

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Pride, prejudice, and working-class furniture – A history of Gelsenkirchener Barock

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## Abstract

The city of Gelsenkirchen, a center of mining located in the most industrialized part of Germany, the Ruhr region in the west, had the dubious honor of inspiring a mocking name for interior design: from the 1930s onward, the heavy, ornate furniture the working class showed a taste for was known as “Gelsenkirchen Baroque,” a term that lampooned how an ascending group did not know the difference between propriety and pompousness. While the city of Gelsenkirchen forged a “Barock Krieg” to eradicate the term in the 1950s, it chose a more successful strategy to change the feeling rules toward Gelsenkirchener Barock in the early 1990s. With the city grappling with the consequences of deindustrialization, the municipality aimed at rehabilitating its image and the original pride of the furniture’s working-class owners by celebrating a Gelsenkirchener Barock festival, the city’s biggest PR initiative to this day. Marrying conceptual history, emotions history, and design history with social history, the article goes beyond the individual case study and shows that to understand taste-making processes, the emotional politics they entailed are crucial. The highly emotional debates over value and taste in specific historical and spatial contexts are vital for grasping the development and change of feeling rules.

**Keywords:** Gelsenkirchen/Germany; interior design history; history of emotions; deindustrialization; place-based stigma

Between September 1991 and January 1992, almost 70,000 people visited an exhibition titled *Gelsenkirchener Barock* in the city of Gelsenkirchen’s municipal museum. The heart of the exhibition was a selection of 50 very large and heavily ornamented kitchen-cum-living room cupboards built between the 1920s and the 1960s, which the museum had collected for the display. Because of the sheer size and ponderousness of these relicts from the past, one journalist nicknamed the cupboards “Brontosauruses” (“Gelsenkirchener Barock: Dinosaurier in der Guten Stube” 1991).<sup>1</sup> The curator himself joked about “Eiche mundegebissen,” self-made oak, referring to the old-fashioned and low-cost fake-oak of the furniture (Figure 1).

<sup>1</sup>All translations from German by the author except where otherwise indicated.



**Figure 1.** A cupboard in Gelsenkirchener Barock style. This picture also covered the catalog of the 1991 Gelsenkirchener Barock exhibition (Städtisches Museum Gelsenkirchen 1991).

Such “showpieces of alleged bad taste,” the curator Dr. Peter Hardtert believed, “they can ... only be approached with covered eyes” (“Eiche, mundgebissen” 1991: 193).

The ironic take on Gelsenkirchener Barock contrasted sharply with the large numbers of spectators – often people who had not set a foot in the museum before, as another curator reported (Niendorf 2010). These visitors were attracted and moved by the fact that the exhibition displayed their lived everyday experience, their *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life).<sup>2</sup> The exhibition revived the pride their families had attached to this particular style of furniture, which is encapsulated in the untranslatable German term *gemütlich*, a combination of cozy, snug, and homely.<sup>3</sup> These cupboards had been standing between the late 1920s and the 1960s in the most important and the most social room of the German house, the kitchen-cum-living room, or *Wohnküche*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>On *Alltagsgeschichte*, see the contemporary Eley (1989) and Lüdtkke (1995).

<sup>3</sup>On *Gemütlichkeit*, see Schmidt-Lauber (2003).

<sup>4</sup>On the *Wohnküche* in the Ruhr valley, see Lehnemann (1982).

Unironically cherishing such pieces of furniture would have been stigmatized in the public discourse as a marker of bad taste and lower class in the four decades before the exhibit. The term Gelsenkirchener Barock itself ridiculed both the furniture's heavy style and the social pretension attached to it; the term had been, since at least the mid-1950s, synonymous with all sorts of kitsch and bad taste in interior decoration.<sup>5</sup> The term spread quickly through Germany and the alleged bad or uneducated taste was strongly associated with the lower or lower-middle classes. In Gelsenkirchen, it was ascribed to typical families of miners as the city, a former center of mining, seemed to represent all too well the cultural wasteland of the industrial (and later deindustrialized) Ruhr valley.

Judging people by their taste in clothing or interior design according to social class is a classic Bourdieuan story (see Bourdieu 1984). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu analyzes the French society of the 1960s and 70s to show that taste-making processes are bound by socio-economic power: those who possess higher cultural capital define good taste, partly by rejecting the supposedly vulgar preferences of the masses. But while, in some ways, the history of Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture does read like a classic Bourdieuan tale, my focus on the emotional politics of taste brings nuance to it. As I show, the changing perception of Gelsenkirchener Barock over the twentieth century is formed by emotional discourses, feeling rules, and taste judgments, which were somewhat aligned with social class, but not exclusively. Emotional discourses, feeling rules, and taste judgments were also collectively produced and changed through the interaction of municipal with national actors and through generational conflict. Emotions are not absent from Pierre Bourdieu's work. He already implicitly pointed to the importance of affective elements of social stratification (Matthäus 2017) but does not put them in the center of taste-making processes. Indeed, as Andrew Sayer (2005: 948) has pointed out, "[s]entiments, such as pride, shame, envy, resentment, compassion and contempt are not just forms of 'affect' but are evaluative judgements of how people are being treated . . . . They are forms of emotional reason" and as such, essential to taste-making processes. Therefore, taste is made and mediated by emotions and feelings.

This article draws on the history of emotions and uses its concept of feeling rules coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) who defines them as rules about which feelings are appropriate or not in a given social setting.<sup>6</sup> It adds to Hochschild's concept a historical argument about how these feeling rules change over time, in this case the journey of Gelsenkirchener Barock from appreciation, rejection, and re-appreciation. The explicit focus on feeling rules and emotions adds to Bourdieu's discussion of taste-making processes. The story of Gelsenkirchener Barock thus shows the importance and consequences of emotions for taste-making

<sup>5</sup>On the history of concepts, see the classic Koselleck (1972, 2006) and Hoffmann and Franzel (2018). For an overview on conceptual history and the history of semantics, see Hoffmann and Kollmeier (2012); Kollmeier (2012). In this article, I am interested in the genesis of the term but mostly in the way emotions toward and perceptions of the term change throughout the twentieth century. For the state of design history, see Lees-Maffei and Houze (2022) and, for West-German design history, see Betts (2004). Here, I am mostly interested in questions of design reception.

<sup>6</sup>For an overview of the field, see Barclay (2021) and the introductions to the history of emotions by Boddice (2018), Frevert (2011), Plamper (2015), and Rosenwein and Cristiani (2018).

processes on the individual and personal level but also for local politics as well as for the mechanisms of taste-making in the design schools and the media.

The specific historical, cultural, and spatial context of Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture and its discontents makes for a particular local case study of West-German design history (Betts 2004; Selle 1984); one, however, that is representative of similar dynamics of taste-making as social distinction through emotions in other regions in the world. In tracing the powerful feelings, the furniture style Gelsenkirchener Barock – and, indeed, the name itself – produced within the city and across the country since the 1920s, this article is also a story of twentieth-century cultural change through emotional change in Western societies. From the original pride of its owners to the snobbish judgment of both the purist Bauhaus and the Nazis, the style was finally used with the aim of regaining pride and a sense of belonging at a time of deindustrialization in the 1990s. This case study therefore also contributes to the research on place-based stigma. Drawing on Loïc Wacquant's (2008) idea of territorial stigma as a sign of social marginalization, newer research (see Butler-Warke 2021 for an overview) on place-based stigma is interested in the genesis and historical development of stigmas related to specific localities – Gelsenkirchen in this case – and aims at giving agency to those who suffered from this stigma.

By studying the history of the term Gelsenkirchener Barock, the emotions attached to it as well as the history of this particular piece of German furniture in the twentieth century, the article brings together conceptual history, emotions history, and design history. It notably shows the work emotions do in social configurations, especially when they become attached to everyday objects and the discourse that surrounds them. Emotions thus delineate generational, social, and economic affiliations and impact a region, a city, and its people. The article demonstrates the collective process and change of taste-making and feeling rules that are connected to a specific place and time. Because of its setting in Gelsenkirchen in its transition from a stereotypical industrial to a postindustrial city, it contributes to the study of deindustrialization (see for an introduction Cowie and Heathcott 2003; High 2021) and to the changing constitution and perception of the working class in the second half of the twentieth century in West Germany (Berger 2013; Hertel 2017).

