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Ruhrgebiet Renewed

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### An Industrial Region Sheds its Soot and Smog to Become a European Capital of Culture

In 1979, Allen Ginsberg lamented his “Ruhr-Gebiet” as home to “Too much industry / too much eats / too much beer”. The poet actively sought landscapes that would fit the odes he wrote so well. Still, he was dead-on and many, even in Germany today, are surprised to find out that the 53-city region now stakes its future to education, green technology, and, perhaps most importantly, the arts—well enough, in fact, to have become a 2010 European Capital of Culture. The factories, mines, and mills in Ginsberg’s topography of “Too much metal / Too much fat / Too many jokes / not enough meditation” have been converted into public parks, galleries, performance venues, and studios.

I’d never been to the Ruhrgebiet before I stepped off the S-Bahn in Dortmund Jan. 11. Near it, sure—I’d changed trains in Köln and planes in Düsseldorf—and not so far away from it on trips to Berlin or Amsterdam, but, until 2006, when I met a proud native who went on about the region, its history and reputation, and all of the good stuff to come, I had never heard of the place. Many Europeans know it as one venue of the World Cup in 2006 and the current home of the Love Parade, and Turks know it as a destination for guest workers over the past several decades and the home to Germany’s largest mosque. Still, even in Germany few see it as a Capital of Culture: “I’m here to see the Europäische Kulturhauptstadt,” I told a Berliner I met on the trip; “Ah,” he replied, “so you’re going to Berlin?” This, in a city covered in posters advertising Ruhr.2010.

Ruins attract me. Give me the Salton Sea, where misplaced dreams leave rotting resorts, give me Coney Island, a century-old playground with a future frequently in doubt, give me Bucharest, a crumbling capital of “new Europe.” “Preservation” vs. “progress” vexes me. Do we let a structure sit dilapidated because it’s always been there? Does knocking it down for condos or a parking lot really represent a vision of the future? The transition from an industrial to a cultural economy, and government’s role in this, intrigues me. Stateside, and especially now, the Rustbelt, the port towns, and the coal country need some sort of stimulus without question; the question is whether we pour money into more of the same or try out alternative options. The Ruhrgebiet, I figured—along with Liverpool, a 2008 European Capital of Culture—was the perfect laboratory to explore what happens when the heritage is preserved but repurposed toward progress, and, perhaps, for me to make a case for culture back home in the first year of a presidential administration that appears to be trying to stake its legacy to bold public works.

“This is where people always say it looks like Pittsburgh,” said Peter Wende, director of Duisburg’s Department for Representation and International Relations and former ACG fellow. We stood atop an old blast furnace in Landschaftspark, built on the 200-hectare site of the Meiderich Ironworks, which closed in 1985. We’d hiked up with Christoph Späh, of the city’s Department for Families, Society, and Culture and an ACG

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alum, and the three of us looked out on smokestacks and scrapped industry. Indeed, when Duane Michals shot his photo series *The Theatre of Real Life* in Duisburg in 2001, the accompanying catalog featured an essay called “The Skies over Pittsburgh: Duane Michals’ American Dreams.” “Aficionados of the Ruhr Region are sure to love it: Duane Michals’ 1982 photo series *I Remember Pittsburgh*,” writes Christoph Ribbat, who has taught American literature and cultural history in the Ruhrgebiet cities of Dortmund and Bochum. “In these seven images the photographer brings to life his memories of the industrial city where he grew up. The parallels between the German ‘Ruhrpott’ and Pittsburgh are obvious—in the U.S. people talk the same way about the city of coal and steel on the Ohio River as they do here about the steel and mining towns between Duisburg and Dortmund. . . . Heavy industry these days is suffering from a case of anorexia, in Germany as well as in the American Northeast.” Duisburg seized its rusty heritage to create the North Duisburg Landscape Park. “In the States,” Wende told me, “you’d just build a fence around it and close off the freeway exit.”



The one-two-three Ruhrgebiet creation myth goes: 300-ish million years ago the Carboniferous Era brought coal, in the 1300s mining began in Dortmund, and, for 150 years, the rock proved profitable enough to attract investors and workers Europe-wide. The ill-informed across Germany still think the Ruhrgebiet is home to little more than state-supported immigrants and ignorants. It’s more complicated, but still I’ll try simplify everything between prehistory and now.

