

History of the Krupp belt: The “factory town”

The site of the ThyssenKrupp Group’s new headquarters has been part of the Company’s history since 1818. That was the year in which Friedrich Krupp and two partners built a new cast steel factory in Altendorf, a community to the west of Essen. Two years previously they had succeeded for the first time in producing high-quality cast steel. The new production site initially comprises just a few buildings. They include a foreman’s cottage, in which the Krupp family later lives and which is to become known as the Krupp Stammhaus (ancestral home). The site of this small factory in rural surroundings is the seed bed for the 230 hectares of land now known as the Krupp belt.

In 1826 Friedrich Krupp’s son Alfred takes over the company, and from the 1850s a period of rapid growth begins for the factory to the west of Essen. In 1852 the factory produces over a million pounds of steel for the first time. From 74 in 1848, the workforce grows to 30,000 before the turn of the 20th century. The site also expands quickly: between 1861 and 1873 its overall area increases 20-fold from 18 to 360 hectares. Two years later, the roofed areas on the site alone are as big as Essen’s town center. But the town is also developing: From a population of 3,000 when the cast steel factory was founded, Essen registers its 100,000th citizen shortly before the turn of the century.

In a book published in 1889, Essen-based publisher Diedrich Baedeker speaks of a factory “of astonishing scale and quite extraordinary expanse”. He calls it “a true factory town” and details its infrastructure: there are 1,195 furnaces, 370 steam engines and 361 cranes on the site, as well as 73 kilometers of rail track and 140 kilometers of telephone lines.

At the turn of the century, Essen incorporates several surrounding communities, including Altendorf. The cast steel factory is now in Essen, but remains a cosmos of its own. Frohnhauser Strasse and Altendorfer Strasse are the only roads between the downtown area and Altendorf. They run through the site and are walled on both sides. Other than that, the “factory town” separates the two districts rather than linking them.

During the First World War Krupp receives extensive armaments contracts. At the end of the war, the company has to switch production and for a while finds itself in difficulties. New products such as locomotives, trucks and agricultural machinery are successfully developed, the existing factory buildings are converted and expanded. The end of the Second World War also marks the end of large-scale industrial production on the Krupp site, with two thirds of the factory partially or completely destroyed by bombing. Much of the equipment that is still functional is moved abroad or dismantled as reparations. By the end of 1950, some 70 percent of the Essen cast steel factory has been destroyed.

From the 1950s the Krupp Group develops into an international conglomerate, but the density of development on the site of the cast steel factory never returns to the original levels. More and more buildings stand empty. New users are found for some structures, with new building projects mainly focused on the outskirts of the site. Rail tracks and former factory roads become overgrown, and the majority of the site falls into disuse. But the Company continues to own the land, and it becomes the largest item of real estate belonging to the new ThyssenKrupp Group when it is formed through the merger of the two Ruhr-based companies Thyssen and Krupp.

In 2000 an urban master plan is drawn up for development of the Krupp belt. A multifunctional model combining living, working and leisure is to be realized in several stages. In 2006 the decision is made to build a new headquarters for the ThyssenKrupp Group in the heart of the Krupp belt. The story of the site takes a new turn with the historic opportunity to create a new, attractive quarter in the middle of a major city. It marks the start of a new epoch for the ThyssenKrupp Group.