### What is Gelsenkirchener Barock? And why Gelsenkirchen?

“Hardly any other city . . . is so readily and so often associated with things that are considered an example of bad taste: inharmonious, staid, overloaded, ostentatious! And no one knows why,” Gelsenkirchen's city director Klaus Bussfeld stated in 1991 at the opening of the aforementioned exhibition (Groels 1991a: 2).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, even a series of academic symposiums before the exhibition started, which included sociologists, political scientists, historians, and art historians, could not fully explain where the term Gelsenkirchener Barock came from and why Gelsenkirchen had become stigmatized as the “home of bad taste.” (Buttler 1991).

<sup>7</sup>Most of the cited newspaper and magazine articles stem from two collections at Gelsenkirchen's municipal archives: StadtA Ge, GE 35, 45 (ZAS zum Gelsenkirchener Barock April 1957 – November 1963) and the media collection of the 1991/2 Gelsenkirchener Barock exhibition: StadtA Ge, KUK 787.

The term probably originated in the 1920s. One story relates it to the slang of local schoolboys in one of Gelsenkirchen's boroughs, where curvy young women were referred to as Gelsenkirchener Barock highlighting the protruding forms of seventeenth century Baroque-style architecture. Another explanation ties the origin of the term to the architecture of Gelsenkirchen's *Bahnhofstraße*, the first pedestrian mall in the working-class region in the 1920s. Situated in Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr valley, the relatively young mining city was proud of its industrious urbanity that combined the ultra-modern pedestrian mall with a brand-new city hall built in 1929 and older Wilhelminian style houses and mines (Hardttert 1991b: 164–65). A modern city of “self-confident miners” proudly chose the term, the explanation goes (Groels 1991b: 3).

It was in 1931 that the term was seemingly first used disparagingly and in relation to large furniture. In a letter to the editor, the author referred to a neo-baroque furniture design that copied the historicism style of the grand bourgeoisie but was industrially produced and made from bent plywood (Groels 1991b). This new technique invented in the 1920s enabled the mass production of this type of furniture, notably the iconic cupboard, the centerpiece of Gelsenkirchener Barock (Fiedler 1991; Schäfer 1991).

This kind of furniture, however, was not – as its name suggests – fabricated in Gelsenkirchen but 150 km further east, in East-Westphalia, which is known for its furniture industry to this day. One theory about the attachment of the city of Gelsenkirchen to the furniture style was that a direct train connection between East Westphalia and Gelsenkirchen meant much of the furniture made its way there; hence, the train wagons departing from East-Westphalia bore the city's name.

More generally, the furniture industry often named their furniture collections after cities. One of the exhibition's curators speculated that there might have been a series named after Gelsenkirchen, but that the style's name could just as well have been Wormser or Bayreuther Barock – small but well-known towns in southern Germany. But the attachment of the term to Gelsenkirchen could also simply refer to the city as a stereotypical working-class city of the Ruhr valley, including all the prejudices that came with it: its inhabitants might have been hardworking, but they had no (good) taste (Stadt Gelsenkirchen 2016). Initially, however, the reference to Gelsenkirchen might have been used not out of contempt but of envy (Lamprecht 1990). The city's industrial modernity and well-paying jobs made the style attractive, and it was only later, as the city declined during deindustrialization, that the negative overtones prevailed.

The large, curved furniture sold well all throughout Germany and the world. To the French, the style was known as *baroque brutal*, while in the United States the cupboards were called “German *Schranks*” and considered iconic examples of German *Gemütlichkeit* (Loskill 1991a).

In Gelsenkirchen and other aspiring cities of the Ruhr valley, with soaring mines and steel industries after the First (and later also the Second) World War and the subsequent occupation, they seemed to have found a particular home. People moved to the area, took up well-paid jobs, and thus could afford Gelsenkirchener Barock. Since the average working-class household often lacked a living room, the kitchen served as the center of family life – the famous *Wohnküche* (literally “living-kitchen”). Next to the stove, often the only heating source, the *Wohnküche* usually

featured a sofa and one of the iconic *Barock* cupboards. With an average size of 2 by 1.7 by 0.6 meters, these items of furniture dominated the working-class household's rather small rooms, which had an average size of between 16 and 20 square meters (Hardteter 1991a). The cupboard's sheer size meant that its doors could sometimes not even be fully opened. Such a piece would perhaps have fit better in a dedicated living room (if the home even had one) but such rooms were nicknamed "cold luxury" ("kalte Pracht") because they lacked heating, whereas a *Wohnküche* was warm and cozy (Thielmann 1991: 3).

Contrary to later beliefs, Gelsenkirchener Barock was by no means cheap. Even a well-off overman had to pay two to three monthly salaries for it. Before cars became more widely available, furniture was, for broad sections of the population, important as a status symbol ("Statussymbol erster Güte" 1991). With such massive and richly ornamented cupboards, owners could flaunt their (relative) wealth, and when such pieces were delivered, they were often left on the street or in the hallway for hours so that the neighbors could jealously eye the new addition to the household. The item was an immense source of pride for its owners, and its baroque and massive style "served as an identification with one's one capability" ("Gelsenkirchener Barock" 1991: 44).

Already as early as the 1920s, when Gelsenkirchener Barock had its first heyday, it was not without its detractors. The highly ornamental furniture was notably criticized by proponents of Bauhaus and Werkbund, the German showpieces of modern, avant-garde industrial design, who supported clean, delicate lines, a functional style, and a general less-is-more approach (see Seng 2023). For the intellectuals behind Bauhaus and Werkbund, the curvilinear and overbearing style of Gelsenkirchener Barock was an affront to their good taste; as such, it was also an antidote to the intellectual Bauhaus style, considered "a reactionary offensive against their [the Bauhaus'] progressive housing and living culture" ("Statussymbol erster Güte" 1991: 71). Although they were called "baroque," the massive cupboards were by no means anti-modern. They were mass produced, and they were functional, too: they often had compartments for kitchen items and clothing, while some had a mini-bar or even electrical connections for a fridge.

In 1930, graphic artist Ines Wetzel wrote that calm and functional rooms were essential for the industrial working classes, whose work environment was noisy, dirty, and busy (Wilgerlein 1991), but the average working or lower-class family did not warm to the "all-white fitted kitchen" the Bauhaus designers proposed. To them, these reform kitchens "look like fifty cents but cost fifty Marks" ("Gelsenkirchener Barock: Dinosaurier in der Guten Stube" 1991). They wanted pieces of furniture that were multi-functional, but also prestigious-looking flagship items that "simulated bourgeois opulence" (Storm-Rusche 1991). Social climbers, Stephan Oster (1991) explained, were oriented toward past role models, the bourgeois style of living of the previous century, and not toward 1920s avant-garde design. "People demand that their environment reflect specific emotional values, especially when their working world is dangerous, dirty, and dark," Erich Naumann (1991: 14) stated, explaining that "[s]ince the miners' work certainly has nothing to do with coziness, they wanted to make themselves comfortable at home" A similar quest for coziness, exemplified by the working class's pursuit of comfort through food, was described by Maurice Halbwachs (1912) in his classic study on working-class consumption.

