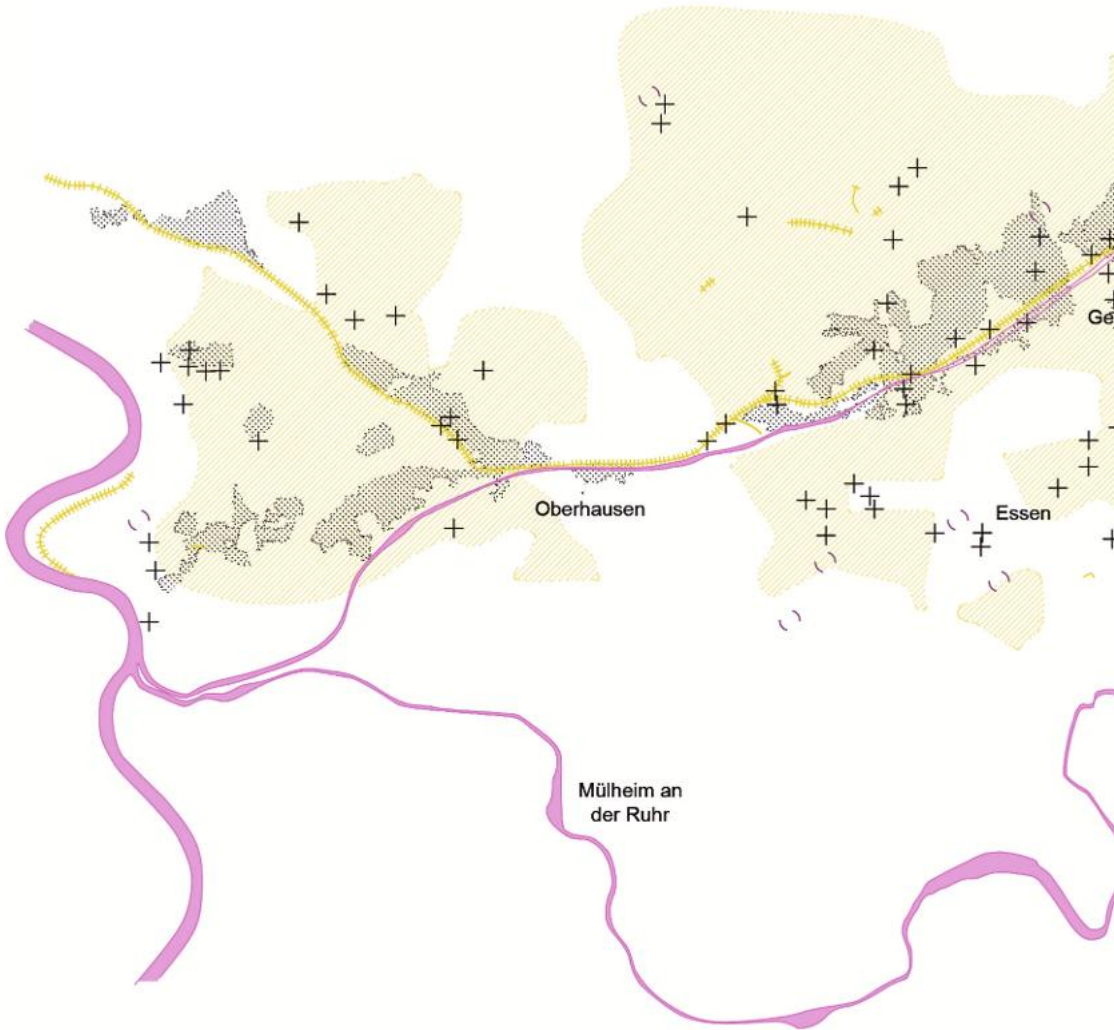


Fig. 16
Unemployment rate and secondary school leaving,
by cities (2022)

This composite map reveals the intersection of two critical indicators: unemployment and early school leaving. In several cities – particularly in the northern Ruhr – high levels of both overlap, forming zones of accumulated vulnerability. These spatial convergences point to systemic cycles of disadvantage, where educational exclusion reinforces precarious labour conditions, and vice versa. The result is a geography of structural disconnection that undermines long-term resilience

Own production with data from StatistikPortal Ruhr



- + Pumping station
- Dike
- ▨ Potential flooding area in the event of a dike breach
- - Flood retention reservoir
- Polder

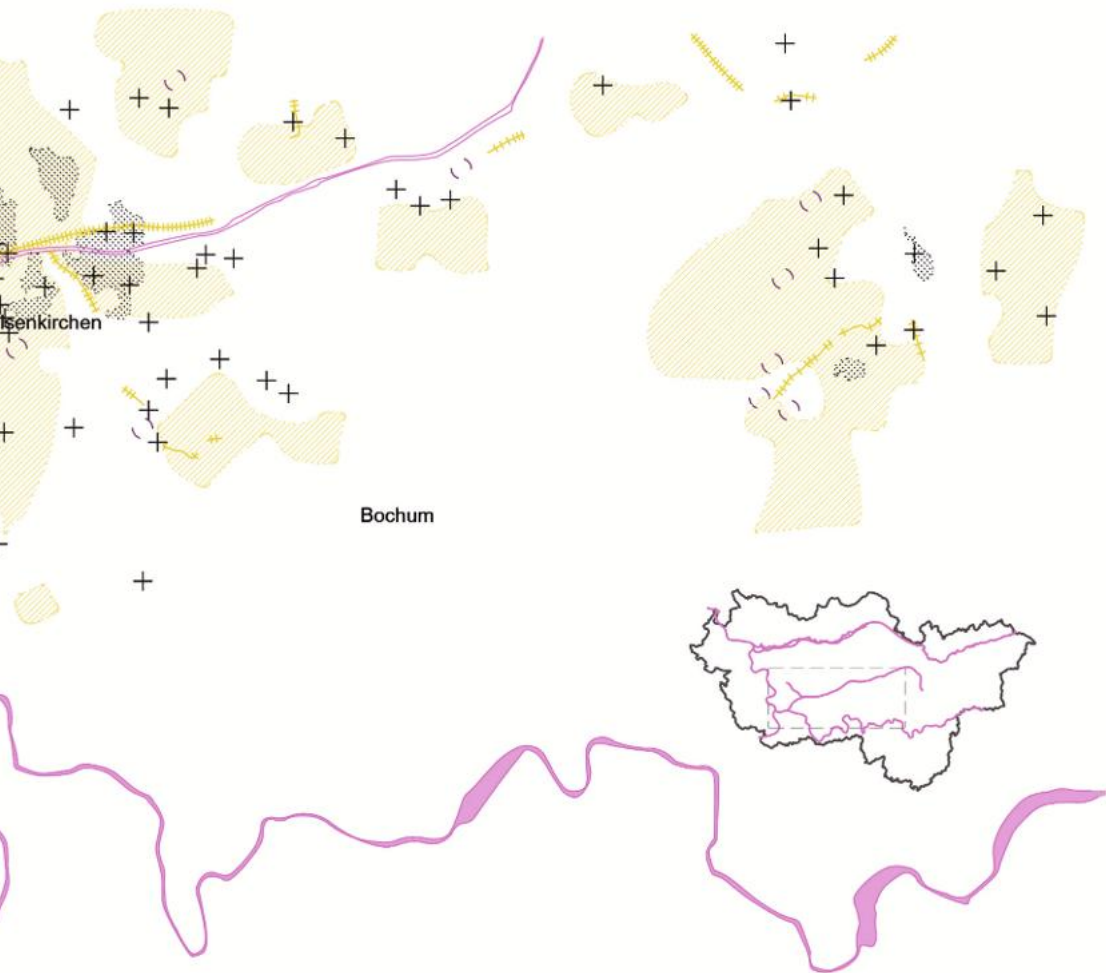
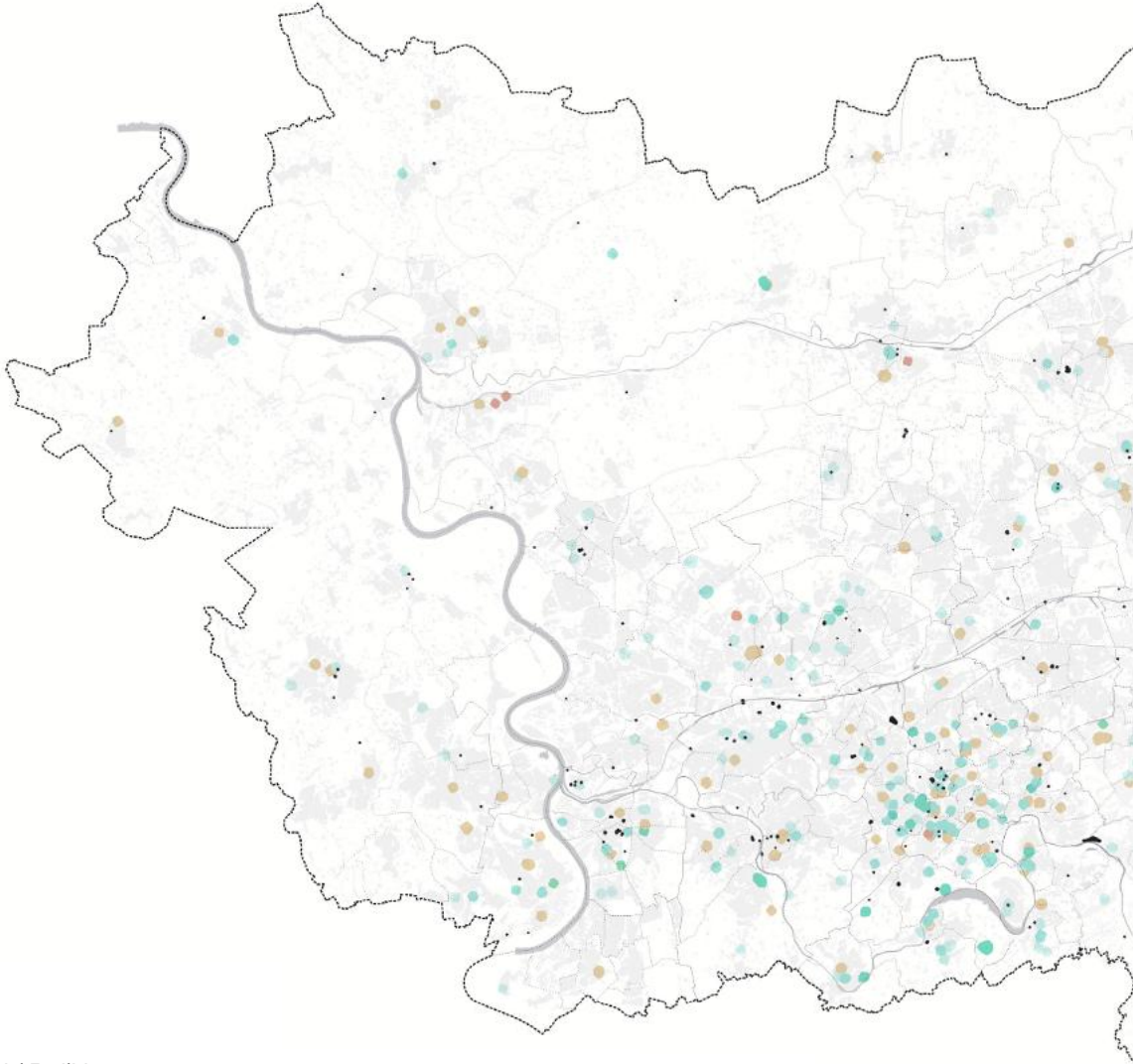


