

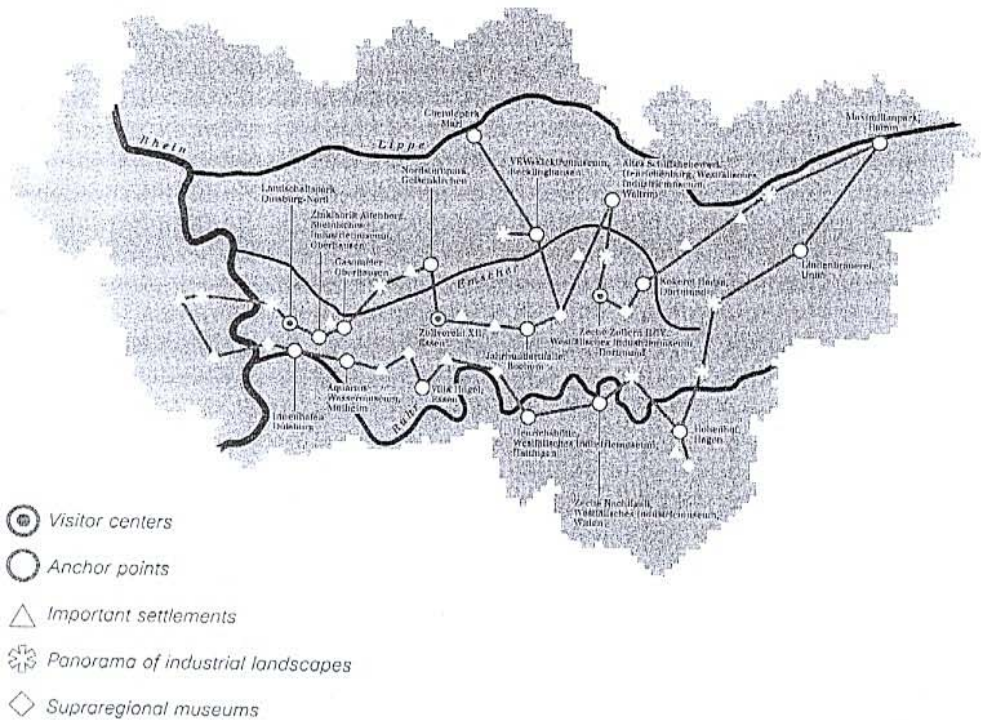
EMSCHER PARK INTERNATIONAL BUILDING EXHIBITION A TRENDSETTING MODEL?

Arnold Voß

The Emscher Park "International Building Exhibition" (IBA) was conceived as a laboratory for economic, social, and ecological structural change and selected as its "experimental subject" an area that urgently needed this kind of integrated approach: the former industrial conurbation of the Ruhr District. As early as the 1950s, this region, whose importance since the nineteenth century had derived primarily from coal mining, was driven by the more competitive energy sources on the global market to the brink of economic disaster. In attempts to stem the region's decline, the state promptly initiated various restructuring and funding programs: subsidies for traditional industries, subsidies for capital investment throughout almost the whole region, the promotion of small and medium-sized businesses, and the costly purchase of abandoned and often highly contaminated land by a regional development company set up specifically for this purpose. Yet, against all hopes, none of these produced the decisive breakthrough to structural change. Only the foundation of a string of universities in the 1960s, as well as the technology transfer that ensued from new funding measures for innovation and research, showed initial signs of success, at least in the university towns.

In the light of this history, the idea of implementing the first IBA project that would cover a whole region can be seen as a consequence of the failure of previous growth and subsidization strategies. In comparison with the sums that had been spent up to that point, and considering the IBA's ten-year time frame (with a projected DM 4 billion to DM 5 billion for mobile investments, in addition to around DM 8 billion for the Emscher redevelopment itself) the actual costs of around DM 30 million for the IBA organization must have seemed to the state government to be a veritable policy bargain. This was possible because the quite considerable amounts of public money allocated to IBA projects came from existing public or European funding programs.