Later interpretations associated Gelsenkirchener Barock with National Socialism, but the Nazis favored in fact the more stylized art deco and forms that displayed, rather than tacitly incorporated, functionalism (Koldehoff 1991; Petsch 1991).<sup>8</sup> Still, one theory posits that the term was coined by full-blooded Nazi Wilhelm Brepohl, an ethnographer, sociologist, and Gelsenkirchen native (Goch 2001). As head of the Forschungsstelle für das Volkstum im Ruhrgebiet (Research Center for the folklore in the Ruhr valley), a research center in Gelsenkirchen that focused on the Ruhr region's people and folklore, Brepohl wrote several articles and memoranda on industrial life in the Ruhr valley that were in line with contemporary National Socialist thought (see for instance Brepohl 1939). Brepohl concentrated notably on the allegedly deleterious effects of Polish immigration to the Ruhr valley and the sociology of the industrial working class (Goch 2001). In the context of this work, Brepohl used the term Gelsenkirchener Barock to designate a furniture style – the “typical curved furniture of industrial regions, especially kitchen cupboards in kitchen-cum-living rooms” (Stadt Gelsenkirchen, 1974: 166). While the curators of the 1991 exhibition dismissed the suggestion that Brepohl was the inventor of the term, the racial component he seemed to have brought to it would survive the end of the war. In the late 1950s, the head of Gelsenkirchen's economic development office pointed out that the term

stems from the time after the First World War (other old Gelsenkirchen residents claim that they have heard it even before) when many workers from the East came to Gelsenkirchen and lived with their family in one or two rooms. At the time, the furniture industry invented for these miners' apartments (not only in Gelsenkirchen!) furniture monsters [*Möbelungetüme*] that were set in kitchen-cum-living rooms and had, in line with the taste of the time, baroque-style ornaments. This furniture was stocked with all sorts of knick-knacks, amongst them hair-raising porcelain figures, nickel- or silver-plated container and that sort of thing. These barbarian fixtures should unite “usefulness and coziness [*Heimeligkeit*].” Unfortunately, the resulting mix of styles was given the, at the time fitting, label [i.e., Gelsenkirchener Barock] because of its strong massification in Gelsenkirchen. (Amt für Wirtschaftsförderung und Presse 1957: 2)

The emotional choice of words (monsters, barbarian, hair-raising) shows that the feeling rules about Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture had changed from coziness and pride to disgust and rejection. Gelsenkirchener Barock now failed to meet the standards of living, and its alleged Eastern European provenance made it dubious in a world of polarizing powers from the East and the West.

However, neither Bauhaus nor the Nazis nor the Ulm School of Design, the most well-known successor to the Bauhaus tradition after the Second World War, could stop the style's success. From the 1920s to the 1930s and again during the affluent years of the German economic miracle in the 1950s, Gelsenkirchener Barock dominated the kitchens and living rooms of the working and lower-middle classes in Germany, including those who had done well for themselves but would not part

<sup>8</sup>On the design of household goods in National Socialism, see Tymkiw (2013).

with the taste they had been accustomed to. According to a 1954 poll by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research, 60 percent of West German women preferred exactly this style of furniture in their living rooms: bulky cupboards, a table in the middle of the room with a set of chairs with curvilinear armrests, and heavy sofas (Pfeil et al. 1954: 112; see also Hardetert 1991b: 161).

When the head of the Gelsenkirchen economic office wrote the letter cited above, the term Gelsenkirchener Barock had been expanded to designate not only furniture but “kitsch manufactures” in general (Amt für Wirtschaftsförderung und Presse 1957: 2). The term became widely known in the 1950s as a derogatory way to describe the love of the lower classes for “kitschy” old-fashioned and oversized interior design choices: velvet covers for phones, crochet tablecloths, pictures of roaring deer, and knick-knacks.

The proliferation of the term was especially connected to the furniture fair in Cologne in the early to mid-1950s. Here, designers presented their recent creations against the backdrop of the prevailing style of German living rooms, and, preaching a more cheerful style, deemed the heavy cupboards of the previous years a relic of the dark times of National Socialism (see Petsch 1991). They considered the style “bulge furniture” (*Wulstmöbel*) and called it the “baroque of the poor” (*Barock der Armen*) (Schepers 1985: 123). This assessment not only discredited the taste of the (alleged) lower classes, but it was also an attempt to disconnect themselves from National Socialism by framing it as a lower-class movement.

From the mid-1950s onward, these designers had managed to dominate the feeling rules of Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture, such that the term evoked rejection. At the same time, the slow economic decline of the industrial region may have played the other major role in the disappearing pride of the industrial product, worker, and place. A change in feeling rules about the style and the place it was associated with led to the demise of Gelsenkirchener Barock so that the latter came to designate furniture that was neither esthetic nor beautiful, furniture synonymous with an uneducated taste that had to be corrected. In 1957, Germany’s most important television news program, the daily evening broadcast *Tagesschau*, opened with a report on a museum of kitsch in Bochum, which a craft teacher at a local middle school had assembled with his students (Hardetert 1991b: 167–68). The *Tagesschau* labeled the pieces on show Gelsenkirchener Barock and reported that the museum’s aim was to “show items that no longer correspond to our modern awareness of life and feel for forms [*Lebens- und Formgefühl*] and to educate thereby the student’s good taste” (“Dieser prächtige Wüstenkönig” 1957). A local newspaper published a photo showing a smiling pupil pointing at a dark ornamented watch and several small figurines on display at the museum that used to be put on “grandmother’s wardrobe” or displayed in the “best room [*Gute Stube*]” of the house (ibid.).

Such widely watched reports made the feeling rules clear: Gelsenkirchener Barock was finally outdated. It no longer fit modern life. The fact that pupils had to learn about new, decent taste implies, however, a danger that this old-fashioned taste would linger on, that it would be transmitted from the lower classes or from the older generation to the younger one. The Gelsenkirchen aberration of taste [*Geschmacksverirrung*] had to be halted (Niendorf 2010).

## The “Barock Krieg”

The *Tagesschau* reportage created quite a stir in the city in question. The local press called it “tactless” and a “slap in the face for Gelsenkirchen,” while both the city government and the local retail association promptly condemned the use of the term (“Fernseh-Ohrfeige für Gelsenkirchen” 1957, see also Hardetert 1991b: 168). There was no need to associate “attempts at taste education [*geschmacksbildende Versuche*]” with the term Gelsenkirchener Barock, the daily *Westfälische Rundschau* ruled, while wondering whether the city had already protested against the “clear misuse” (ibid.) of its name. They found the term “evil” and “harmful to the economic reputation of our city” (ibid.). The retail association immediately responded to the *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* responsible for the reporting:

We would like to inform you today that the local commerce in Gelsenkirchen has expressed in various ways their outrage about the fact that [the *Tagesschau*] spoke about ‘Gelsenkirchener Barock’ as a prime example for kitsch products. We would like to make perfectly clear that there is not a single reason to still speak of *Gelsenkirchener Barock* today. A tour of the furniture stores of the city would convince any journalist that, on no account, Gelsenkirchen offers more kitsch products than any other neighboring city. (Einzelhandelsverband Gelsenkirchen 1957)

Gelsenkirchen’s city administration, pushed simultaneously by its citizens and its retail association, waged a veritable war to “eradicate” the negative feelings the term Gelsenkirchener Barock evoked (“Neues vom Barock Krieg” 1957). Every time its use in the media came to the knowledge of the administration, Gelsenkirchen’s department for economic development and press sent a letter of complaint to the author or media outlet responsible. The *Barock Krieg* engendered an entire rebuttal strategy by the city’s administration (ibid.): they planned on collecting and duplicating newspaper articles that fought against the stigma of Gelsenkirchener Barock to be able to “use them accordingly as rebuttal [*Abwehr*]” (Amt für Wirtschaftsförderung und Presse 1958).