The region has long attracted outsiders, from Romans in the B.C. era to Charlemagne in 775. Bochum established its first coal office in 1738; by 1790, 900 pits lined the Ruhr River. The Industrial Revolution brought steam engines in the 1800s, and a railroad line from Cologne to Minden completed in 1847 carried people in and coal out. A population of about 400,000 in 1850 swelled to 3.8 million by 1925. Some of the first immigrants attracted by the region’s coal boom were miners from Belgium, France, England, and Scotland. However, the first major population shift was due to an internal migration of ethnically Polish German citizens from Prussia, Silesia, and the east; to this day, Polish surnames are common in the Ruhrgebiet. In the 1960s, when the population reached its high of about 5.7 million people—it has been in steady decline since then, now sits at about 5.3 million, and is predicted to drop to about 5 million in the next half-decade—immigrants were attracted from Mediterranean countries such as Spain and Italy. After the fall of communism, migrants began to arrive from the Balkans and the former Eastern bloc. The most recent immigrants come from Turkey and other Muslim countries. The immigrant population in the Ruhrgebiet is about 11 percent of the total (the national number is just under 9 percent), and Turks compose 43.6 percent of this, while foreigners from ex-Yugoslavia make up about 13 percent. The Ruhrgebiet is surprisingly tolerant of foreigners in a country where immigration is constantly under debate.

The region opposed Hitler on worker grounds in the run-up to his election and the first years of his administration. The Führer shut down the handful of gay bars that had

existed during the Weimar '20s, demolished Dortmund's synagogue even before Kristallnacht, and established a prison and interrogation center there that was known as the "Hell of West Germany." Allied bombing heavily targeted the Ruhrgebiet because of its position as Germany's industrial center, and, by the end of the war, the population stood at under 4 million. Recovery money allowed the Ruhr to rebuild, and it quickly became a major European supplier of coal and steel again. The boom times were short, though: natural gas, inexpensive imports, and research into nuclear power reduced the market for the region's major products.

In 1958, just at the start of the decline, a 14-year-old Klaus Tenfelde arrived in Essen to begin a four-year apprenticeship. "I was confronted with the idea of a major crisis in coal mining in Germany, and I thought about my own career, I thought about the idea to make a sort of career in mining or to leave and do something else," Tenfelde, now 65, told me. "I decided for the latter." The latter brought him back to the Ruhrgebiet in 1995, when he took a job as the director of the Ruhr University Bochum's Institute for Social Movements. His experience in the region's mines as well as its academies—and his half-century of Ruhrgebiet perspective—allows him to comment in ways few can. "When I left the region, no university was around," said Tenfelde, whose regional history is due to be published during the Culture Capital year. "The blue sky on the Ruhr—they were talking about that in the 1960s—has been realized very well," he added. "I mean, there's no dust, no dirt, anymore. It's an urban region like anywhere else."

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The transformation from coal country to Culture Capital has much to do with the institution Tenfelde represents. RUB, a concrete campus in the fine tradition of postwar modernism, became the Ruhr's first higher-education establishment in 1961. Nowadays, the region is home to several universities and specialist schools, including institutions devoted to the arts and specialized sciences. A survey at the end of the 2002–03 school year found 167,550 students in the six universities and polytechnics and eight specialist schools, with 39.5 percent studying law, business, or social sciences and 31 percent learning mathematics, natural sciences, technology, or engineering. An additional 22 percent engage language and cultural studies.

This burgeoning educated class means the Ruhrgebiet now churns out its own cultural consumers and creators—and the original technological and scientific research to attract new minds and new money to the region. Although the Ruhr has a theater tradition that dates back to the 1400s, the cultural evolution of the past few decades is what has garnered the region an honor in 2010 that would have been unthinkable in 1990. Recent developments include new and reconstructed arts venues, innovative approaches to culture, and new festivals. Since 2001, for example, the RuhrTriennale has staged productions in three-year cycles in the converted industrial sites that make the Ruhr unique.