The Emscher Park IBA focused in particular on the northern part of the region, the former Emscher Valley, with its circa two million inhabitants—still, at that time, the part of the region most strongly characterized by the base-metal and mining industries. Once a natural river, the Emscher and all its tributaries had been abused since the beginning of the twentieth century as an almost 400-kilometer sewer and quasi-canalized industrial river that had become a major focus of endeavor for change. Its renaturalization, initially required by new European Union guidelines on water and then pushed through by the Emscher Cooperative (an association specialized in matters of sewage organization and comprising concerned local authorities), was the starting point for the IBA's second major scheme, the creation of a continuous regional landscape park along the east-west axis of the "new Emscher." New workplaces and residences in and around the Emscher Landscape Park were planned, along with the conversion of an increasing number of vacant cathedrals of industrial architecture into cultural centers. At its inception at the end of the 1980s, therefore, the Emscher Park IBA corresponded perfectly to prevailing concepts of urban development, architecture, and regional planning. A "brain-storming" appeal, aimed at professionals in all conceivable social fields, and launched by North Rhine-Westphalia's Ministry for Urban Development and Transportation in 1989, marked



The "Industrial Culture Route" consists of nineteen anchor points in a network of prominent, formerly industrial locations, and encompasses industrial monuments, museums, viewpoints, and important settlements.

the start of this long-term project. Over the course of the following ten years, 120 projects on six major themes were carried out.

- The proposed aim of the *Emscher Landscape Park* was to recoup nature and exploit its recreational, regenerative, and constitutive potential for the urban context. The green corridor, almost 70 kilometers long and several kilometers wide, with an industrial forest, open landscapes, waste heaps with landmarks, and residential and commercial properties, offers a broad spectrum of typologies for space and usage.

- The *ecological regeneration of the Emscher* was aimed at sustainable regional development by means of a new approach to hitherto neglected, natural basic materials in urban development. The river was renaturalized and freed of effluents by the construction of new sewage plants.

- The concept of *new industrial culture* created a framework for the new historicity of urban planning under the slogan "Regeneration by Preservation." The conversion, primarily for cultural purposes, of industrial ruins and the attendant review of local history, were intended to help the region find a new identity.

- The concept of *working in the park* reflected aspirations that structural change would create fewer, yet more highly qualified, workplaces, which were integral to the city.

- The concept of *new accommodation and neighborhood structures* was based—at least as far as experimental architectural approaches were concerned—on the expectation that lifestyles and the constitution of the family would change. DIY options for homeowners or renters, along with purchase assistance and amortized loans, were intended to guarantee the provision of accommodation for people from a wide range of social backgrounds.

- The goal of numerous *social initiatives* was to include the local population in the redevelopment process and especially to integrate young, long-term unemployed people by means of job-creation schemes and training programs.

The IBA saw its role as being that of facilitator, engine, and quality controller. It put its seal on the project, thereby rendering the real investors "fit for funding," provided that these were not themselves public bodies. Investment projects, in turn, saw themselves as flagships of creative design, as islands of innovation in the morass of regional planning. The underlying idea here is "perspective incrementalism," whereby, in the context of a still vague, long-term overall perspective, concrete single steps are formulated and implemented. The projected investment sum of DM 4 billion to DM 5 billion was, if one can believe the official statistics, chalked up by the more than one hundred projects. The greater part of this sum had, however, once again flowed from public funds and, by the end of the IBA project an overall concept for future redevelopment—a kind of master plan—was still nowhere in sight.

The Reversal of Social Trends: Regeneration without Growth

Before the ball even got rolling, however, growth rates in Germany began to fall. In the Ruhr district the pendulum even shifted to partial stagnation or below zero—and this against a background of demand-deficient unemployment caused by the onset of regional structural change some considerable time earlier. Applied to the IBA area itself, that is, to the northern part of the region, these figures indicate a social structure that was already characterized by an above-average proportion of older and less-qualified

long-term unemployed. An ongoing decline in population and state revenue at both regional and federal levels was already foreseeable, too, as the process of structural change overlaying economic problems continued to accelerate.