The head of the department of economic development and press, transportation director Zabel, explained in a letter to the *Westdeutsche Zeitung*:

I am glad that you ... are always with us in the same levers when it is necessary to bring to a halt the – as you so rightly write – ‘thoughtless roller [Walze] about the “Gelsenkirchener Barock.”’ I may explain to you that as soon as I hear about it, I always write to the thoughtless, stupid, or malicious spreaders of this ugly expression. One must indeed get the impression that it is a phenomenon of epidemic nature which cannot be eradicated. Nevertheless, I record every case that comes to my attention. I have repeatedly let go of letters ... in the hope of convincing [of] the habit of some public relations people, radio and television reporters, association managers, etc., which already lies in the borderland of clinical nonsense. (Zabel 1958b)

The outrage and militarized language with which the term Gelsenkirchener Barock was combatted in the Ruhr valley contrasts with the relatively composed and less emotionally charged objections addressed to people elsewhere in Germany, which provides somewhat more neutral insight into the origin of the term.<sup>9</sup> Letters of complaint addressed to people outside of the region with the aim of ending its association with the city of Gelsenkirchen resembled each other and indeed even used the same wording and paragraphs. They mentioned the true place of origin of the furniture (Herford in East-Westphalia) and how fashionable the style had been beyond the Ruhr, while emphasizing the modernity of Gelsenkirchen's current products.<sup>10</sup>

Along with letters sent directly to authors or editors-in-chief, Gelsenkirchen's city administration also wrote letters that were published and thus reached a bigger audience. The feelings of the inhabitants of Gelsenkirchen were so hurt, and thus the letters so important, that the city manager sent out one of them while staying at a health resort on Starnberger See (Zabel 1957). Transport director Zabel tackled the monthly magazine of the famous design association Werkbund, *Werk und Zeit*, publishing a complaint in October 1958 (Zabel 1958a: 5). After receiving the letter, *Werk und Zeit* was persuaded that the "expression is indeed quite annoying for Gelsenkirchen as the 'style' on hand is by no means a specialty of this city" (ibid.: 5). It vowed to use the more "neutral" term *Messe-Barock* ("fair baroque" – referring to the furniture fairs) in future (ibid.: 5). It also published a picture of Zabel's letter, accompanied by one of Gelsenkirchen's modern apartment buildings from the 1960s (the *Siedlung an der Zeppelin-Allee*), to show that "also in Gelsenkirchen one tries hard to enable good construction und living in the spirit of our time" (ibid.: 5).

Not all correspondents appreciated Gelsenkirchen's objection to the use of Gelsenkirchener Barock. In a response to one resident who had complained about the use of the term, a journalist from the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) wrote that "this expression is extremely widespread, and I believe – has become so much part of the vernacular [*Volksmund*] that it can no longer be regarded as a slur on Gelsenkirchen" (Wiegenstein 1958). The resident, Maria Schneider, underlined in her response to the WDR the specific sociological context in which the term had emerged. It was an upper-class discourse through which people looked down upon the broader populace's taste: "Do you believe that a formulation that is repeated again and again only in very specific circles and is chattered about incessantly – because it may sound interesting – has already become the vernacular?" (Schneider 1958).

Schneider's elegant letter reached the ears of the city administration, whose representatives celebrated Schneider (in a very gendered way) as a "magnificent amazon against GB [abbreviation of Gelsenkirchener Barock]: . . . She has taken up arms against Westdeutscher Rundfunk, which, as we know, has been interpreting the GB with constant malice for years, and she has done so with a foil [*Florett*], although heavy sabers might have been more appropriate. But the foil is also probably more appropriate to a delicate woman's hand" (Lehnert 1958). This "Gelsenkirchen Rage" (Casimir 1991) against Gelsenkirchener Barock flared up so

<sup>9</sup>See the file in Gelsenkirchen's municipal archive (StadtA Ge, GE 35, 45).

<sup>10</sup>For examples of these letters, see (StadtA Ge, GE 35, 45).

much because “[a]ll pride in economic and social achievements is gone when lifestyle and good taste are called into question” (“Der Pfahl im Fleisch” 1991).

In fact, using the term Gelsenkirchener Barock was seen as yet another way of damaging Gelsenkirchen’s good reputation as a modern and progressive city, a reputation it tried so hard to convey. Mining and coal production had taken off after the war and, alongside Gelsenkirchen’s textile industry and stove manufacturer Küppersbusch, contributed to the West German post-war economic miracle. Gelsenkirchen and its inhabitants became affluent and invested its tax revenues in a brand-new avant-garde musical theater, which opened its doors in 1959. And yet, Gelsenkirchen still had to prove its position. It stood for a young city of workers, not for a long-standing bourgeois tradition and culture, even compared to its neighbors in the Ruhr valley Essen or Dortmund. Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Heinrich Böll wrote as much in his famous but locally highly criticized essay, “Im Ruhrgebiet”: “Gelsenkirchen, with its four hundred thousand inhabitants, occupies as much space in the lexicon as [the town of] Gelnhausen with eight thousand. There is little history to report, nor is that precious material deposited that commands reverence: no patina” (Böll and Chargesheimer 1958: 23). The city figures prominently but negatively in Böll’s text, as well as in the book of pictures Böll’s text accompanied.<sup>11</sup>

The picture of the Ruhr valley Böll evoked in his essay was grim. It had nothing to offer: “No building, no house, no landscape is visible that would be worth a trip or at least a stay for the stranger” (Böll and Chargesheimer 1958: 6). The author also looked down upon the residents:

The idea that people live here may seem fantastic to the stranger standing at the compartment window, although he sees people: on platforms, streets, in schoolyards, at the kitchen stove; he believes, not in these people, thinks of them as phantoms, as the lost, the damned; pathos, pity, a little contempt mix into a feeling that expresses itself in a sigh. (ibid.: 6)

According to this view, the many people who lived in the Ruhr valley belonged to the presumably uneducated working class, who were “less melodramatic, simpler and more friendly” than anywhere else (ibid.: 6); they worked hard and spent their money quickly (ibid.: 26) – on Gelsenkirchener Barock, Böll might have added. It goes almost without saying that Gelsenkirchen’s transportation director was among those who complained vehemently, and by evoking National Socialist terminology, about Böll’s representation of the Ruhr valley as a mere “degeneration” (*Entartung*) (Hoffmans 2014).

In a similar vein, the famous 1961 song “Gelsenkirchen” by Austrian singer-songwriter Georg Kreisler created a stir because it represented the city in a negative light, underlining the dirt of the industry and the flatness of its inhabitants: “Where is the cinema attendance and alcoholism more substantial?/Where is the bedding gray and the soap advertising in vain? .../Good books we have – only reading and

<sup>11</sup>Böll had received most of the background information from his friend and Gelsenkirchen native Ernst-Adolf Kunz, the owner of the Ruhr Story, a press agency for literature based in Gelsenkirchen (see Hoffmans 2014).

writing/Is still sometimes quite difficult for us/You can only find that here in Gelsenkirchen!" (Kreisler 1973: 125–32, see Müller-Oberhäuser 2022).

It was these feelings about the city that the stigma of Gelsenkirchener Barock encapsulated, and to which the city's Barock Krieg so fiercely responded. During the 1960s, the "war" the city had fought against Gelsenkirchener toward the end of the previous decade ebbed. No more letters of complaint found their way into the municipal archives. This could have been because the furniture styles had been slowly changing since the 1960s, according to the new tastes designers had promoted at furniture fairs. Gelsenkirchener Barock was "no longer in demand" ("Gelsenkirchener Barock heute nicht mehr gefragt" 1961), and the war no longer had to be fought to such a degree.

Maybe, however, Gelsenkirchener Barock was just quietly accepted. *Werk und Zeit* ("Simpler Bauen" 1958) admitted in its August 1958 issue that modern style may not be for everyone. The issue dealt with social housing, and the magazine underlined the importance and superiority of architects who not only design houses but aim to "predispose culture and highly organized civilization" (ibid.). But there was a dilemma: architects may suggest modern floor plans but "the tenants who move in often do not know how to deal with bold [*kühn*] solutions and set up their bulging [*wülstige*] furniture in the wrong place . . . How does one educate humans on their own well-being?" *Werk und Zeit* asked (ibid.). They suggested a solution, which, in their own words, meant a "regression" and "renunciation" (ibid.). It called for undifferentiated floor plans, without designated places for specific functions, because the latter had failed. This way, tenants could arrange "what they set their heart on: Gelsenkirchener Barock, sewing machines, TV chests" however they liked (ibid.).

