Archaeology in the World Heritage Site - Underneath the historic town centre

As is the case everywhere in the world, archaeological monuments in Wismar are endangered by intrusions into their structures and substance. In 2002, the historic town centres of Wismar and Stralsund were inscribed together on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Both German coastal towns have extensive, well-preserved architectural substance from the medieval and modern periods. Due to favourable preservation conditions and a low degree of destruction, the material legacy of past epochs is present here in a completeness that is otherwise difficult to find. Almost without exception, groundworks on construction projects in Wismar affect archaeological monuments. Exact documentation, recovery and knowledge transfer concerning the function and significance of new finds are vital in order to preserve and maintain the city's historic assets and World Heritage status.

Excavations on the market square in Wismar in 2008. Together with the Wasserkunst fountain in the background, the excavated wooden pipes are remnants of the city`s 18th-century water distribution system. This system supplied many of Wismar's burgher houses with drinking water.

Ceramic tiles ready for placement on the sculpture fountain

WATER FEATURE
in the garden of the World Heritage House Wismar

Opening hours

Garden and exhibition open daily
09:00 to 17:00 from May to October
10:00 to 16:00 from November to April
Languages spoken: German and English

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WELT ERBE HAUS WISMAR

Water Feature
in the garden of the World Heritage House Wismar

View of the courtyard of the Wismar's World Heritage House and Tourist Information with fountain in the foreground.

Concrete sculpture – Model of Wismar's historic town centre

The World Heritage House and Tourist Information in Wismar have a shared outdoor area with a courtyard and a garden. The outdoor area is part of the World Heritage exhibition and explores the topic "water".

A model of Wismar's historic town centre made of light-coloured concrete is presented in the attractive garden. The five-by-six-metre sculpture includes a network of channels. Water from the fountain flows through the channels to illustrate the city's historic water distribution system leading along the main streets and directly into its stately houses.

Historic water distribution system

Map of Wismar's historic water distribution system from around 1710 (early 19th century reproduction). The map shows the system of wooden pipes radiating out from the Wasserkunst fountain and distributing water along the main streets to individual front-gabled houses throughout the city. Source: Wismar City Archive.

The idea to integrate the theme of drinking water into the exhibit was inspired by the map of Wismar's water distribution system drawn by the city's 18th-century master builder Zacharias Voigt. The map depicts individual building facades and represents the earliest surviving inventory of Wismar's inner-city development. The highly-valued document was reproduced several times in the 19th century. Of special note is that instead of the standard north-up orientation, the top of the map points south. Radiating out from the *Wasserkunst* on the market, pipes made of hollowed-out spruce trunks connect the fountain with the main streets and the city`s large burgher houses. Even today, construction work in the historic town centre regularly unearths historic water pipes.

Jigsaw puzzle – each ceramic facade was carefully positioned and glued into place

The design concept

The idea was initially proposed by the team planning Wismar's World Heritage exhibition. A first interpretation of the idea involved painting the water distribution system onto a concrete surface. Unfortunately, the paint faded after several years. The search began for a more permanent solution that was decorative as well as durable, weatherproof, abrasion-resistant and non-slip. Ceramic artist Dörte Michaelis from Vogelsang near Neuburg submitted the winning concept. Michaelis created ceramic tiles representing the facades of houses in Wismar's old town made of red, beige and light grey clay. She then added relief, partially glazed the tiles, and glued them onto the concrete base. The houses were positioned according to the map of the 18th-century water distribution system from the Wismar City Archive. A high-resolution photograph of the map was scaled to fit the location of the sculpture, providing a template for the production of the water feature's concrete base. A second map printed at the same scale was used as a template for the ceramic tiles representing the building facades.

Implementation

Within a four month period, the ceramic artist created and fired the tiles representing the facades of the houses on the map. No two houses are alike. Because of the large number of tiles, assembling the houses in their final positions was much like completing a jigsaw puzzle. The original map is rich in detail and drawn in fine lines. When designing the ceramic facades, the goal was to retain the unique characteristics of each house and at the same time create a pleasing visual effect. Dörte Michaelis achieved this goal by using graphic and painterly techniques. The vertical edges of the tiles and the outlines of individual houses are glazed black. This creates a shadow effect and makes details such as gables and chimneys more discernible. In contrast, recessed windows and doors are highlighted with coloured glaze and outlined with thin lines.