



Background information

A retrospect of the future

The Design Zentrum Nordrhein Westfalen at Zollverein (1997–2010)

When the boiler house, carefully modernised by the British architect Lord Norman Foster, opened its doors on May 1, 1997, few could have guessed that the relocation of the Design Zentrum Nordrhein Westfalen would herald a new form of design museum that would become the flagship of the Zollverein Complex and the driving force behind the international design scene.

The last shift finished at the Zeche Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex in Essen on December 23, 1986. The closure of the mine was accompanied by calls for structural change in the region. The Design Zentrum had a vision that the Zollverein Complex should undergo radical change in the following 10 years that would transform it from a mining complex to a busy business location. As a result, the Design Zentrum decided to move out from Essen city center to the North of the city, thus marking the transition from an industrial setting shaped by history to a creative center for the design industry. "We quickly realised that the city council's offer to move to the Zeche Zollverein Complex as the anchor tenant was a major opportunity, and were happy to accept the challenge of setting up something new there," explains Professor Dr. Peter Zec, who has been head of the Design Zentrum since 1991 and is the initiator of the red dot design award. "We were also aware, however, that it was necessary to give a clear signal for change. That is why we accepted the offer at the time on the condition that Lord Norman Foster would be responsible for the conversion of the boiler house – he was to set the quality standard for future developments."

The Design Zentrum – an engine for design and location development

Up until the closure of the Zeche Zollverein mines, patinated steel girders, relays and control fittings, compressors and conveyor belts testified to the site's debt to heavy industry. Since the Design Zentrum moved there in the spring of 1997, the face of the Complex is characterised by creative ideas and inspiring projects, fascinating architecture and contemporary design. The Design Zentrum has become an engine for a new design and location development. A restaurant opened up next door in the former compressor hall, beside that there is a film company, and studios for lighting, design offices and workshops have sprung up all around, shaping the face of a creative design scene at the Zollverein Complex.



“The conversion of the boiler house, which is almost forty meters high, ... gave the Complex its new flagship. The Design Zentrum, which is expected to move out here from the city center at the end of April is to become the ‘world’s most significant’. This was the phrase used by Minister for the Economy, Wolfgang Clement, at the ceremonial handing over of the keys.” (Andreas Rossmann, FAZ newspaper 1996)

It is true that the work of the Design Zentrum has long been a source of inspiration across regional boundaries. Its design competition, the “red dot design award”, has made it a fulcrum of the design and communication industry. In just ten years, the Design Zentrum and the red dot design museum have established themselves as a communication and training center in a form that is unique worldwide. Thousands of visitors with an interest in design come every year to see the award-winning design objects. The world’s largest and most unusual exhibition of contemporary design now covers an area of around 4,000 square meters and has more than 1,500 exhibits. The red dot itself as a prize at the annual red dot design award organised by the Design Zentrum has become an internationally recognised mark of quality for good design. You can find it all over: in advertisements, product packaging and company portfolios.

Since moving to the Zollverein Complex in 1997, the Design Zentrum has also breathed life into its role as the international anchor tenant and innovator. As early as 1995, Professor Zec presented a study entitled “Designpark Essen” that he prepared on behalf of the Essen Economic Development Agency and the Chamber of Industry and Commerce. His concept focused on developing the design business by attracting companies from the design and communication industry as well as design-based manufacturers and retailers to the location. The study favored the Zollverein Complex as a location for the economic development of the region and the integration of the design industry in the economic structures of the Ruhr region.

The ideas contained in the study became more specific a few years later in an address by Dr. Carl Ganser – who assumed the role of CEO of the International Building Exhibition Emscher Park (IBA) in 1989, in cooperation with Dr. Oliver Scheytt, head of the cultural department of the city of Essen, Dr. Wolfgang Roters who later became the CEO of Entwicklungsgesellschaft Zollverein, Prof. Dr. Ralph Bruder who later became the founding president of the Zollverein School of Management and Design, Prof. Dr. Ulrich Borsdorf, Director of the Ruhr Museum and Prof. Dr. Zec, and new components were added. These included the “Plattform Design”, an institution for innovative training and



research in the field of design that later gave rise to the Zollverein School, "Interform", a world exposition to redefine design and reposition the location that later resulted in ENTRY2006, as well as the relocation of the Ruhr Museum, which has been located in the former coal washing plant since the beginning of 2010.

According to figures from Entwicklungsgesellschaft Zollverein, more than 1,000 people are working in 115 companies on the Zollverein Complex today. The Complex was listed by the World Heritage Committee as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on December 14, 2001.

The world as a guest in the red dot design museum – the red dot design museum as a guest in the world

The Zollverein location is booming, and the red dot design museum attracts numerous guests of the state, business delegations and celebrities, including Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, ex-Chancellor of Germany Gerhard Schröder, the former German Presidents Richard von Weizsäcker and Roman Herzog, Princess Gloria of Thurn and Taxis, Queen Sonja of Norway and the fashion designers Michael Michalsky and Karim Rashid. In addition, many renowned companies have already discovered the fascinating setting of the building as a monumental stage for their product presentations or exhibitions.

The exhibits from the red dot design museum also travel all over the world. In recent years the Design Zentrum has presented top-class products that won the red dot under the motto "red dot on tour" in more than 30 exhibitions around the globe.

The red dot design museum opened its Singapore branch in 2005. It is housed in the red dot traffic, an impressive colonial-style building that was once the headquarters of the traffic police. The building is painted bright red and is the creative center of modern Singapore. The red dot design museum is the main attraction. In addition to the red dot design museum, the red dot traffic houses creative firms such as advertising agencies and design studios. For the winners of the "red dot award: product design", the red dot design museum in Singapore offers the unique opportunity to present their award-winning products to the Asian public in Asia's hub, in the heart of the booming city state of Singapore.

A cult surrounding the past and a focus on the future

January 9, 2010 marked the opening of RUHR.2010 with a spectacular ceremony at the Zollverein UNESCO World Heritage Site, presided over by the former German President Horst Köhler in the presence of the President of the



EU Commission José Manuel Barroso and other high-profile politicians. For a whole year, all eyes have been on Essen and the Ruhr region as the European Capital of Culture. Roughly 100,000 guests took part in the two-day opening event, with close to another two million viewers watching the event on television.

Thousands of people from all over the world have been travelling to the Zeche Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex ever since, and the red dot design museum has also received record numbers of visitors. The Design Zentrum showed numerous special exhibitions in the red dot design museum for the European City of Culture year, with free public tours every Sunday. Zec summarised by saying: "We can look back with pride on the last few years. We have achieved a great deal both for ourselves and for the location – on a regional, national and international level."

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