Modern design was by no means universally embraced, and the resigned acceptance of Gelsenkirchener Barock even by leading avant-garde outlets may have stemmed from the fact that the modern furniture of the design fairs lacked feeling, and coziness in particular: "Why is over-modern furniture so exhausting in the long-run," a 1958 article wondered (Dittmar 1958). The journalist made a case for calm and comfort in the home, because furniture is "no less than the interior of a person turned outwards [*das nach außen gekehrte Innere eines Menschen*]" (ibid.). While more and more people chose to furnish their apartments "distinctly modern," they found the style difficult to endure in everyday life as it purportedly conferred agitation and restlessness. The "bastard brother of the period furniture, Gelsenkirchener Barock" (ibid.), meanwhile, stood the test of time. While its owners, according to the journalist, did not think about the fact that they "lack any definite style" and "only want to convey wealth and attest for their 'culturedness'" (ibid.), it was this conservative taste that created a "calm and cozy atmosphere in the home" (ibid.). Furthermore, as Paul Betts (2004) has shown in his book *The Authority of Everyday Objects*, the 1960s witnessed a decline of moralizing West German industrial design à la Bauhaus, with the authoritative Ulm School of Design closing in 1968, so that Gelsenkirchener Barock thereafter lacked its most famous bourgeois opponent.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Only in the 1980s did German functional design have a comeback—alongside Gelsenkirchener Barock—in the wave of nostalgia for the 1950s. See Betts (2004) and for nostalgia also Becker (2023).

Finally, there is an argument to be made about the changing perception of the place Gelsenkirchener Barock was associated with: the coal crisis in the late 1950s and the subsequent deindustrialization of first the coal and then the steel industries hit Gelsenkirchen, nicknamed the “city of a thousand fires,” hard. The city may have no longer had the capacity to engage with bad press about furniture, but with the economic tide turning, the city administration also lost credibility. Gelsenkirchen had some of the highest unemployment figures in the Federal Republic,<sup>13</sup> and nostalgia for the industrialized past now fed the stereotype that Gelsenkirchener Barock was an essential fixture of the simple, shabby apartments of the working class.<sup>14</sup> With the demise of Gelsenkirchen, Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture finally seemed to fulfill the stigma and prejudices the upper-middle class designers had always held. To them, Gelsenkirchener Barock attested to the popular class’s style of living, which included emotional furniture – a “particular penchant for kitsch and sentimentality” (Dittmar 1958).

While the *Barock Krieg* officially ended in the 1960s, Gelsenkirchen locals continued to react “neurotically” when they heard the term (“Boulevard-Barock als Auslöser für die Häme” 1991). When Helmut Schmidt moved into the chancellery in Bonn in 1974 and dismissed Konrad Adenauer’s desk as Gelsenkirchener Barock (“Vorwärts, Genossen, wir müssen zurück” 1974), it came as a shock for the many loyal SPD voters in Gelsenkirchen, who had just helped Schmidt to achieve his chancellorship.

It also remained difficult to touch on the topic of Gelsenkirchener Barock within the city itself. When Gelsenkirchen’s head of press wanted to tackle the term at the end of the 1960s, he was stopped by his superiors (“Der Pfahl im Fleisch” 1991). Similarly, when the cultural department suggested a critical engagement with Gelsenkirchener Barock in 1978, it was “urgently advised” to drop the project (“Boulevard-Barock als Auslöser für die Häme” 1991). A “feeling of powerlessness” and inferiority still accompanied every mention of the term (“Der Pfahl im Fleisch” 1991).

### New feeling rules toward Gelsenkirchener Barock

It was only in the early 1990s that Gelsenkirchen once again actively aimed to attack the stigma and change the feeling rules toward Gelsenkirchener Barock, both within the city and throughout the country: “If up to now the representatives of the coal [Revier] city winced, if they were confronted once again with this label for some furniture, for knick-knacks, for flowery wallpaper or a luxuriantly decorated facade, they start now an offensive” (“Kulturfestival rund um Plüsch und Schnörkel” 1991).

At the time, Gelsenkirchen was in the midst of the process of deindustrialization (see Berger 2019). Of the 14 Gelsenkirchen mines, only five remained active in 1990. One newspaper article described the city as “the quiet gray mouse of the Ruhr coalfield [Revier], shaken by structural change, a frightening unemployment rate, and the ugly word of Gelsenkirchener Barock” (Thielmann 1991: 3). The entire

<sup>13</sup>16.4% in 1988 in contrast to 8.7% countrywide (see Bundesanstalt für Arbeit 1991).

<sup>14</sup>On nostalgia and deindustrialization, see Smith and Campbell (2017) and Strangleman (2013). For the Ruhr valley, see Berger (2021).

Ruhr region was looking for a new image to rid itself of the stigma of decay. Unlike other urban areas in the valley, however, Gelsenkirchen did not opt to present itself as a green city at that point in time nor did it possess any of the industrial museums that emerged from the late 1980s and that aimed at valorizing the industrial past in the moment of its disappearance (see Angelo 2021; Berger, et al. 2019). Instead, it focused on and chose to change its feelings toward the emotional buzzword and stigma of Gelsenkirchener Barock.

Two newcomers to Gelsenkirchen set this change in feeling rules in motion: Dr. Peter Hardetert, a trained geographer who took up a position in the city's municipal museum in 1983, came up with the idea of organizing an exhibition on the topic.<sup>15</sup> And Dr. Klaus Bussfeld, a jurist who became city manager of Gelsenkirchen in 1990 and had previously worked in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia's urban development department, cleared the way on the administrative side.<sup>16</sup>

The result was an entire festival on Gelsenkirchener Barock, held between September 1990 and January 1991. It was centered on a display of furniture at the museum, but it also included scholarly discussions and a festival of music and theater with a focus on the original seventeenth-century baroque. To this day, the festival remains the largest PR endeavor the city has been involved in. It was intended to help it "emerge from the trough of the consolidation course marked by the red pencil [*aus der Talsohle des vom Rotstift geprägten Konsolidierungskurses herauskommen*]" ("Kulturfestival rund um Plüsch und Schnörkel" 1991). A PR agency from Essen was hired to make sure that the festival was widely known in Gelsenkirchen, the Ruhr valley, and beyond. One hundred posters were displayed in train stations nationwide, and one even made it to New York City ("Barock für das Image" 1991). While the festival cost 3.5 million Deutsche Mark, the city had only to cover 450,000 Deutsche Mark (of which 350,000 went into the exhibition), as the lion's share came from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and charitable foundations ("Schmähwort macht Karriere" 1991; "Schönheit aus Wurzelholz" 1991).<sup>17</sup>

Peter Hardetert's aim was twofold. On the one hand, he wanted to reduce the negative emotional charge of the term Gelsenkirchener Barock and take away its "affective-polemic component" (Storm-Rusche 1991). To this end, he wanted to have a scholarly reassessment of both the style and the term, of their genesis and historical developments. He led a seminar on the topic in the nearby Ruhr-Universität Bochum's department of history and organized an interdisciplinary academic workshop ahead of the exhibition that included historians, art historians, sociologists, an industry designer, and museum professionals. The resulting publication served as an exhibition catalog (Städtisches Museum Gelsenkirchen 1991). The goal was to establish Gelsenkirchener Barock as the distinct style of the period between 1920 and 1960, representing the taste of industrial mass society as a proletarian-bourgeois counterpoint to the intellectual Bauhaus (ibid.).

On the other hand, however, Hardetert and his team, in particular, fellow curator Wiltrud Apfeld, also wanted to unearth the positive emotions attached to

<sup>15</sup>On Hardetert, see Boy (1991) and his biography in Städtisches Museum Gelsenkirchen (1991): 199.

<sup>16</sup>On Bussfeld, see Gelsenkirchener Geschichten e. V. (2023).

<sup>17</sup>These foundations included the NRW Stiftung Kunst und Kultur, the Stiftung für Naturschutz, Heimat und Kulturpflege, the Initiativkreis Ruhrgebiet, and the Gelsenkirchen Stiftung.

Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture (Zimmer 1991). These had been overshadowed by the criticism the furniture had met with since it had emerged, and the widening of the term in the 1950s to designate all sorts of kitsch. Focused on the preservation of working-class design, the Barock exhibit was in line with the early efforts to value and protect mining objects and architecture of the region since the late 1960s.<sup>18</sup> But the exhibition also focused on everyday life in the tradition of *Alltagsgeschichte*, which gained prominence in Germany in the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> Displaying Gelsenkirchener Barock in the local museum echoes the memorialization of everyday life since the 1980s in the industrial Ruhr valley, which was on the brink of disappearing. The Ruhrlandmuseum (now located on the UNESCO world heritage site of the Zollverein mine and renamed the Ruhr-Museum) in Essen is certainly one of its flagships (Kritter 2022). The museum focused its collection on the social history of industrialization in 1984. Accordingly, the curators in Gelsenkirchen drew attention to the many personal histories tied to Barock furniture. The heavy cupboards, for example, were often wedding gifts, and one couple who visited the exhibition were so moved that the wife decided that once she died, their own cupboard should be donated to the museum (Stadt Gelsenkirchen 2016). The aim of the project was thus to deconstruct the negative emotions attached to Gelsenkirchener Barock and Gelsenkirchen and foreground the owner's pride and comfort: "After all, it was precisely the men from the Pütt [the coal mine] who had initially treated the baroque cabinet treasures with affection and self-confidence" ("Kulturfestival rund um Plüsch und Schnörkel" 1991).

The valorization and focus on private life and its consumer goods can be thought of as a way to cope with deindustrialization and societal transformations. In the years shortly after the fall of the wall, a similar nostalgia emerged for products from the GDR.<sup>20</sup> The rediscovery of GDR consumer goods such as Bautzener Senf but also the iconic car Trabi car and GDR-era furniture – including wall units – helped ease the rough transition to the social market economy of the Federal Republic by enabling people to collectively remember and construct a lost world: the seemingly benign, peaceful, good life under the communist regime (Ahbe 2016; Berdahl 1999; Bisky 2004).

The story of Gelsenkirchener Barock can be read in a similar vein as a retreat into the private life, into the living rooms of the good old *Wirtschaftswunder* period, when hard work in the coal industry was honored with a decent salary, with which laborers could afford one of the iconic cupboards. At the same time, political upheavals around deindustrialization, such as the fierce fight against the closure of the steel plant in nearby Duisburg-Rheinhausen in 1987/88, were eclipsed by this retreat into the nostalgic memory of cosy kitchen-cum-living room furniture.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup>For a short overview of the preservation and memorialization process of industrial life in the Ruhr valley, see Berger et al. (2019).

<sup>19</sup>Alf Lütke's famous *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* was published in German in 1989, just two years before the exhibition's opening (Lütke 1989). For another endeavor to valorize everyday design formerly looked down upon as kitsch and unworthy of display at a museum, see the "Genial design of the 80s" exhibition at IDZ in West-Berlin in 1983 (Selle 1984).

<sup>20</sup>For learning processes and mutual influences between the deindustrialization of the Ruhr valley and the former GDR, see Berger (2022).

<sup>21</sup>For the Rheinhausen protests, see Hordt (2018).

For city manager Bussfeld, the festival was a way to change the feelings toward a city “which has long stood in the shadows, to which outsiders entrusted [*zutrauen*] nothing but work and insiders little” (“Stadt zeigt deutliche Konturen” 1991). A “new sense of citizenship [*Bürgersinn*]” (ibid.) was meant to emerge from the festival; Gelsenkirchen’s inhabitants were supposed to “responsibly commit themselves to this city without ifs and buts, full of conviction” (ibid.). Of course, Bussfeld also saw an economic advantage in improving Gelsenkirchen’s image: “People [should be] interested in Gelsenkirchen again without reacting amused or disgusted at the mention of the name” (Thielmann 1991: 3). The idea was that Gelsenkirchener Barock would become a trademark for Gelsenkirchen. Overcoming the Barock-stigma was thus part of a municipal strategy to position itself as a city capable of mastering deindustrialization. It attests to the positive narrative of structural change (*Strukturwandel*) in the Ruhr valley, as deindustrialization is euphemistically called in the region, as a communal effort that involved the social democratic municipalities of the Ruhr (Berger 2021). Other tactics to boost Gelsenkirchen’s image and infrastructure followed suit. With his background and experience in state government, Bussfeld succeeded in channeling significant sums of money from the state of North-Rhine Westphalia into the development of the city’s infrastructure: one of the largest projects from the international construction exhibition (IBA) Emscherpark, which opened in 1989, was realized in Gelsenkirchen’s Nordsternpark on the grounds of a former mine. Furthermore, the city managed to establish a university of applied sciences in 1992. In addition, sport was used as a tool to construct a positive image of the city. One of Gelsenkirchen’s social-democratic mayors, Gerhard Rehberg, a former miner who became president of the Bundesliga soccer club FC Schalke 04, turned the club from the mid-1990s into an emotional home for those who had lost their jobs in the mining industry. The success of the club at a time of major mine closures in the late 1990s and early 2000s helped to alleviate a difficult and emotionally taxing time for the city and its inhabitants (Wambach 2022). The Barock exhibit was thus one of the first endeavors to explicitly fight the stigma attached to the deindustrializing city. As such, it was a more localized effort to change the feeling rules than the 1985 campaign of the Regional Verband Ruhr (RVR) titled “Das Ruhrgebiet: Ein starkes Stück Deutschland” (The Ruhr: A Strong Piece of Germany), which highlighted the disunity of the Ruhr region, composed of many competing cities (Heinson 1996).

While the city had unsuccessfully and in retrospect almost comically tried to fight the negative feelings and the stigma associated with the term in the 1950s, the 1991 Gelsenkirchener Barock festival was a serious take on the term but was self-ironic enough not to produce uncritical nostalgia. Feelings toward Gelsenkirchener Barock had changed, Gelsenkirchen’s mayor Bartlewski said in his opening speech of the festival:

[It] is a misunderstanding one could live with. . . . Although prejudices like these are difficult to dispel, Gelsenkirchen wants to deal with them with composure, humor, and imagination. . . . Old clichés are to be shaken off and a new self-image and self-confidence are to be sought” (“Feuerwerk dem Spott zum Trotz” 1991).

Was the endeavor successful? The archival material, consisting mostly of media documentation of the festival, is “weighty, almost as much as the exhibit in the municipal museum” (Introduction to the Media collection on Gelsenkirchener Barock festival, StadtA Ge, KUK 787). Almost 150 newspaper and journal articles, 12 television and 18 radio reports, ranging from the local press to national news outlets including Germany’s most-read tabloid, *BILD*, informed their readers, listeners, and viewers about the festival and exhibition. Gelsenkirchener Barock “long ridiculed, now making positive headlines nationwide,” one headline read (“Gelsenkirchener Barock – lange belächelt” 1991). “Barock swept away [überrollt] Gelsenkirchen,” another newspaper reported (Loskill 1991b). The municipal museum was in fact too small to handle the crowds who wanted to attend the opening ceremony: “Like a whirlwind, the stream of visitors poured into a much too small festival hall, got tangled up there and caused a traffic jam as big as a freeway” (“Mutmaßungen über ein barockes Lebensgefühl” 1991).

The curators were amazed by the success of their exhibition. Ten thousand visitors came in the first week alone, and the catalog “sold like hot cakes” – the museum sold as many in one day as they normally did in three weeks (Loskill 1991b). The exhibition managed to stir visitors’ emotions. “The bulbous kitchen buffets loaded with ornamental decorations not infrequently expose the true soul of the people,” observers from the local Gelsenkirchen art society proclaimed (“Annäherung an ein neues Stadtimago” 1991).