Insofar, the central slogan of the Emscher Park IBA project, "Regeneration without Growth," was perfectly suited to the social landscape. But only on the face of it. In reality, the slogan belonged to a period when growth had been largely a matter of course, and an ecological critique of it arising from newly won political awareness was hence almost inevitable. Now the threat of too much growth had been deprived of the "growth" part. The Emscher Park IBA was planning de facto with a yesteryear slogan for a move into economic and social tides of change that, despite all its successes, were bound to overwhelm it in the end. None of the people in charge could have imagined that, in less than ten years, the trend would completely reverse and that shrinking would constitute the major threat; and not only from an economic viewpoint.

If one takes a closer look at the lead projects, however, it is clear that the IBA, and likewise the state government behind it, were hoping, at least in the medium term, for fresh economic growth, or at least to raise the regional growth rate to the state and federal average. The *working in the park* concept, which solely because of its regional political implications had been established in almost every town in the Emscher zone, demanded as much. The extension of landscaped recreational areas, likewise foreseen in the *park* concept, was also pursued quite halfheartedly, although the need for more forceful action was clearly signaled by all demographic forecasts. The region's political players understandably considered the growing expanse of available land not as an opportunity for more recreational areas, but as potential locations for new investors, which it was imperative to keep in reserve. And, when it came to the crunch, the IBA—despite knowing better—did not contradict them.

From Idea to Ideology: The Emscher Park IBA as Regional Design

Declining growth rates were found in many other locations as a result of German reunification, which at least in its ultimate form was quite unforeseeable, and of the subsequent opening of Europe to the east. This heralded the start of harsh competition for growth opportunities and, above all, for funding—a trend that was to be reinforced throughout Europe by the new wave of globalization that began at the same time. The foreseeable regional shrinking process was thereby exposed to additional pressure from external forces. This by no means led to acceptance of the increasingly hopeless prospects of regional growth but, on the contrary, to a veritable do-or-die promotion of redevelopment as a means to new growth. The Emscher Park IBA thus not only found itself obliged to conduct a considerable, additional marketing campaign; it also bade its antigrowth slogan a final farewell.

Instead, an image change for the Ruhr district took center stage in all of the Emscher Park IBA's endeavors for a regional upturn. Regional regeneration and—more than anything else—the iconic potential of its media representation were in practice esteemed much more highly than any real exposure to the shrinking process in all its pertinent creative, social, and urban aspects. Beyond its economic causes, no further interest in the issue of shrinking was expressed at all. Not a single project dealt seriously with its inevitable consequences for urban design and sociocultural developments.

From Self-Marketing to Self-Deception

From this point onwards, the IBA was much too preoccupied with the regeneration part of its strategy to have any willingness to see that the general situation around many of its flagship projects was continuing to deteriorate and, in fact, at a more rapid rate than ever since structural change had begun. It did not see that the people who were supposed to be animated by aesthetically top-notch islands of innovation, inspired by a new culture to enter the old halls of industry or, at least, to take pride in it all, were growing constantly poorer, collectively older into the bargain and, above all, fewer and fewer. When, on top of everything else, the strategy based on *perceptions* of structural change marked up its first media successes, nobody gave even a moment's thought to changing the underlying priority ranking of so-called soft locational factors. Criticism initially voiced in this regard by some economic experts and by the Christian Democratic Party also evaporated.

In the grand, euphoric phase of the image change, nobody wanted to admit that the Ruhr District had been at its most successful when it had neither a blue sky nor post-modern architecture, when there had been fewer cultural highlights and no tourists. Nor was anyone inclined to listen to those who said that the region, although indisputably more lovely, more ecologically sound, and culturally more diverse, was constantly losing more jobs and more people.