Fig. 17
Subsidence and water management

Beneath the Ruhr Area's urban fabric lies an invisible yet indispensable system of pumping stations and water infrastructure, working constantly to prevent flooding in areas destabilised by decades of mining. The map reveals the extent of this hidden network – an artificial equilibrium that sustains entire neighbourhoods above former coal seams. Far from resolved, this condition demands permanent intervention, exposing the environmental vulnerability at the foundation of the region's urban life.

Own production from archive material



Social Facilities

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Advice | Hospice |
| Home Care Service | Nursing Home |
| Ambulatory Care | Social Services Office |
| Children's Centre | Assisted Living |
| Clothing Bank | Refugee Housing |
| Community Centre | Senior Centre |
| Consulting | Shelter |
| Daily Care | Food Bank / Food Sharing |
| Day Care | Warehouse |
| Group Home | Woman's Shelter |
| Healthcare | |

Culture Facilities

- Arts Centre
- Art work
- Cinema
- Museum
- Theatre

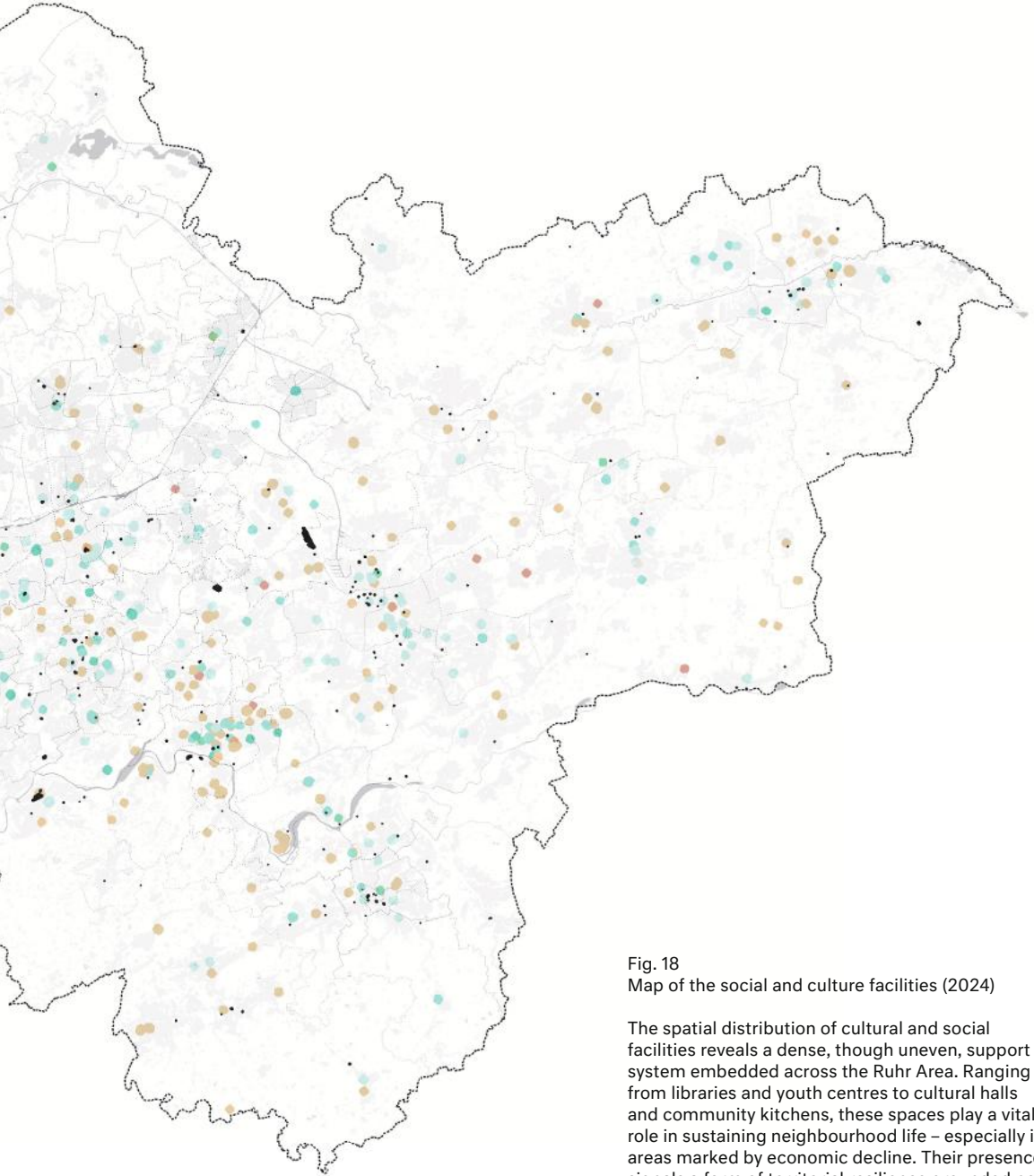
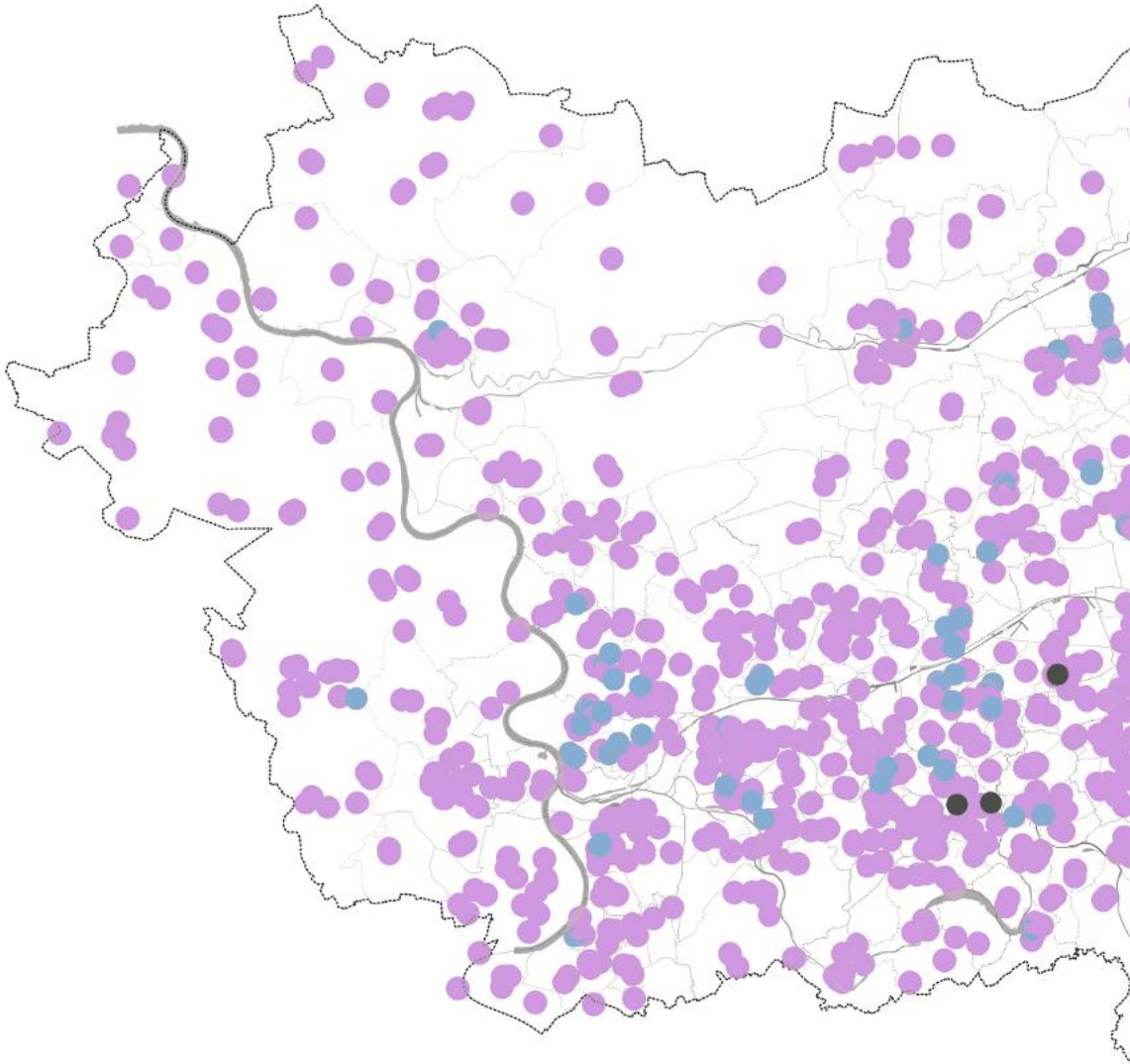