The visitors’ feelings were differentiated according to age and class, however. For the older generation, the exhibit reestablished their lost sense of pride toward the furniture they had once owned or that still graced their private homes. It made them “really happy that one finally deals with our things” (Zimmer 1991). “The emotion [*Rührung*] of older couples over the first pieces of their furnishings, most of which later ended up in the bulky waste, and the memories of lives once begun is unmistakable” (“Annäherung an ein neues Stadtimago” 1991). “Look, this is our cupboard, [*Komma kucken, dat iss doch unser Schrank!*],” visitors exclaimed (Casimir 1991). They exchanged memories and even took photographs with the exhibits for their family albums (“Barocke Fülle lässt sich kaum verkraften” 1991). Some enthusiastic residents sent flowers to city manager Bussfeld to thank him for organizing the exhibition. The whole atmosphere of the city seemed somewhat lighter, local newspaper *Ruhr-Nachrichten* observed (“Ist es denn wahr?” 1991). Despite this enthusiasm, however, the classist element of taste-making did not necessarily change: this generation was proud that their furniture was displayed in a museum, that is, a high-culture institution, which ultimately decides what good taste is.

The younger generation, by contrast, was fascinated by the furniture of their grandparents (“Annäherung an ein neues Stadtimago” 1991). Schools did not visit the museum to mock Gelsenkirchener Barock. Rather, it was here that the next generation after the post-war period discovered this type of furniture for the first time. Somewhat liberated from the tensions between modern and baroque style that had marked the 1950s and 1960s, the pieces, for them, incited positive emotions: “Our [sic] baroque is past coziness [*vergangene Gemütlichkeit*]. This is the furniture of the home in which our grandmother resided with pride in her chest” (Loskill 1991d). They discovered, and appreciated, the practicality of the sturdy cupboards, which barely needed refurbishment for the exhibit. Art students from nearby

Düsseldorf even wanted to buy exhibits for their shared flats (“Stilmischung brachte ‘Barock’ den Spott ein” 1991). When visitors continued to offer Gelsenkirchener Barock cupboards and other furniture items for sale to the museum, it organized a *Barockbörse*, a flea market in March 1992 (“Barock fürs traute Heim” 1991).

The taste of the times had changed. The head of the Association of the Furniture Industry, Erich Naumann (1991: 15), even predicted a comeback of Gelsenkirchener Barock: “Soon, young people will put a combined book-, living room, and kitchen cabinet, which was yesterday derided as Gelsenkirchener Barock, in their homes as a costly acquisition. That won’t take as long as some suspect.” The rediscovery of the *Wohnküche* in the 1990s, where “a Gelsenkirchener Barock buffet from grandma blissfully increases the postmodern rush of joy,” as well as the retro and vintage trend of the 2000s, proved him right (Cassidy and Bennett 2012; “Die neue Küchenlust” 1995: 115).

However, not all visitors saw the exhibition in such a positive light. Some deemed the festival a waste of public money and the exhibition “Gelsenkirchen’s biggest collection of bulk waste” (“Gelsenkirchener Barock: Dinosaurier in der Guten Stube” 1991). Others argued that the city would be better off focusing on sports in their rebranding, with Gelsenkirchen’s internationally renowned football club FC Schalke 04 being a much more suitable image-booster (Zimmer 1991).<sup>22</sup> A number of Gelsenkirchen locals could not shake the earlier negative connotations and feelings toward Gelsenkirchener Barock and considered the festival as fouling one’s own nest (“Eiche, mundgebissen” 1991). One visitor, an elderly man, was so outraged that he attacked one of the large cupboards and almost broke its gold-cased glass cabinet (“Werbung mit dem Klischeebild” 1991).

While the behavior of this older man is a relic of the Gelsenkirchener rage of the 1950s, it was mostly the middle generation, those between 40 and 50 years old, who, “infected by Bauhaus and contemporary design, view[ed] the cuddly sofas, groups of armchairs, knick-knacks and doilies . . . with mild shivers” (“Annäherung an ein neues Stadtimagen” 1991). Having grown up in a period where Gelsenkirchener Barock was deprecated, they either did not get or did not appreciate the reappraisal and ironic take on it and considered the festival a provincial farce. Some criticized the fact that Hardetert and Bussfeld were outsiders and blamed them for organizing the festival without explicitly involving the city’s dignitaries or institutions, such as the director of the museum or the city’s marketing department (“Mutmaßungen über ein barockes Lebensgefühl” 1991). Importantly, some members of the upper-middle class, including one of the speakers at the opening ceremony, art historian Prof. Dr. Volker Plagemann, saw Gelsenkirchener Barock as still connected to National Socialism. To them, Gelsenkirchener Barock was the “design of the last backward-looking rebellion of the Germans against modernity . . . the seemingly harmless face of fascism” (Loskill 1991d). This opinion was fueled by Jürgen Habermas’s interpretation of the style as an “obstacle to the development of civil citizenship [*Hemmschuh der Entwicklung des zivilen Bürgersinns*]” in the post-fascist German mentality (Groels 1991a, 2, see also Hardetert 1991b: 179). According to Habermas’s verdict, the smugness of the middle and lower-middle classes, reflected in the dark and curvilinear Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture and

<sup>22</sup>On the role of Schalke 04 for the city of Gelsenkirchen, see Wambach (2022).

in their retreat into the home in the 1950s, served as a way to disconnect from the Nazi past. Connecting Gelsenkirchener Barock and National Socialism, however, shows one mechanism of distancing: the portrayal of the two as interlinked examples of a backward and now overcome tradition and taste could serve to whitewash the upper-middle classes that preferred modern designs, rendering them innocent of involvement in Nazism.

As expected, a variety of earlier negative feelings and prejudices toward Gelsenkirchener Barock resurfaced. An article titled “Furniture of Horror” warned readers that “Those who love bad taste or German *Gemütlichkeit* may stray there, those who don’t may blindfold themselves” (“Möbel des Schreckens” 1991). *Süddeutsche Zeitung* dismissed the curator’s wish to decentralize Gelsenkirchener Barock: “And then those descendants of steel and coal-sweating people from the area [*Revier*] even claim: Gelsenkirchener Barock is in all of us. God forbid” (“Das Streiflicht” 1991). Furthermore, stereotypes of an alleged Eastern European preference for kitsch furniture resurged. In 1991, newspapers asserted that Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture was still en vogue as an iconic example of German *Gemütlichkeit* and that the museum had received numerous requests from Poland to buy exhibits (“‘Gelsenkirchener Barock’: Ein Massenmöbel als Museumsstück” 1991; Loskill 1991c). Here, the reference to Poland also served as way to distance themselves from and portray themselves as above Eastern Europe, which after the fall of communism in the 1990s seemed to inherit the allegation of backward style from the Ruhr Valley (see Buchowski 2006).

However, as in earlier times, when the furniture’s purchasers had remained somewhat unfazed by the classist criticism, the majority of visitors ignored such intellectual and upper-middle class skepticism. They found the exhibition and the Barock festival a thorough success. “A city celebrates its mockery, long live the Gelsenkirchen Barock!” praised the newspaper *Ruhr-Nachrichten* (“Feuerwerk dem Spott zum Trotz” 1991). The ironic festival managed to attract the masses, as one commentator confirmed: “It is a bold product. Once you get to the museum, ironically or not, you’re there for now” (“Barockendes Gelsenkirchen” 1991). City manager Bussfeld remarked that with the festival Gelsenkirchen had “achieved a level of attention that we would not otherwise have been able to achieve with the greatest effort” (“Barock für das Image” 1991). The project was even in the running for the 1992 German city marketing prize (“Ein Schmähwort wird zum Markenzeichen” 1991).

The exhibition itself received another special honor: 40 years after it had been ridiculed at the Cologne furniture fair, it traveled to the very same fair in 1992 – but this time under very different auspices (“Schönheit aus Wurzelholz” 1991). “The negative image of the term is not off the table but neutralized and scientifically reappraised,” Bussfeld concluded (“Barock für das Image” 1991). The feeling rules toward Gelsenkirchener Barock had, again, changed.