That these structures remain and have been repurposed toward arts and public use is thanks to the Internationale Bauausstellung Emscher Park, a 10-year project begun in

1989 that convened architects from around Europe to discuss how the region could guide its cultural transformation. The consensus was to preserve, and the architects were tasked with incorporating the Ruhrgebiet's sooty history into its arty future. The preservationist logic is in part that, by maintaining historical cultural touchstones, art institutions will be less alienating to the people of the traditionally working-class region. "One side is to build up new buildings," the architect Karl-Heinz Petzinka, creative director of the Ruhr.2010 project "City of Possibilities," told me. "The other side is what can be interesting for normal people?" A fancy new structure by a hired-gun outsider architect wouldn't fly in the still rough-around-the-edges Ruhrgebiet. "We want to change the meaning of the location," Petzinka said. "We want to try to build up new feeling, new atmospheres."

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In 1985, Athens was declared the first European City of Culture. Ever since, rotating countries have given the designation to one of their cities, with Ireland's Cork City being the initial European Capital of Culture in 1999. In the beginning, the capitals were cities that would normally find themselves on tourists' itineraries: Florence, Amsterdam, Paris. Indeed, they were often simply European capitals. However, expansion of the system to include more than one city per year in 2000 opened the field of contenders dramatically, and beginning in 2001 the chosen cities required visitors to venture into the provinces of European countries, with places like Porto, Portugal; Bruges, Belgium; and Graz, Austria, getting the title.

Romania's Sibiu, for example, made the list and a name for itself. The city of 150,000 people saw 800,000 tourists during the year, according to Oana Ionita, who handled public relations for Sibiu 2007. About 300 cultural operators—institutions, artists, nongovernmental organizations—at various venues hosted a total of 2,000 events. After all of that, no one was left wondering, "Sibiu?" "The idea of choosing more or less small-scale cities to be European Capitals of Culture was to—how to say?—pop up the interest for these cities," Ionita told me.

The designation also helped Luxembourg, which saw 2.5 million tourists attend 4,000 events. Lille, France, the 2004 Culture Capital, had tourism shoot from 308,000 the year before to more than 820,000. Granted, an increased number of visitors in a year of costly festivals and exhibits doesn't necessarily mean a large financial windfall: according to a 2004 study, about one-third of European Capitals of Culture report small surpluses at the end of their turns, one-third break even, and one-third lose money on the year. On average a total of about 77.5 percent of funds come from city, regional, and national governments—plus a small EU kick-in—with the rest of the money coming from private donors. While some sponsors may consider their interest in the festivals an advertisement, governments might see it more as an investment. Visits to Dublin museums increased 72 percent in 1991, and attendance at performances went up 31 percent. In Salamanca, Spain, 37.5 million euros of tourist expenditures in 2002 were attributed to the city's status as a European Capital of Culture. Plus, the designation of

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cultural capital is one that'll for stick for years after the celebration—as will the arts infrastructure built in preparation for and fortified by the honor.

The Ruhr.2010 project has a budget of about 60 million euros. (Cities can draw on their own money for events, but in downturns culture departments often lose funding first). Sponsorship has dropped severely. “The title is a European title, and it’s awarded by a European jury, by Brussels, but the money they give is absolutely ridiculous because they give 1.5 million euros,” Ruhr.2010 International Relations Director Hanns-Dietrich Schmidt told me. “The budget of the average capital city is 65 million, so all this is not about money and that’s very important. We try to fight for more from the European Union, from Brussels, but it’s not so easy. They want to show, ‘Okay, it’s a European Capital of Culture,’ but they do not want to pay for it.” The government picks up the slack, though, and it is this institutional funding that makes Culture Capitals possible. “We have, of course, a certain amount of fundraising money, and, in the last two or three months, it’s getting more difficult to get more even here in Europe,” said Schmidt, who works as a dramaturgy professor at the Folkwang Hochschule when not serving as the “foreign minister” of a Culture Capital. “Of course, we are a little bit on the safe side because most of the money is given by the state and the region so this doesn’t depend on companies, but we have 12 to 15 million out of fundraising and this is very hard to get now. ... I think in the cultural life it’s much more problematic in the U.S.”

In 2000, the Americas began designating their own capitals of culture, with Mérida, Mexico, being the first city to hold the title. The capitals Brasilia, Panama City, and Santiago, Chile, aside, American Capitals of Culture have also tended toward lesser-known cities like Cusco, Peru; Cordoba, Argentina; and Maceió, Brazil. Any city from the tip of Alaska to Tierra del Fuego is eligible to apply for the title, but thus far no city north of Guadalajara, Mexico, has held the honor.