Fig. 18
Map of the social and culture facilities (2024)

The spatial distribution of cultural and social facilities reveals a dense, though uneven, support system embedded across the Ruhr Area. Ranging from libraries and youth centres to cultural halls and community kitchens, these spaces play a vital role in sustaining neighbourhood life – especially in areas marked by economic decline. Their presence signals a form of territorial resilience grounded not in large-scale infrastructure, but in the everyday practices of care, culture and community.

Own production with data from OpenStreetMap



Places of worship by religion

- Muslim
- Jewish
- Christian

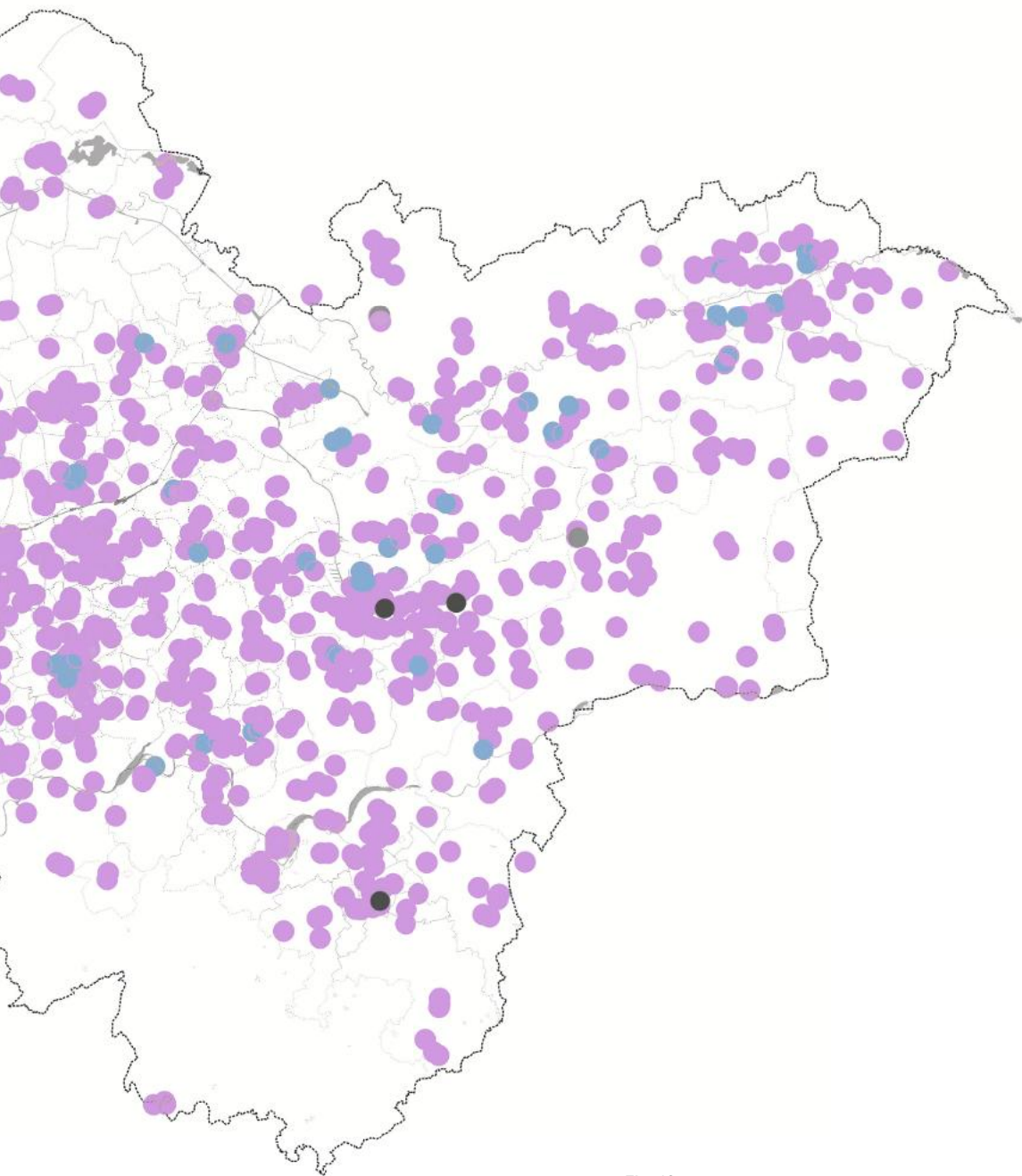


Fig. 19
Spaces of worship for the three most prevalent religions.

Own production with data from OpenStreetMap

3. The Revolution of Proximity

Josep Bohigas

Urbanist and First Creative
Mediator of Manifesta 16 Ruhr

"Distance is the pathology of the modern city:" – Richard Sennett¹⁹

The 20th century witnessed the consolidation of nation-states, while the 21st century has undeniably become the century of cities. Their growing influence parallels the exponential rise of megacorporations that have propelled capitalism into a new dimension; one that some predict may herald its own demise. Today, the planet's future is being shaped in metropolitan areas and sprawling urban regions whose geographical boundaries grow increasingly blurred. These city-territories define a diffuse, globalised, anonymous and accelerated reality that has simultaneously provoked a countermovement: the resurgence of neighbourhood communities as fundamental urban units.

The neighbourhood represents the smallest urban structure of meaningful complexity: a space whose contours we still recognise, with a familiar local landscape accessible at a human scale. It offers an irreplaceable sense of identity and belonging that complements the overwhelming anonymity of global cities. During the late 20th and early 21st centuries, cities engaged in fierce competition for global positioning, rebranding themselves as commodities in hopes of economic improvement that would trickle down to citizens' quality of life. Yet this promise largely failed to materialise as intended. Capitalism placed economic metrics at the core of public policy, exacerbating socio-spatial inequalities – a reality laid bare during the 2007 subprime crisis. The financialisation and speculation of housing, which disregarded fundamental rights to dignified, affordable homes in well-equipped neighbourhoods, sparked widespread social movements demanding more equitable management of shared resources through direct, localised governance²⁰.

