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- (1) Welding on the barge
- (2) Cigarette break
- (3) Tower blocks make for unusual cargo
- (4) Buildings are to a 1:25 scale
- (5) Neustadt takes shape
- (6) Municipal works

Neustadt The Ruhr, Germany

His signature beard blowing back and forth in the breeze, artist Julius von Bismarck has his eyes fixed on the cargo of a passing barge. Normally stacked with coal or steel, today the flat-bottomed boat is transporting some unusual goods: a miniature city that the artist is shipping from his studio in Berlin to a sculpture trail in and around Duisburg, where it will be installed as a permanent public artwork.

Created in collaboration with the architect Marta Dyachenko, *Neustadt* comprises scaled-down reproductions of 23 buildings – including residential complexes, wartime bunkers, churches and pools – that were torn down in the industrial Ruhr district within the past 20 years. The project reflects the massive change that this densely populated area has undergone in the past 60 years, as both coal mining and the steel industry took a downturn. “In *Neustadt*, the history of society and buildings is not revealed through new creations but through the decisions on which architecture was removed,” says Von Bismarck. “The whole complex becomes a negative of current building policy; a city as an anti-version.” In recent years the German artist has played with spatial, sculptural installations that challenge people’s perceptions of physics and the space that surrounds them. From ceiling lamps that spin in a mysterious pattern to a revolving concrete

platform topped with a bed and a desk, he is used to working with both the large-scale and the symbolic.

After he’s finished filming the launch from a small boat off the main barge, Von Bismarck joins Dyachenko on deck to survey their creations up close. Built to a 1:25 scale, the project’s tallest buildings, such as a mid-1970s residential tower from Bergkamen, loom above the artists, while the smaller structures, including a modernist swimming hall built in Marl, can be scrutinised from above. For research, the duo visited a number of miniature parks across Europe but whereas the latter often replicate famous historic buildings, Dyachenko and Von Bismarck wanted to represent projects designed mostly by local or unknown architects. Yet these are buildings that many citizens of the Ruhr might have seen and visited first-hand.

“These sculptures are a machine for memory,” says the project’s curator, Britta Peters. “Every one has its own story and as you spend time with them, you start talking about public life and its institutions.” As the artistic director of Urbane Künste Ruhr, an organisation that initiates

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public art projects in the Ruhr region, Peters believes that art can play an important role in helping to shape a new identity for post-industrial areas. “The Ruhr district is a network,” she says of its 53 municipalities. “The idea with *Neustadt* is that it’s a project where parts of all the different areas in the region appear together to make a fictive 54th town.”

Peters is one of a number of invited guests who are boarding the boat at different stops along the 10-day journey from Berlin to Duisburg so that they can take part in a series of talks. Dyachenko and Von Bismarck hope that these talks, which they want to eventually turn into a book, spark a wider public conversation about what is lost when

a work of architecture is destroyed. “I want people to see that these decisions are important,” says Von Bismarck. “For the building industry, it’s better to tear down and rebuild rather than renovate, because that’s where the money is.”

An interest in the environmental impact of such practices is also reflected in the artist’s choice to transport his works by boat. Not only is it the cleanest way to do so but, as Dyachenko points out, by putting their city in motion they can show the connection between the raw materials usually carried on the boat – coal and steel – and our built environment. Eventually, when they are installed in the grounds of the sculpture park at the Emscherkunstweg (Emscher art trail), the miniature buildings will be left to assimilate with their surroundings and nature will grow around them. *Neustadt* will join a network of 18 other works scattered across the trail, which are free to visit.

Besides the construction of this new scaled-down town, the duo hope to turn their experience of travelling by boat through Germany, at the leisurely speed of 12km/h, into an art film. “We have two cameras, one each, and we’re focusing on the buildings moving through other cityscapes, where you don’t really know which part is real,” says Dyachenko. “It’s going to be a very slow movie,” adds Von Bismarck, jokingly. “Some people might fall asleep but I hope that they’ll have interesting dreams.” — CST emscherkunstweg.de