In 2007, an announcement was made that cities could apply for a brand-new designation: U.S. Capital of Culture. “Any city in the USA with a population of more than fifty thousand inhabitants may submit an application to be the next US Capital of Culture,” a post on [www.culturalcapital.us](http://www.culturalcapital.us) read. “Also, any state capital (including Washington DC,) with a population of fewer than fifty thousand inhabitants may submit an application to be the next US Capital of Culture.” As we all know, there hasn’t been a U.S. Capital of Culture yet. While I was in Germany, the site was updated for the first time in since November 2008 to state that the 2010 application process was open; as of late April 2009, the most recent post came from early March and announced that Santo Domingo had won the American Capital of Culture title, with no updates on applicants for the U.S. honor.

It’s a pity, though not surprising, that the United States lags so far behind most of Europe when it comes to cultural promotion. This is a country where towns of 50,000 sit on top of towns of 50,000 and it seems like every city over 50 years old offers “a historic downtown” complete with an art walk. One would think the U.S. government would do more to promote the regions beyond the metropolises with the big gateway international

airports where foreign tourists arrive and never leave—except to travel to other metropolises.

There's more to New York State than New York City, just like there's more to the United States than a couple of coasts with Chicago in the middle. Unfortunately, in a country that does little to promote the arts, facilitate travel to off-the-beaten-path destinations, or offer incentives to artists and art organizations, it seems the world will never know.

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In addition to studying the buildup in a region on the verge, I also had to measure the morning-after vibe in a city that'd concluded its big year's activities a few weeks earlier. When I arrived at Liverpool's John Lennon International Airport, it was clear that the hangover had yet to set in: banners on the road into town still touted 2008, and I saw a few folks around the city wearing T-shirts or badges embossed with last year's slogans. Liverpool, much like the Ruhrgebiet, was a hardworking, hard-drinking town that had quickly been forced to adjust when industry was no longer its most viable product.

Liverpool carried only one advantage over former and future capitals: 2008, a leap year, meant the city had an extra day to make its case. A bad reputation has long plagued the port (even this year I've told British friends I spent a few days there, and they ask me why) and out-of-town media coverage that often took shots at the city even while praising it. "Ask the average journalist their thoughts on the jewel of the Mersey and the usual glib clichés will trip off the tongue," the *Independent's* Jonathan Brown wrote in a rare newspaper defense of Liverpool. "The perception is of a crime-ridden, economic basket case, populated by a mawkish people with a chip on their collective shoulder." "Liverpool has always had a difficult relationship with the national media simply because it's been a fantastic source of negative stories," Liverpool Capital of Culture Creative Director Phil Redmond told me. "You can't argue with that. The interesting thing is, from my time in the media, there's a disproportionate number of people in the media who come from Liverpool and Merseyside, so, therefore, they are naturally sensitized to any story that comes out of Liverpool. ... Because they made the choice to go away from the city, their natural propensity is to defend that decision, and the way to defend that decision is to say 'Where I am now is better than where I was.' A lot of them left, you know, a long time ago, when life was pretty grim here, and overall I think the most generalized view and the reaction of most journalists who've not come here in a long time is, 'Wow, this place has changed.'" Still, in the run-up to the Culture Capital, some of the major stories to come out of Liverpool were not these positive changes, but the hiccups in the planning process. The city ran a debt of 20 million pounds to finance the year and requested a bailout from the national government, planned projects disappeared because the money just wasn't there, Redmond's predecessor as creative director left in a huff. "There was lots of daft things coming out of the council and, you know, people leaving," said Redmond, who currently serves as the chair of the National Museums Liverpool. "This was grist for the mill for most of the media. This was fantastic stuff. And my job was really to take that on and say, 'That's fine, but you're missing the main

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story, and the main story is that happens everywhere, you know, it's not just here: you can go to the Olympics, you can go to any big event stage anywhere, and you'll find these kind of issues. Look at the program, look at what we're doing here.' And then, gradually, I think, over the year—by making them focus on the program, by making them come here, by making them walk the street—gradually, they came around to it was all right.”