Progress has been uneven and lessons from that crisis remain incompletely learned. Yet citizens today are more vigilant and organised through activist networks advocating political changes to create "lives worth living" – lives rooted in the neighbourhoods where daily existence unfolds. This spirit of reclamation has spawned initiatives worldwide asserting rights to the city, to neighbourhoods and to housing – a demand for physical and political proximity to reverse glaring socio-spatial injustices. Many began as grassroots efforts in community organisations and urban labs operating outside formal institutions, gradually gaining partial municipal adoption after years of advocacy.

19 As cited in Carlos Moreno, *La révolution de la proximité: De la ville du quart d'heure à la métamorphose urbaine*. Paris: Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2020, Introduction.

20 For example in Spain, with the movement 11M and many activisms like PAH (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca)

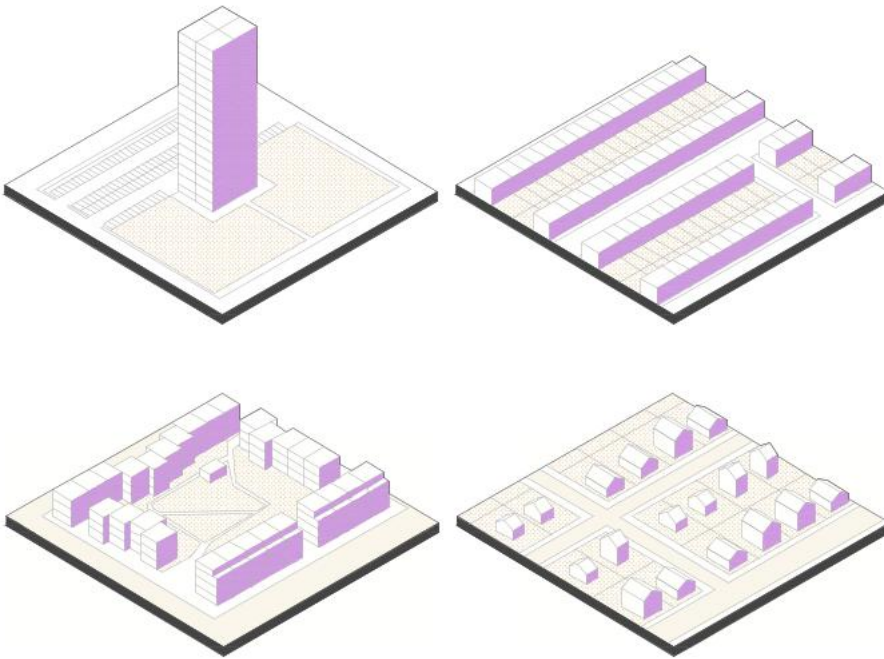


Street Performance in Mülheim an der Ruhr.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a watershed in this neighbourhood-centric shift. Lockdowns forced cities to reconsider their basic functioning as mobility plummeted and residents relied on immediate surroundings for essentials. To reduce contagion risks from crowded transit, cities rapidly implemented alternatives – within months, sidewalks expanded, bike networks multiplied, parking spaces became outdoor dining areas and sustainable neighbourhood initiatives proliferated. This agile, low-cost urban reconfiguration demonstrated the efficacy of flexible planning. The health crisis not only validated proximity principles but accelerated their adoption by highlighting the value of local access, non-motorised transport and community bonds.

Today, most global cities are testing and refining similar approaches through mutual learning. The C40's *Global Observatory of Sustainable Proximities*²¹ facilitates this knowledge exchange toward new models – never literal copies given cultural, geographic, economic and climatic differences, but adaptable frameworks addressing shared challenges. This collaborative scaling represents one of our most potent strategies against environmental crises and worsening socio-spatial inequalities.

From Paris' *15-Minute City* to Barcelona's *Superblocks*, Bogotá's *Vital Neighbourhoods*, Melbourne's *20-Minute City*, Shanghai's *15-Minute Community Life Circles*, Glasgow's *Liveable Neighbourhoods*, New York's *Caring and Cool Neighborhoods* and Portland's *Complete Neighborhoods*, cities are pioneering contextualised interpretations of proximity while forging unprecedented global cooperation networks – choosing collaboration over competition.



Different settlement models

21 The Global Observatory of Sustainable Proximities, developed by C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, functions as a global knowledge platform that monitors and compares urban policies promoting proximity-based planning, particularly strategies inspired by the 15-minute city model.

Resurgent Neighbourhoods: Proximity in the Ruhr Area

“The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city.” – David Harvey²²

The Ruhr Area’s official designation as “Metropole Ruhr” in 2010, when it served as European Capital of Culture, marked a political shift in scale that strengthened cooperation among its cities. This milestone ushered in new opportunities and challenges for the territory. As urban design requirements evolved, a critical question emerged:

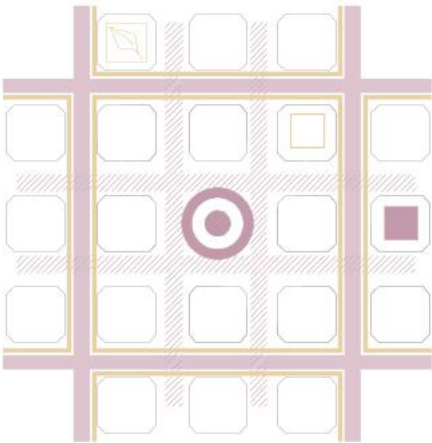
Can polycentric territories like the Ruhr Area adopt a single, unified spatial and urban planning vision?

The answer is decisively negative. Neither the Ruhr Area nor any complex territory should aspire to singular visions. What these regions require instead are complementary perspectives capable of building scalable alliances and networks. More fundamentally, they need methodologies that prioritise collective wellbeing for both residents and the planet.

Our proposed complementary vision reimagines the territory through an inside-out approach. It begins by understanding neighbourhood realities and residents’ lived experiences, then progressively expands to territorial-scale perspectives. This framework can be visualised through concentric circles placing people at the centre of fundamental rights.

At the core lie housing rights – the essential foundation without which other rights cannot materialise. Neighbourhood and urban rights remain meaningless without guaranteed housing. Without a registered address, individuals face significant barriers to exercising basic civic and democratic rights. A home functions simultaneously as shelter, personal agency and collective voice – extending its influence on the community, neighbourhood and city scales.

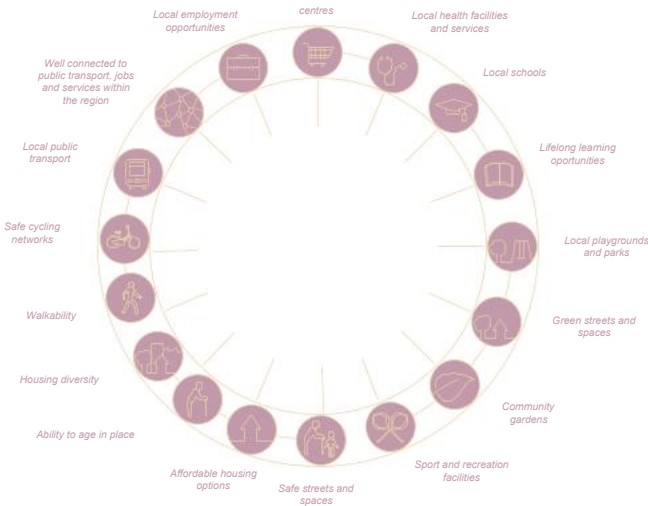
22 Harvey, David. “The Right to the City.” *New Left Review* 53 (2008): p.23–40



Barcelona Superblock



15-Minute Community Life Circle Shanghai



20-Minute City Melbourne









The second concentric circle encompasses neighbourhood rights, representing a strategic scale that global cities increasingly recognise as both counter-balance and complement to metropolitan forces. The Ruhr Area's urban structure – with its legacy of modest yet cohesive neighbourhoods designed for communal living – is particularly suited to this decentralised model. These 'nearly identical' neighbourhoods suggest systemic regeneration approaches operating in two key dimensions: internally through improved housing, public spaces, amenities and social cohesion; and externally through reconnection with the broader network of neighbourhoods comprising the basin.

The right to the city, then, is built upon two prior rights: without housing and without a neighbourhood, there can be no liveable city. The right to the metropolis and to be a global city, are indeed desirable and essential in understanding the interconnection of global challenges – challenges which are likely impossible to be addressed solely at the neighbourhood scale. However, cities cannot continue to operate exclusively at this level, under the illusion that competing in the league of global cities will, in itself, improve the lives of neighbourhoods and the people who inhabit them.

Implementation pathways vary by context, though some cities' solutions have achieved model status and inspired global adoption. In the Ruhr Area, our proximity strategy focuses on Christian churches – former epicentres of neighbourhood life now undergoing significant transformation. These structures represent both the region's evolution and potential catalysts for its next chapter, demonstrating how historical social infrastructure can anchor contemporary urban regeneration.