History as a Limited Endogenous Force

This corresponded with the IBA's notion of the "endogenous forces" that were earmarked for funding. For want of any explicitly trendsetting poles of economic growth, and in blind loyalty to its "post-material ideology," it perceived the Ruhr District's inner strength primarily in its architectural industrial heritage, which it radically reinterpreted in a radically regional style. The last vestiges of traditional industrial production were very successfully imbued with a new mythical history and identity and declared to be a unique selling point. While the segment of the Ruhr's capital that was either leaping into position as a global player or planning its getaway engaged in a purely economic and often (for residents and local authorities) negative disposal of the remains, the IBA's distinctly alternative way of dealing with "the leftovers" gave people something lasting, in the truest sense of the word. The psychological effect of ensuing regional self-confidence should therefore not be underestimated. Yet in the long term, unless regional potential for an economic leap forward is strengthened, this kind of strategy ends up going nowhere. It certainly proved less capable than ever of slowing down the shrinking process, let alone stopping it. However important a detail for the region it might be, the growth of architectural and cultural tourism—which was later boosted by the highly subsidized "Ruhr Triennale"—cannot trigger any fundamental reversal.

Regeneration Begins with Policy Structures

That the regional political and administrative apparatus was, given the hitherto unstoppable downward spiral, no longer adequately equipped to deal with the problems and, indeed, was itself one of the problems, was something that the IBA failed to address either in its program or practically. The theme of a "Ruhr city" or regional city was not even hypothetically discussed. The IBA was too entangled with existing political structures to ever think

of challenging them, even verbally. Yet the organization of regional shrinking and regeneration processes emphatically requires both widely networked decentralized structures and centralized structures that can draw the various threads together and take effective action. To this day, the Ruhr District has neither one nor the other, even though the central side was potentially strengthened by the creation of a new regional alliance in 2005.

An extremely inflexible, overly bureaucratic municipal system composed of thirty local councils that all compete at the regional level is still in charge, and of course hampers attempts by all nonmunicipal initiatives to regionalize their own endeavors. Intermunicipal cooperation, if it occurs at all, is limited purely to win-win constellations and, for this reason alone, is incapable of effecting comprehensive structural change throughout the whole region.

Shrinking in the Ruhr District Is Only Just Starting

Considering this almost systematic refusal to look problems in the face, it is little wonder that the Emscher Park IBA has not found an official successor to this day. And yet, from a purely demographic viewpoint, shrinking in the Ruhr District is only just beginning. All estimates reckon with a population decline of between 350,000 and 400,000 by the year 2015. That represents 6% or 7% of the population, admittedly with an uneven distribution. There are towns like Dortmund that have not yet registered any losses, or like Bottrop that have even made small gains. Altogether, however, the trend is cutting across the board and hitting the communities in the Emscher zone, that is to say, in the former IBA area, particularly hard. As this development is mainly due to the falling birthrate and the aging population and as, in the short term, a radical change in Germany's immigration policy is highly improbable, population decline is irremediable. Even the region's political caste is beginning, albeit belatedly, to accept and to take account of this fact. For the first time, local authorities are prepared to retract their option on land they had reserved for prospective job creation and cede it to the new Emscher Landscape Park 2010, which was developed by Projekt-Ruhr GmbH as the continuation of the IBA's master plan. Even the demolition of residential areas is under discussion.

An Historic Moment

In reality, the Ruhr District has no other choice but to finally make a virtue out of necessity. The decline of its population—an irremediable fact in the medium term—is therefore to be seized as an historic moment. This ties in very closely with two other equally momentous regional schemes. First, the further regeneration of the Emscher sewer, which during the IBA period was restricted to its tributaries and, second, the systematic extension and integration of the Emscher Landscape Park as stipulated by the new master plan. The redevelopment of the main course of the Emscher, for which the Emscher Cooperative submitted an alternative master plan, foresees, in addition to the Rhein-Herne canal, a second waterfront with public access that will provide the ecological backbone for a sustainable extension of open parkland and recreational areas. This resolves one of the region's largest and oldest structural problems, namely, the internal disparity between north and south, which has accelerated alarmingly in recent decades.