Four billion pounds of public and private money were pumped into 300 major developments since the year 2000, and the investment seems to be paying off so far: Liverpool received an economic benefit from 2008 of 800 million pounds and the positive coverage of the Culture Capital year was worth an estimated global media value of 200 million pounds. This January, just before I went to Liverpool, a friend of mine interviewed Redmond for a London *Times* article on the regenerative effects of culture. During 2008, Richard Brooks wrote that “The gloom merchants, such as myself, have been proved wrong about Liverpool as European Capital of Culture” in a *Sunday Times* mea culpa. By the end of the big year, 70 percent of Liverpoolians had visited a museum or gallery (far above the national average of 59 percent) and 79 percent of people considered Liverpool to be a city on the rise (the top percentage of any U.K. city). An estimated 25 percent of visitors in 2008 had come to the city for the first time.

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Ruhr.2010 organizers eye Liverpool as a model Culture Capital; however, next year could prove unfortunate timing for ambitious events. Last year, of course, carried a bigger advantage for Culture Capitals than simply the quadrennial Feb. 29: back then, cities had money to fund the arts, and, back then, people had the means to consume them. The unemployment rate in the Ruhrgebiet is 14.5 percent—higher in some of the biggest cities such as Dortmund (17.6 percent), Gelsenkirchen (24.6 percent), and Duisburg (20.9 percent)—compared with 11.5 percent in North-Rhine Westphalia. This will surely be exacerbated by cutbacks and closures, especially with Nokia closing its Bochum plant and General Motors Europe, which employs 5,500 people at its Opel factory in the city, mulling similar measures.

Additionally, planners must address questions of social penetration and inclusion. How does a Culture Capital reach all strata of society? How does the Ruhr.2010 bureaucracy ensure that locals feel that next year is being done for—and, perhaps more importantly, with—they rather than to them?

Jürgen Mittag works with Tenfelde at RUB's Institute for Social Movements and studies Culture Capitals for his book *Die Idee Der Kulturhauptstadt Europas*. In a nutshell, he says the trick to a successful 2010 is unity, variety, and sustainability to ensure that the culture year is not just a one-off shebang. He points to Patras in Greece as a Culture Capital complicated by quarrelling: “Political parties fought against each other and tried to make personal use or party use of the European Capital of Culture, and in the end nothing came to an end,” he told me. In order to get everyone involved, the programmers need to ensure that there's something for everyone on the agenda, “to have

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a broad approach that includes both the high culture and the top events as well as local people.” Finally, he points to Weimar’s culture year in 1998 as an example of a city without an enduring vision: “A few months later, all the museums have been closed, all the buildings have been shut down, so nothing lasts for more than this year.” Still, he says the Ruhrgebiet needs to find its own way. “Every city has its different approaches, has different opportunities, has different chances to offer,” he said. “It makes no sense to copy [Austria’s 2009 capital] Linz for 2010,” he added. “You have to be creative, you have to find out your own approach to succeed in the European Capital of Culture.”

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No matter what happens next year, the Ruhrgebiet has succeeded merely by earning the European Capital of Culture title. A half-century ago, when Jürgen Mittag’s colleague Klaus Tenfelde arrived, the old way of life in the region was coming to an end and a future had to be forged from a history manufactured in the traditional mills. Visionaries sifted through the smog and cultivated minds in a place known better for mines.

“I’m curious to see what’s going to happen and the changes and how the perception of this region is going to change through the Kulturhauptstadt,” Julia Sattler, a study advisor at the Technical University of Dortmund, told me.

And what is that perception?

“Traditionally speaking, it’s smokestacks and industry, coal and steel, and what’s left and what’s still there from the old pursuits is beer and soccer,” Walter Grünzweig, a deputy rector at the university, chimed in.

“And working-class people,” Sattler added.

“Except the working class is out of business, out of work—more time drinking beer that way,” Grünzweig laughed.

We sat in Grünzweig’s office talking old stereotypes, talking Ginsberg, who’d protested “Too much money / Too many poor / Turks without vote” in ’79. Talking all the change 30 years have brought. Perhaps next year, when the Ruhr takes the stage as European Capital of Culture with a program of dance and theater and visual art, perhaps now that the place has redefined itself by producing region-specific literature in Ruhrpott German, perhaps soon enough, the Ruhrgebiet will prove itself as a place for poetry rather than simply the subject of it.