Still, while the mood was enthusiastic, at some point the efforts petered out. Hardtert was rumored to become director of the museum, but this did not eventuate. Moreover, despite plans for the festival to become a yearly event, the city’s strained budget situation did not permit it, and while another Barock music festival took place in 1993, the exhibition was dismantled and parts of the furniture sold, going against the stated wish to make it a permanent part of the museum in

order to showcase changing tastes over time (“Mutmaßungen über ein barockes Lebensgefühl” 1991). Other cities of the Ruhr valley profited from the installation of industrial museums, such as the large number of state-funded museums of the Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe (LWL) that turned abandoned mines and factories into sites of industrial culture (*Industriekultur*) or the development into museum flagships, such as the Ruhr-Museum at its new site at mine Zollverein or the Bergbaumuseum in Bochum. Gelsenkirchen, however, lost in the competition within the region. Situated in the northern part of the Ruhr valley, the Emscher zone, known to have difficulties in transitioning to alternative industries, Gelsenkirchen was particularly hard-hit during deindustrialization. The small municipal museum now displays works of classic modern art and a large collection of kinetic art, but visitors look in vain for traces of the 1991 Gelsenkirchener Barock exhibition.

Today, the term Gelsenkirchener Barock only occasionally reemerges to designate kitsch items, furniture, or generally bad taste; mostly it has fallen out of use. One contribution to this development was the 1991/92 Barock festival, which performed some important emotional work that served to neutralize the negative feelings associated with the term. In November 2022, Gelsenkirchener Barock finally entered cultural nobility: one of the finest pieces of the 1991 exhibition was included in the collection of the newly established history museum of North Rhine-Westphalia in Düsseldorf. A freshly restored two-meter, polished and shiny walnut veneer cupboard with brass fittings and a gold-enclosed glass cabinet, produced in 1953, was chosen to represent Gelsenkirchen. As the object was too heavy to be handed over in person and the cupboard was still in the process of being restored, the city’s mayor Karin Welge – alongside Wiltrud Apfeld, one of the curators of the 1991 exhibit – solemnly donated two drawers of the cupboard to the chairmanship of the new museum during a ceremony at Gelsenkirchen’s city hall. Welge happily commented on the changing emotions toward Gelsenkirchener Barock: “what used to be a target of ridicule, is today worthy of display at a museum,” she said, reiterating the aim of the 1991 Barock festival (Stender 2022). In the collection of the future North Rhine-Westphalia museum, Gelsenkirchener Barock has not only become a source of pride for local Gelsenkircheners, as in the 1991 exhibit. The item itself now testifies to Gelsenkirchener Barock becoming part of the entire state’s heritage.

From the original pride of its owners to the snobbish judgment of both the purist Bauhaus and the Nazis, Gelsenkirchener Barock fostered pride and a sense of belonging at a time of deindustrialization in the 1990s. Now, the “Altar der Wohnküche,” (Gross 1991: 27), the altar of the kitchen-cum-living-room, has finally found its home: in the memory of the state.

## Conclusion

The story of Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture contributes to studying the process and change of taste-making and feeling rules connected to place, to the study of deindustrialization, and to changing perceptions of class in the second half of the twentieth century:

It shows that taste-making is a collaborative process that produces feeling rules (Cummins and Pahl, introduction to this issue; Hochschild 1983). The explicit focus on feeling rules and emotions adds to Bourdieu's (1984) discussion of taste-making processes. The story of Gelsenkirchener Barock thus shows the importance and consequences of emotions for taste-making-processes in local politics as well as in design schools and the media. The article highlights the mechanisms of feeling rules: producing and changing feeling rules involves a whole set of actors; individuals like Peter Harderter, Klaus Bussfeld, or Dr. Zabel, functioned within a greater ecosystem of collective organizations of local government, Bauhaus designers, furniture experts, and art historians. Media outlets deepened the feeling rules propagated and contested by, predominantly, educated upper-middle class tastemakers, over the heads of those who made Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture a famous example of German *Gemütlichkeit* (Schmidt-Lauber 2003). The municipal and regional politics of the Ruhr region and the highly emotional debates over value and taste are crucial to understanding the development and change of feeling rules, both on a local and a national, even European or Western, level. The conflictual story of Gelsenkirchener Barock furniture, and the emotion-laden discourse between pride and prejudice it entailed for almost a century, is thus perfectly apt for teaching us the work of emotions in taste-making processes and their capacity to change discourses on taste over time.

Furthermore, Gelsenkirchener Barock is an example for how place-based stigma changes over time and thus contributes to the newer sociological research on stigma attributed to localities (Butler-Warke 2021). The industrial and then post-industrial landscape of Gelsenkirchen triggered feelings first of envy and later disgust with those who did not live in the city and its surroundings. In addition, those who lived in and administrated Gelsenkirchen changed their feelings toward *their* Barock over the course of the twentieth century, from pride to shamefully rejecting the stigma-laden piece to rediscovering the lost pride with the 1991 exhibition and its current valorization in the new history museum of the state of North-Rhine Westphalia.

As such, Gelsenkirchener Barock contributes to the study of deindustrialization and coping strategies in transformation processes. This research on deindustrialization and transformation processes in general has underlined the importance of nostalgia in rough times of transition and economic crisis (Ahbe 2016; Berdahl 1999; Bisky 2004; Clarke 2015; Strangleman 2013). Similar to *Ostalgie*, that is the nostalgia for products and memories of the GDR, the story of Gelsenkirchener Barock feeds into the nostalgic memory of the West-German *Wirtschaftswunder* years, when the hard work in the coal and steel industry was honored with decent pay and a retreat into the private life, to the *Wohnküche*. It also pushes away the political upheavals of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when deindustrialization hit the region hard and political protests threatened to disturb this carefully constructed nostalgia. The involvement of Gelsenkirchen's municipality in the Barock exhibit indicates the beginnings of the triumphant narrative of deindustrialization in the Ruhr valley as a success story around the emotion of pride that united municipalities and locals alike (Berger 2021).

Finally, the story depicts the changing perception and composition of class in the second half of the twentieth century. Around the time of the exhibit, students of working-class parents and grandparents who themselves could no longer be

considered working-class rediscovered Gelsenkirchener Barock for the kitchens of their shared apartments. The upward social mobility since the 1960s smoothed out the classic class divide that, as I have shown here, characterized the conflicts around Gelsenkirchener Barock in the late 1950s. As such, the case study confirms Hertel's (Hertel 2017) findings on class mobility in Germany. Deindustrialization and the need to find alternative career paths certainly contributed to this upward mobility in the Ruhr valley (Tenfelde 1996). It went hand in hand with endeavors to commemorate and value working-class life in the context of deindustrialization in the Ruhr valley, of which the Gelsenkirchener Barock exhibit was an early, temporary, and often forgotten project in comparison to the flagships of industrial culture in the region, such as the Zollverein mine (Berger et al. 2019). While industrial culture in the Ruhr valley has today reached the upper echelons of society and been deemed appropriate to be displayed and cherished, the example of Gelsenkirchener Barock shows the class divide that in the late 1980s and early 1990s still accompanied displays of working-class life (Tenfelde 1996). The Barock exhibit was particularly cherished by those who felt ennobled to see their own furniture displayed in a museum, while upper-middle class visitors showed resentment and connected it to a Nazi past and thereby devalued it (Ellerbrock 2022).

The article marries several fields of historical research: conceptual history, that is, the genesis, changing semantics, and reception of the term Gelsenkirchener Barock throughout the twentieth century (Hoffmann and Kollmeier 2012; Kollmeier 2012; Koselleck 1972, 2006), and emotions history, notably feeling rules toward Gelsenkirchener Barock (Cummins and Pahl, introduction to this issue; Hochschild 1983). Furthermore, it contributes to design history in that it analyzes the use of and responses toward this iconic piece of German furniture (Betts 2004). Finally, it addresses social history: notably the stigma around class and the subsequent deindustrialization, which weigh on a region with multiple stigma. However, the change in which Gelsenkirchener Barock has been preserved and memorialized since the late 1980s reveals a way in which feeling rules can be changed and these stigma can be overcome.

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