The Ruhr Area's distinctive neighbourhood fabric, combined with its poly-centric structure, positions it uniquely to develop proximity principles that address 21st century challenges while honouring its industrial heritage and community traditions. This approach exemplifies how urban regeneration can emerge from existing social and spatial assets rather than imposed blueprints.

p. 88–89: Barcelona Superblock (Scofet)
Photo © Manifesta 15 Barcelona Metropolitana
p. 90–91: Church pews in St. Josef Church.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Anton Vichrov



Event of the Keybâb Collective in St. Josef in Gelsenkirchen, April, 2026. Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Anna Jocham

4. Churches as Urban Infrastructure

Josep Bohigas

Urbanist and First Creative Mediator
of Manifesta 16 Ruhr

The Problem of Churches

Christian churches in the Ruhr Area are undergoing a profound process of transformation. The reasons for this are multifaceted, although the most evident is the steady loss of parishioners, who are increasingly ageing due to a lack of generational renewal. Many sons and daughters of the original parish founders have been compelled to relocate to other regions in search of better employment opportunities. This phenomenon is not only occurring in the Ruhr Area but throughout Germany which is one of the most secularised populations in the world. Only ten percent of Catholics and five percent of Protestants attend mass regularly, according to data from the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) report from 2023.²³ In the Ruhr Area specifically, the traditional working-class and mining identity historically linked to the Church and the community life it fostered has faded with the onset of industrial decline.

In 1950, over 90% of West Germans were members of Christian churches; today, fewer than 50% are. And the vast majority of these are merely nominal members, with minimal engagement in church liturgy.²⁴ The clergy has also failed to undergo a generational shift. In 2022, the number of Catholic priests in the Ruhr Area was 60% lower than in 1990. In the absence of members of the clergy, many parishes have been forced to merge or to remain closed most of the time, opening only for an hour a week or on significant religious holidays.

Economic and urban changes have further rendered the model of maintaining a church in every neighbourhood unfeasible. The diminished parishes are unable to regularly activate these infrastructures, and neither the Church nor the state has prioritised their upkeep. These are remarkable communal spaces that remain underutilised, including both their interiors and the associated outdoor areas, which typically provide public squares and gardens.

23 Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), *Kirchenmitgliederstatistik 2023*; see also statistics on religious affiliation and practice in Germany indicating that roughly 46% of the population has no religious affiliation and only about 5% attend services regularly.

24 Detlef Pollack and Olaf Müller, as cited in Pew Research Center, "Once a Majority, Protestants Now Account for Fewer Than a Third of Germans," February 12, 2019; Michael Ebertz, as cited in Eurel, "Religious Demography: Germany," March 3, 2026; Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland (fowid), "Statistics of Religious Beliefs 2019," Giordano Bruno Stiftung.

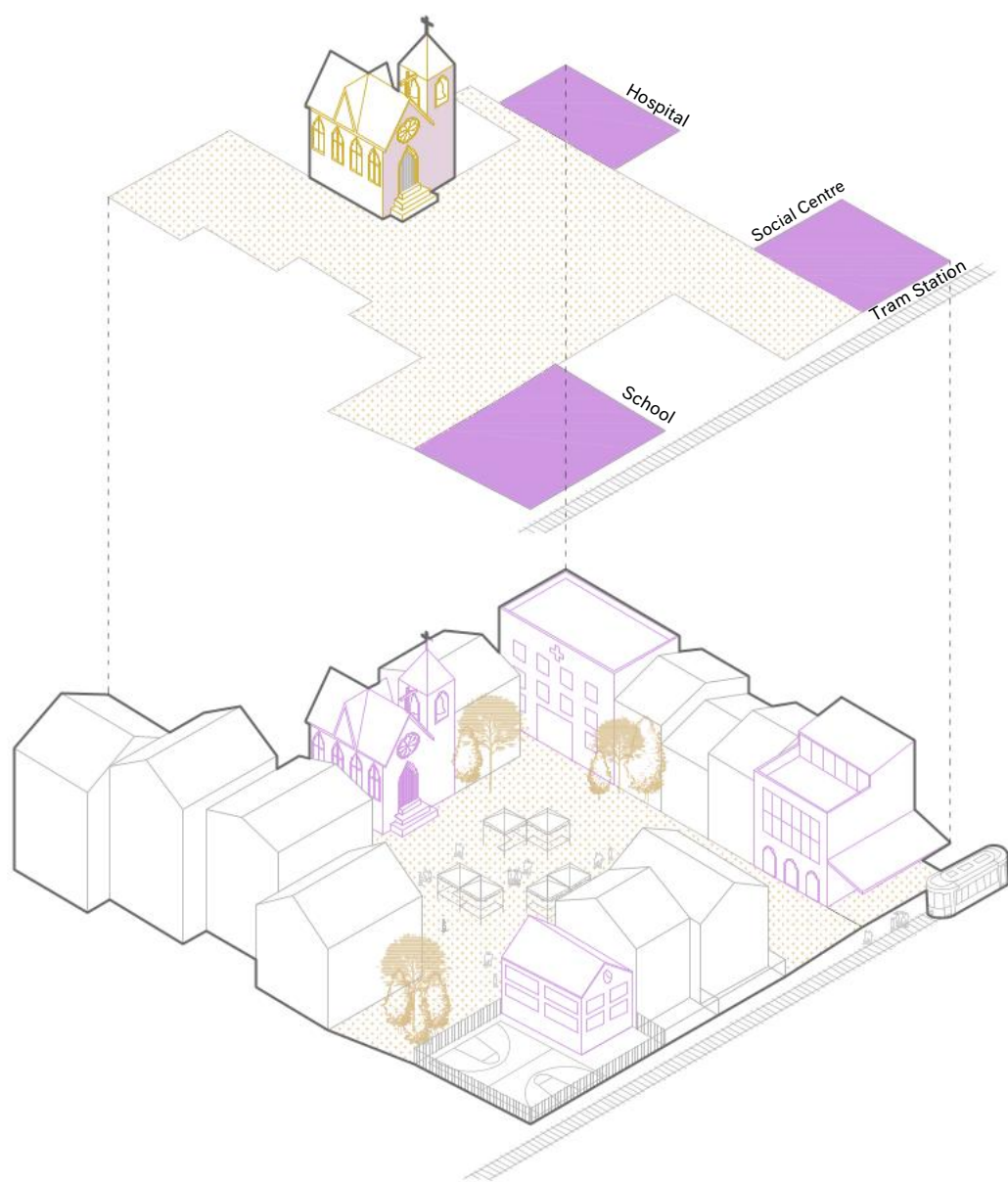
Perhaps the greatest issue, however, lies in the fact that in the Ruhr Area, churches have become victims of their own post-war success: far too many were built for a society that no longer exists.²⁵

Pantoffelkirche

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Ruhr Area faced a profound socio-cultural rupture, marked by the dual burden of suppressed collective guilt and the yearning for renewal following the devastation of Nazism. Amid material hardship and infrastructural ruin, communities were compelled to reconstruct both their physical environment and social identity. Within this context of disorientation and recovery, local parishes emerged as vital spaces of cohesion, offering continuity, moral anchorage and a renewed sense of belonging.

In the 1950s, the Catholic diocese of the Ruhr was established, and its first bishop, Franz Hengsbach, developed the concept of the Pantoffelkirche – the “slipper church.” This idea was deeply rooted in the finest urban planning traditions of “proximity,” aimed at building cohesive and walkable neighbourhoods in which every believer would have a church so nearby that they could attend mass without having to put on shoes but could walk to the church on their slippers. The ambitious reconstruction project was also a programme of evangelisation and a political strategy of protection. Its strategic deployment systematised the notion of a safeguarded and interconnected community, in which parishes were linked and their tall bell towers served as territorial sentinels.

25 This situation has led to the emergence of various initiatives in Germany aimed at raising awareness of the alarming decline and abandonment of numerous church buildings in recent years. One of the most significant of these efforts has been the *Kirchenmanifest* (Church Manifesto) “Kirchen sind Gemeingüter!”. A manifesto officially published in early May 2024 that calls for a collective societal responsibility – via foundations or foundation networks – to rescue and repurpose deconsecrated and threatened church buildings in Germany. (https://baukultur.nrw/veranstaltungen/das-kirchenmanifest/?utm_source=moderne-regional.de&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=kirchenmanifest) Another significant initiative was the exhibition in September 2025 “Kirchen als Vierte Orte” (Churches as fourth spaces) curated by Felix Hemmers, in the Holy Spirit church in Katernberg, Essen.



The church at the centre of the neighbourhood





This approach harmonised with the American model of dispersed residential developments, designed to offer greater safety in the event of renewed aerial bombardments by reducing urban density and favouring isolated housing clusters connected by road networks. This formula led to a wave of church construction during the 1950s and 1960s, coinciding with the rise of post-war modernist architecture. Architects such as Gottfried Böhm, Emil Steffann, Otto Bartning and Hans Scharoun designed religious buildings in the Rhine and Ruhr regions that are now considered iconic examples of that era.