There are two further developments to be borne in mind here that affect the Emscher zone, in particular, and that the latest master plan has largely ignored: the increasing poverty of the population, and the growing share of ethnic minority residents. Together

these trends make a fatal brew, for the unemployment level for immigrants is even now almost twice as high as for the German population. Considering that, parallel to population decline, sociostructural changes are ensuing now from social conditions that were created in the region some considerable time ago, the opportunities presented by shrinkage must be evaluated differently for the Emscher zone than for the rest of the region. It is important to differentiate in this regard between short-term (until 2015), medium-term (2030), and long-term strategies.

Shrinkage and Impoverishment

In the short term the Emscher zone will have to continue to play, and even strengthen, the role it has had, at least at its most densely populated core, since structural change began: it is the region's dustbin for modernization's losers. The fall in property prices and rents that will accompany population decline will—particularly in the case of second- or third-level locations—be advantageous both to this group and to the local authorities, who frequently have to cover their rent expenses. Another parallel consideration is whether the trend towards lower rents (and the resulting possibility of being able to afford a larger apartment) might relieve the daily stress faced by children of people on social welfare or low-level unemployment benefit.

That the demolition of accommodation should not be permitted at this phase goes without saying. It stands to reason that market forces should also apply when they are unfavorable to landlords, and lead to rents that young entrepreneurs, artists, and other creative people or, in a word, anyone with lots of ideas but little money, can afford. Furthermore, the subsequent devaluation of real estate could lead groups that previously had no chance of buying to become owner-occupants.

No Demolition Until the Worst Is Over

In the medium term, the trend towards devaluation and revaluation must be countered, or rather complemented, by a new valorization scheme. An essential economic prerequisite for this is a reduction in unemployment that will occur automatically in the Ruhr District in the next ten to fifteen years as a result of the low number of children currently living there. In addition, the effects of urban development strategies for valorization based on the regeneration of the Emscher and the Emscher Landscape Park will begin to be felt throughout the region at that time. It is only then, it seems to me, that there would be any point in systematically demolishing completely devalued properties and infrastructures in order to extend recreational areas, mainly in the urban areas of the Emscher zone, particularly because population decline will continue for some time after 2015.

The close interrelation between built and unbuilt areas, very typical for this part of the Ruhr city, should in this context be further accentuated and integrated by means of a gradual extension of the Emscher Landscape Park. In this way, the prevalence of Turkish gardens could increase, alongside the allotments with their orientation towards self-sufficiency, the leisure pursuits in and around industrial monuments, and the recreational use of the banks of the old canals and the new Emscher. Altogether, this would mean a huge, sustainable, and—above all—family-friendly augmentation and improvement of the residential environment, combined with real-estate prices that, compared with those in the Hellweg area and—even more so—those in other densely built-up areas, are relatively low.

Urban Peacefulness and Self-Organization as a Long-Term Locational Advantage

Abundant green recreational spaces and multicentered, small-town or village-like development structures in the Ruhr city, so untypical of conurbations, together with a long tradition of neighborliness and immigration have, in spite of increasingly acute social problems, not yet led to any notable rise in crime or violence. In the coming decades, when towns that are still flourishing today will be dragged into the global maelstrom of unemployment, poverty, and brutality, this structural plus will prove to be an additional and sustainable locational advantage. The IBA, by supporting the Ruhr District's garden-city tradition, has accomplished good groundwork.

In this context, the Emscher Zone does not need state-financed demolition but the low-level refurbishment that its impoverished residents can afford. This means more use of flexible mortgages and neighborhood support schemes, more cooperative elements, such as community partnerships between landlords and commercial enterprises, and—above all—more legislative protection from large-scale property speculation. In these areas, too, the Emscher Park IBA has demonstrated some approaches that are well worth adopting.

Translated from the German by Jill Denton

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