The Decline and Transformation of Churches in Europe

The issue of disused churches is not unique to the Ruhr Area. In recent decades, the European continent has experienced a progressive decline in the use of religious spaces, reflected in the closure, abandonment, sale or repurposing of many buildings²⁶. This phenomenon, particularly pronounced in countries with high levels of secularisation and decreasing religious practice, is driven by demographic, socio-economic and cultural factors and shows significant geographical variation in both its intensity and the responses it has elicited.

In the Netherlands, studies and church authorities have suggested that up to around 1,000 churches may close or be repurposed before 2030 as congregations decline.²⁷ Many have been adapted for alternative purposes, some of them communal, such as concert halls, theatres or libraries. A well-known example is the Dominicanen Bookstore in Maastricht, a former Gothic church converted into a cultural venue and bookshop. However, many other churches have been sold to the highest bidder for private, less community-oriented uses. A similar trend can be observed in the United Kingdom,

- 26 See Justin Beaumont and Christopher Baker (eds.). *Postsecular cities: Space, theory and practice*. London Continuum, 2011; Detlef Pollack. "Religious Change in Europe: Theoretical Considerations and Empirical Findings." (2008) https://www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/soziologie/personen/pollack/religious_change_in_europe_theoretical_considerations_and_empirical_findings.pdf; Council of Europe. *The Future of Religious Heritage in Europe*, 2021. Online available at: <https://rm.coe.int/strategy-21-factsheet-the-future-for-religious-heritage/168093c039> (accessed 18th of February 2026).
- 27 Cf. Cardinal Willem Eijk, as reported in "1,000 Churches to Close by 2025, Warns Eijk," *The Tablet*, 2013; supplemented by KASKI Institute (Radboud University Nijmegen) data on church attendance trends, as cited in "Large Number of Dutch Churches to Close in Near Future," *Crux*, August 5, 2019; and *Future for Religious Heritage*, "Netherlands – Utrecht: From 300 to 20 Churches," December 15, 2014. The figure of approximately 1,000 refers specifically to Catholic churches; including Protestant closures, the total would be higher.



St. Gertrud, Essen. Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Daniel Sadrowski



where the Church of England has implemented a parish consolidation plan that involves the closure of around 20 buildings per year, many of which are transformed into housing, community centres or commercial premises.

In contrast to this growing trend, southern European countries such as Spain, Portugal and Italy present a less pronounced picture. In these nations, despite the decline in religious observance, the strong cultural and identity-based ties to Catholicism, along with higher population density in rural areas, have so far limited both the prevalence of such transformations and the public debate surrounding them. Nonetheless, in depopulated regions such as parts of Castile and León in Spain or the Portuguese interior, as well as in major cities like Madrid, Barcelona and Lisbon, instances of church transformation are beginning to emerge – particularly in buildings of significant heritage value – though not yet on the scale observed in northern Europe.

In any case, the tension between preservation, functional adaptation and disappearance of these spaces will remain a central challenge in the management of 21st century cultural heritage. Every church that closes marks a small rupture in the historical fabric of its community, yet at the same time, every transformation offers a significant opportunity to reimagine these structures. Though deconsecrated, they can continue to serve as powerful spaces for gathering and fostering social cohesion within neighbourhoods.



- ↑ Kunstkirche Christ-König in Bochum.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Anton Vichrov
- ← Versöhnungskirche (Church of Reconciliation) in
Bochum-Wattenscheid. Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr





- ↑ Kunstraum (Art Space) Heilig Geist, Essen.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Claudia Dreyse
- ← Kulturkirche Liebfrauen in Duisburg.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Daniel Sadrowski

Neighbourhoods and Churches of Opportunity for an Urban Vision

What would be the most appropriate use for these urban monuments, preserving the deep-rooted social significance they have historically represented? And how do they reflect the hyper-diverse neighbourhoods and contribute to communicating over cultural breaking grounds?

The *Urban Vision* for Manifesta 16 is grounded in the belief that the biennial can serve as a modest catalyst to complement the long-standing transition already underway in the Ruhr Area.

Through substantial investment and the strategic hosting of international events, the Ruhr Area has emerged as a global reference for the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage. Culture and environmental regeneration have been employed as principal drivers of transformation. The results – evident at multiple scales – have converted a once hostile and heavily polluted landscape into a greener, more liveable region, distinguished by exemplary cultural infrastructure.



Roof of Thomaskirche in Gelsenkirchen.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose

Nevertheless, the region continues to seek complementary strategies to address the concerning reality faced by a significant segment of its population – those who struggle to make ends meet and reside in segregated neighbourhoods that have lost much of their original cohesion.

This *Urban Vision* proposes to focus precisely on the neighbourhood scale as a structuring axis for the pending regeneration. By intersecting two lines of investigation – the vulnerability of neighbourhoods and the widespread closure of churches – a locally grounded proximity-based model may emerge, contributing uniquely to the “proximity revolution”²⁸ currently being embraced by cities around the world.

The cross-referencing of data on vulnerability, neighbourhood resilience and the condition of churches has enabled us to develop initial mappings and exploratory strategies for intervention.

Over the past months, my team and I, together with the team of Manifesta 16 Ruhr, have visited more than 50 churches, organised workshops and engaged with local experts about churches and neighbourhoods in the Ruhr Area. Notably, we have benefited from the invaluable collaboration of Professor Renée Tribble from the University of Dortmund, Sebastian Schlecht from the collective lala.ruhr and Felix Hemmers, an architect specialising in churches in the Ruhr Area, along with numerous contacts with organisations on site, experts, members from various parishes, bishops, priests and their technical teams. Their insights have helped us to understand the circumstances of vulnerable neighbourhoods and how these may be associated with the phenomenon of closed and abandoned churches, thereby contributing to the establishment of a regeneration process that can be both piloted and scaled.

28 Carlos Moreno, *La révolution de la proximité: De la ville du quart d'heure à la métamorphose urbaine*. Paris: Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2020.



- ↑ Thomaskirche Gelsenkirchen. Front view.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose
- DITIB-Merkez Mosque in Duisburg-Marxloh.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Charlotte Ernst

- p. 110–111: Interior view of Thomaskirche, Gelsenkirchen.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose
- p. 112–113: Interior view of Gethsemane Church, Bochum.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Daniel Sadrowski
- p. 114–115: Installation in St. Bonifatius Church: *Healing Complex* (2018 – ongoing), 2018–, Gelsenkirchen, 2023, Photo © Daniel Sadrowski. Image courtesy of Urbane Künste Ruhr.

















Workshops

One of the key actions undertaken during this research has been the organisation of a series of workshops involving expert stakeholders, academics and students.

The first, held on the 5th of February 2025, was a short “expectation workshop” with professionals from the cultural sector of the Ruhr Area. This session introduced and critically discussed the potential of engaging with the region’s closed or abandoned churches.

The second workshop, organised in March 2025 by Manifesta 16 in collaboration with the department for Spatial Planning at the Technical University of Dortmund, was the result of an international open call and brought together students of Planning, Architecture, Urbanism and Design for an intensive five-day programme. The third workshop, also organised in partnership with the Technical University of Dortmund, began on the 8th of April 2025 and continued throughout the semester until June 2025.

The research collaboration between Manifesta 16 and Professor Renée Tribble and her team has been instrumental in deepening the understanding of each neighbourhood and its churches, as the proposed methodology requires a nuanced grasp of local dynamics and sustained engagement with the communities involved.

In each neighbourhood, the research unfolds through an iterative process of mapping, questioning and reinterpreting existing urban and social dynamics. This approach enables a deeper immersion into the stratified histories of the region, acknowledging the complex interplay between its industrial past, fragmented urban fabric and contemporary challenges.

Through fieldwork, participatory workshops and interdisciplinary collaborations, the research seeks to construct a framework that not only analyses but also activates potential pilot interventions. This evolving body of knowledge is shaped through direct dialogue with local communities, institutions and key stakeholders, fostering a shared understanding of how urban transformation might emerge from within.

Rather than imposing pre-defined solutions, the project aims to reveal latent possibilities embedded within existing urban structures – in particular underutilised churches – which once played a vital role in the social fabric of their respective neighbourhoods. By critically examining these spaces and their contexts, the project explores how they might be reimaged as catalysts for new civic interactions and cultural production.

↖ Citizen Consultation Workshop in St. Gertrud in Essen.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Lukas Arp
← *This is not a church* Workshop, March 2025, Essen.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Charlotte Ernst

At its core, this pre-biennial research lays the foundations for Manifesta 16 Ruhr, setting the stage for future artistic and civic interventions that will activate these spaces in meaningful ways. The insights gained and actions implemented will not only inform the biennial's programme but also contribute to the broader global discourse on proximity, social cohesion and adaptive reuse within contemporary urban strategies.

This is not a church student workshop

Dates: 4th to the 8th of March 2025

Venue: ChorForum Essen (International Baptist Church)

Student participants: Erim Besak, Anni Brünner, Sameena Corrado, Paola Dominguez Velez, Luisa Gehnen, Mahdyar Mafakherian, Irina Pischalnikov, Ana Rrushi, Selen Seferogullari, Martin Sonnek, Antonín Vitoušek, Jannik Wetzstein

Directors: Josep Bohigas (Manifesta 16), Renée Tribble (TU Dortmund)

Lecturers: Lisa Marie Zander, María Martínez-Artero, Roy Huschenbeth, Kim Lempelius, Greta Wienen, Jan Dröge-Rothaar, Sebastian Schlecht

Churches/Neighbourhoods:

Heilig Geist Kirche / Katernberg (Essen)

Heilig Kreuz Kirche / Ückendorf (Gelsenkirchen)

KunstKirche ChristKönig / (Bochum)

Versöhnungskirche / Wattenscheid (Bochum)

The workshop aimed to conduct an in-depth analysis of four selected churches and their surrounding contexts. An expanded notion of “context” was adopted: one that sought to examine not only the emphatic architectural form of the buildings, but also their prominent positioning within their respective neighbourhoods, as well as the diverse communities that use or live in close proximity to them.

The primary objective was to map the parameters and perimeters of these churches in order to analyse the causes of their decline and explore ways to reclaim – through their new deconsecrated condition – their original social hierarchy and function.

↗ *This is not a church* Workshop, March 2025, Essen.

Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Charlotte Ernst

→ Neighbourhood activity in the Ruhr Area.

Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose





Each student group assessed the current condition of a specific church and investigated the needs of its surrounding neighbourhood, formulating tailored urban strategies to reintegrate these structures into the everyday lives of residents.

The outcome is an interpretative documentation of the realities and potentialities of the buildings and their urban settings: it comprises plans, diagrams, sketches, photographs, interviews and models, that supported a critical reflection on the state and future of each church.

Taken together, the four research projects and proposals developed during the workshop aim to act as catalysts for local change, while simultaneously establishing a network of synergies that lays the groundwork for desirable scalability.

The modest scope of each proposal seeks to co-design strategies that offer a renewed opportunity for the church, before it is sold or abandoned. Yet we should be capable of imagining that these small-scale actions could become the spark for something greater – multiplying and activating hundreds of churches in similar conditions across the region. It is within this ambitious vision that the joint proposal may be conceived as a modest yet profoundly transformative “revolution of proximity.”

- ↖ *This is not a church* Workshop, March 2025, Essen.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Charlotte Ernst
- ← *This is not a church* Workshop, March 2025, Essen.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Charlotte Ernst





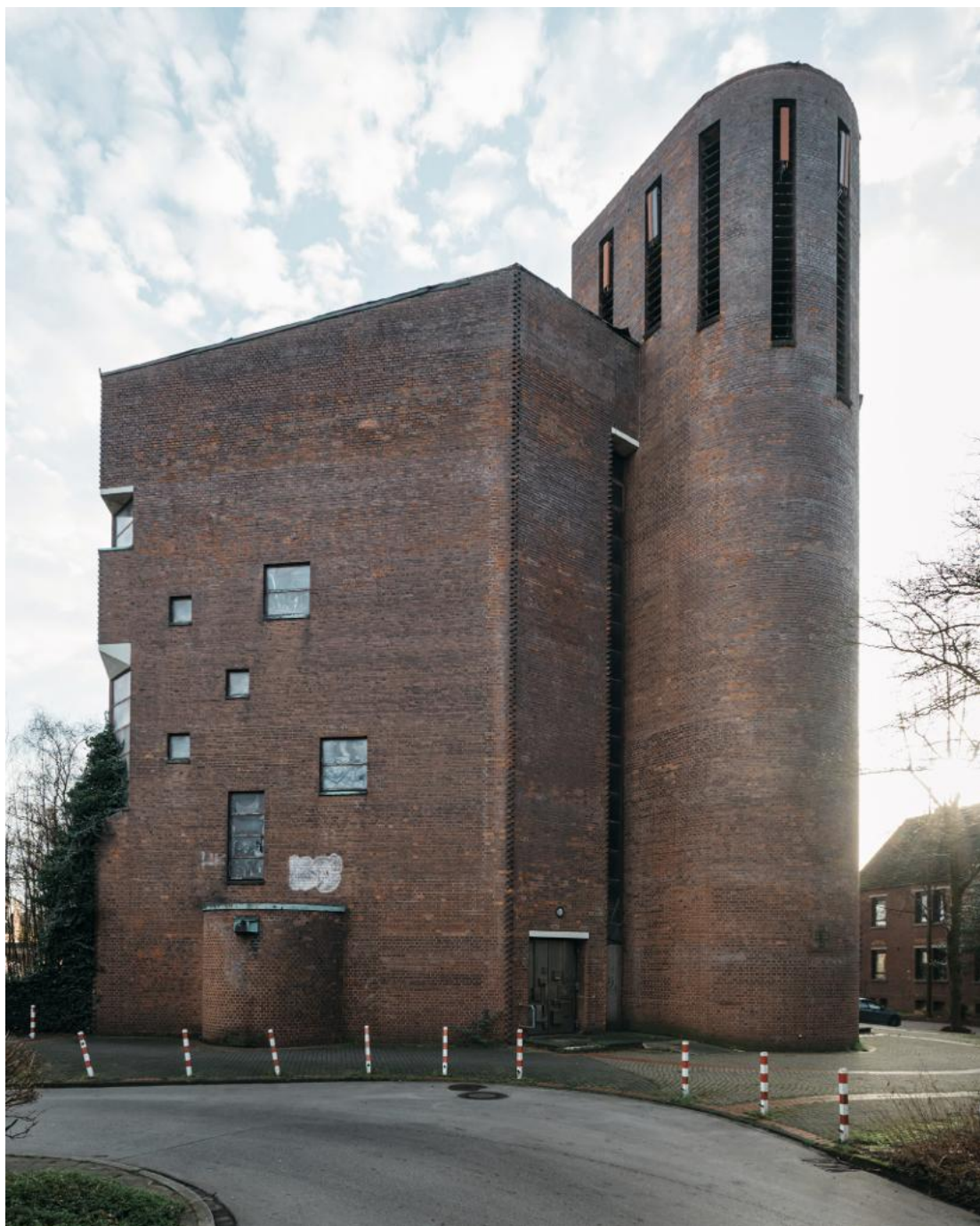
The Potential Venues of Manifesta 16 Ruhr

In any case – and keeping our feet firmly on the ground – the immediate objective of this research was to consolidate all these initial efforts to strengthen the *Urban Vision* of the biennial. This vision ultimately culminated in the strategic selection of venues by the team of Manifesta 16 Ruhr – and served as a foundational resource for the artists and collectives participating in subsequent interventions. The preliminary research of the *Urban Vision* enabled the identification of over 50 churches and neighbourhoods across the territory. Each site and each church, beyond their theoretical suitability, was also subject to other considerations.

A key consideration was the feasibility of establishing cooperation. Not all churches have a clear interlocutor, and it is often difficult to contact the owner or their representative (be it the Church itself, the local community or a private owner) to discuss a collaboration regarding the building's regeneration. Many of these churches are/were closed or abandoned and in the process of being sold or demolished, which made negotiations complex, slow and highly sensitive.

Another fundamental aspect in the final selection of venues for the biennial was the connectivity between groups of them, forming clusters of multiple sites to facilitate visits and to better exemplify the concept of connected archipelagos. These connections should also provide a valuable opportunity to address some of the region's infrastructural deficits, such as the limited network of bicycle lanes. As previously noted, there are some excellent recreational infrastructures along parks and rivers, but the urban cycling network remains far from adequate, with streets still overwhelmingly dominated by car traffic.

Finally, the architectural and urbanistic quality of the churches was also a crucial factor. All churches possess intrinsic value due to their hierarchical position and their striking forms and dimensions. However, some are particularly unique and must be protected and urgently reoriented towards new functions before they are sold, demolished or undergo dramatic transformations.



St. Marien Church in Essen, 2025.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Daniel Sadrowski





- ↑ Thomaskirche Gelsenkirchen.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose
- ← St. Bonifatius, Gelsenkirchen.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Anton Vichrov

p. 128–129: St. Suitbert, Gelsenkirchen.
Photo © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Dirk Rose





Tentative Outline of Urban Actions

In recent editions of Manifesta, the role of the First Creative Mediator has extended beyond territorial research and the identification of relevant themes and potential venues. It has also been central to the collaborative development of a series of proposals for urban interventions.

The final selection of venues – in this case churches – is determined through a range of considerations which fall under the responsibility of the Director of Manifesta 16 Ruhr – not only in terms of alignment with the *Urban Vision* but also based on practical criteria: the feasibility of access, the possibility of leasing, adapting and activating the spaces, as well as their connectivity and proximity to other biennial sites.

It is therefore essential to understand that the objective is not merely to intervene within the churches themselves, but also to develop urban-scale projects that establish connections and make visible a physical and symbolic commitment to the territory.

This document outlines a set of speculative ideas for actions that might take place outside the churches. Rather than presenting final proposals, these reflections were intended to provoke thinking beyond the architectural splendour and heritage value of these spaces, encouraging a broader consideration of their urban and social contexts. The interventions that ultimately emerged from this process can be discovered through the final twelve venues of Manifesta 16 Ruhr. The following hypothetical projects were discussed, but not realised in the context of Manifesta 16 Ruhr. They could, though, be options for the future.

1. Open Doors

Churches constitute far more than religious structures; they are key civic infrastructures that historically articulated and gave meaning to their immediate urban environments. However, our field research encompassing over 50 churches has revealed a stark shift: most are now permanently closed, or open only briefly on specific religious dates. These once-vital spaces have become architecturally imposing yet socially inert, detached from the communities they once served.

This context calls for a symbolic and functional reactivation of the threshold – the door – as a site of renewed social engagement. We propose a series of artistic and architectural interventions focused on church entrances, developed in collaboration with artists, local collectives and residents. These interventions aim to reimagine the interface between interior and exterior spaces, fostering new forms of dialogue, inclusion and community use. By re-signifying these thresholds, we can test how churches might once again become relevant as inclusive civic and cultural infrastructures.



St. Josef (indoor beach). 2026 © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Josep Bohigas. Image processing using own photographs, Adobe Photoshop and AI-based tools (ChatGPT).



2. Open Church (within Open House)

Open House is a global initiative that grants public access to significant buildings – ranging from historic landmarks to contemporary architectural works – promoting public appreciation of the built environment and stimulating discourse on urban sustainability and heritage. Since its inception in London in 1992, the festival has expanded to over 50 cities worldwide.

In the Ruhr Area, Open House remains relatively recent, with strong potential for growth. Since 2015, it has focused primarily on the region's post-industrial transformation, offering public access to repurposed mines, industrial heritage sites and innovative housing developments. The cities of Essen, Dortmund and Duisburg have become active participants, demonstrating a clear appetite for cultural engagement with architecture and urban change.



- ↑ This is not a beach (Zollverein), 2026
© Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Josep Bohigas. Image processing using own photographs, Adobe Photoshop and AI-based tools (ChatGPT).
- ← St. Josef (outdoor beach), 2026 © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Josep Bohigas. Image processing using own photographs, Adobe Photoshop and AI-based tools (ChatGPT).

We proposed an institutional partnership between Open House Ruhr and Manifesta, introducing a dedicated focus on churches as sites of artistic exploration and urban reflection. In particular, the inclusion of Pantoffelkirchen – modest churches built during the post-war reconstruction – could offer a meaningful counterpoint to the monumental scale of industrial heritage sites.

A coordinated initiative to open a network of churches over one or two days would not only reveal their architectural significance – with works by figures such as Hans Scharoun, Gottfried Böhm, Emil Steffann and Otto Bartning – but also serve as a catalyst for discussions on their future uses, preservation and integration into the social fabric of contemporary cities.

3. Floating Church

Emscherkunstweg is an open-air contemporary art exhibition held across the Emscher river basin. Initiated in 2010 as part of the European Capital of Culture celebrations, it has since become a triennial event that aims to revitalise this former industrial region through art and culture. The works, created by international artists, are situated within post-industrial landscapes – abandoned factories, waterways and rewilded natural areas – fostering a dialogue between the region's industrial past and its sustainable future.

Today, the exhibition includes 21 permanent artworks, with further expansion planned for 2026. The sculptural trail spans over 100 kilometres along the Emscher River, from its source in Holzwickede to its confluence with the Rhine in Dinslaken and is supported by a dense network of cycling paths.

A possible alliance between Manifesta 16 and Emscherkunstweg for 2026 offers a unique opportunity to generate synergies and enhance the cultural impact of both initiatives.

Among the proposed actions is the creation of a Floating Church – a symbolic and mobile space that would navigate the Rhein-Herne Canal, a 45-kilometre waterway connecting the eastern and western Ruhr Area. This itinerant venue would host artistic, spiritual and community-based activities, making programmed stops in Duisburg, Oberhausen, Essen, Gelsenkirchen and Herne, eventually approaching Dortmund, where it could temporarily connect with selected fixed-site churches.

The Floating Church could also function as one of the Blue Classrooms (Blaue Klassenzimmer) – a series of open-air learning spaces promoted by the EmscherGenossenschaft along riverbanks. Reimagined as a small nomadic amphitheatre, the church would support educational, reflective and celebratory gatherings in a constantly shifting environment.

4. Entreacto (Interlude, Intermission)

Manifesta 16 Ruhr proposes the temporary use of churches, with the intention of catalysing their transformation. As previously mentioned, many of these churches are undergoing a delicate phase of transition. Once spiritual and social hubs of mining communities, they now face abandonment and await either an urgent sale to enable a new purpose – or a slow and silent disappearance.

Destruction is typically a violent act that tends to erase memory without regard. The Interlude proposal seeks to identify all churches currently in this transitional state (between one “act” and the next – whether disappearance or transformation) and to make use of this fragile moment to provoke reflection through ephemeral actions that honour their heritage and memory.

A compelling example of this strategy can be found in the work *Ende einer Pantoffelkirche* by the photographer Karna Lütge. The artist documented the entire process of dismantling the church of Saint Thérèse in Stadtwald (Essen), transforming its disappearance into a sensitive tribute.



Floating Church (pool), 2026 © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Josep Bohigas. Image processing using own photographs, Adobe Photoshop and AI-based tools (ChatGPT).

5. Beachurch: Where is the beach?

The *Beachurch* project idea emerges from a dual observation: on the one hand, the increasing number of churches in the Ruhr Area that are closed, underused, or facing demolition; on the other, the urgent need to rethink public space as a vehicle for rebuilding community ties in territories marked by deindustrialisation, lack of social mobility and urban fragmentation.

Rather than interpreting these churches merely as remnants of a fading religiosity, the project proposes their symbolic and functional reconversion through an urban metaphor: the church as a beach.

Here, the beach is not understood solely as a physical location, but as a radically open social construct – where diverse bodies converge, temporalities slow down and informal modes of coexistence emerge. As a paradigmatic liminal space – between land and water, nature and culture – the beach embodies a form of non-hierarchical public space, free from formal prescriptions, accommodating both solitude and collectivity, ritual and play.



Floating Church (garden), 2026 © Manifesta 16 Ruhr / Josep Bohigas. Image processing using own photographs, Adobe Photoshop and AI-based tools (ChatGPT).

Beachurch thus invites us to imagine and activate a network of disused churches reconfigured as new civic infrastructures, open to hybrid uses and collectively reimagined alongside artists, architects, residents and cultural practitioners. This is not simply about assigning a new function to these spaces but about re-signifying their urban presence as sites of encounter, hospitality and shared meaning-making.

The question “Where is the beach?” functions both as a provocation and a working hypothesis. If beaches do not exist, perhaps we can create their symbolic equivalents in the heart of our neighbourhoods: spaces where time expands, hierarchies dissolve and common life becomes possible once again.

In this sense, *Beachurch* offers a contemporary reading of the sacred – not through the lens of institutional faith, but through the political and affective need to reconstitute the commons. In every church, a potential beach. In every neighbourhood, an invitation to relearn how to be together.

6. Proposal for an International Conference organised by Manifesta 16 Ruhr and RVR: “New Uses for Churches in Transition”

In the context of the profound social, demographic and cultural shifts taking place across Europe, the future of disused religious buildings – particularly churches – has become a pressing and complex issue. Countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands are several years ahead in addressing these challenges, while others, including Spain and Italy, are only beginning to confront the scale of the problem. Yet across all nations, churches are becoming increasingly empty and the cost of their upkeep is often too great to maintain them in a proper state.

This international conference proposes to bring together researchers, architects, artists, institutional representatives and community stakeholders to discuss the challenges and opportunities related to the transformation and adaptive reuse of ecclesiastical heritage. The sharing of experiences – both positive and negative – across different countries can help avoid repeating past mistakes and foster innovative solutions, ensuring that this vast and widely distributed heritage is not irretrievably lost.

The Ruhr Area, with its dense industrial and social history, provides a paradigmatic case. Dozens of churches that once served as vital community centres for mining neighbourhoods now stand closed, abandoned, or threatened with demolition. Yet due to the opacity of many dioceses, no comprehensive public inventory of their current condition or future prospects exists.

One of the key objectives of the conference will be to promote the establishment of a “Ruhr Area Churches Observatory” and the development of a full catalogue that compiles architectural and historical data, as well as assessments of future potential – whether as sites of memory or as spaces for collective reinvention.

Colophon

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