

**The struggle to belong  
Dealing with diversity in 21<sup>st</sup> century urban settings**

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**Architecture and the creation of place specificity in urban  
development projects: the case of Hamburg's HafenCity**

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## **Abstract**

*The paper discusses the role of architecture in creating a sense of belonging and place specificity in new urban development projects by examining the example of HafenCity in Hamburg. Located on a 123 hectare site in the Northern Harbour in walking distance from the city centre HafenCity is one the largest urban development projects in Europe currently under construction. I will pay a look at the urban design framework, the conditions and processes of architectural production as well as the successive meanings attributed to the architecture and the public spaces of HafenCity in strategies of city marketing, in the public debate as well as in the everyday use and appropriation of these spaces.*

*Based on a brief comparison of the case study with other European examples I argue that despite the asserted ‘physical similarity’ of many urban development projects today (Fainstein 2008) the use and interpretation of architecture as a means to create a sense of belonging varies greatly depending on the local context and the audience. The case of HafenCity surely demonstrates what constitutes a challenge for contemporary architecture and design in general: to create modern urban spaces that meet people’s needs for identification and affiliation without employing historicist and neo-traditionalist design idioms.*

*Keywords: architecture, place specificity, city marketing, urban megaprojects*

## **Introduction**

The Urban Mega Projects (UMPs) of the last two decades are characterized by a number of organizational and political aspects. They further the restructuring of urban policy-making through the redistribution of competencies and responsibilities to private and semi-public institutions and development agencies. The ‘condition of exceptionality’ (Swyngedouw et al. 2003a: 264) with which the UMPs are attributed on grounds of their scale and their significance serves as an argument for the circumvention of legal norms and democratic control mechanisms. In sum, UMPs are interpreted as ‘the very catalysts of urban and political change’ (Swyngedouw et al. 2003b: 3) and ‘the mechanisms par excellence through which globalization becomes urbanized’ (ibid.).

At the same time, UMPs are also associated with the transformation of urban imagery and representational logic. They seem to be capable of initiating symbolic transformations and of re-defining the image of places and whole cities. The physical transformation of the built environment is thereby seen as the key factor for economic recovery and the strengthening of a city’s competitiveness. Images of decline and decay are substituted by images of growth and prosperity as well as of innovation and creativity (even though the public benefits and broader economic effects of the UMPs are contested). Additionally, the UMPs are very often also associated with the establishment of international economic linkages and the achievement of world city status.

The starting point of my article is that both dimensions of the UMPs as described above rely essentially on their (heightened) *visibility*. Firstly, UMPs need to be highly visible in order to justify their exceptional status and the high priority given to them by public authorities. This kind of visibility implies a distinctive and often central location within the urban fabric as well as the clear demarcation of the project in relation to the urban surroundings; only then does the project's exceptionality become comprehensible for citizens and local stakeholders. Secondly, the UMPs have to be visible in order to convey the symbolic meaning with which they are attributed. They need to be visibly new as well as visibly different from existing structures in order to convey images of regeneration and new economic strength. Moreover, this kind of visibility is the precondition for any kind of image-based marketing strategy that tries to promote a city's advantages by attracting attention or by establishing recognizable icons.

This question of visibility is – apart from the sheer size of many projects – inevitably bound up with the question of the architectural design of the UMP and, as I wish to argue in this paper, with a decision as how to position the project with regard to 'place-specific' versus 'globalized' design approaches. Apart, possibly, from purely infrastructural projects (which are the exception nowadays), the UMP's architecture serves as a signifier and provides the imagery that the meaning of the UMPs is constructed on. This hasn't basically changed since the prototypical projects of Battery Park City in New York City and the Docklands in London (Fainstein 1994; Gordon 1997). These two projects exemplified the pro-growth and property-led regeneration strategies of the 1980s. Both made systematic use of a postmodern design idiom for the purpose of urban redevelopment and generated wide discussions which addressed in particular the significance of their architectural design (e.g. Zukin 1992; Crilley 1993). However, the architectural vocabulary has changed since then; the postmodern aesthetic of those days seems far removed nowadays. The questions, however, of how to establish a sense of place in the development of UMPs and of whether authenticity and place-specificity are suitable tools to enhance the value of a development project or not – questions which were at the core of the debate at that time – continue to be valid.

I argue that, to be visible, the architecture of UMPs today necessarily needs to be positioned in two ways: on the one hand, it has to react to the urban surroundings and find a way of standing out against the existing buildings and place-specific styles and materials. On the other hand, the architects, planners and politicians responsible for the design of the UMP have to find solutions to the problem of how to be visible in comparison with those international role-models and similar projects in competing cities – of which there are plenty. As a consequence, the UMP is inevitably (and this has in my view remained unchanged since the postmodern designs for Battery Park City and Canary Wharf) challenged to position itself with regard to the adoption or the refusal of local building traditions as well as international standards and typologies.

One of the most obvious ways of making a project visible today, both physically as well as in the media, is to employ what has been termed 'iconic architecture', designed by celebrity

architects; another solution is the erection of always taller buildings competing for height. However, these are not the only options; there are different ways to make use of architecture as a strategic element and signifier for a UMP. It would be far too easy to reduce the question of signifying in the case of the UMP to the question of iconicity or height alone. My contribution explores how architecture is used as a signifier in the development and promotion of Urban Megaprojects by examining the case of HafenCity in Hamburg. How is the architecture in this case used with the intention of gaining visibility with regard to citizens as well as outsiders? My aim is to show how this aspect of visibility is inevitably bound up with debates about the authenticity and/or the uniformity of the design solutions.

In order to present my argument I will take a look at both, namely the conditions and circumstances of architectural production as well as the successive meanings attributed to the architecture and the use of architectural imagery for purposes of marketing. By doing so, I don't wish to embark on a purely stylistic debate which might easily detract from the fact that these projects are built at all, as Peter Marcuse (1998) once remarked referring to the case of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. Rather, my interest for architecture as a signifier and for the conditions of its making is explained by the central role architecture has in shaping urban identity – thereby also acting as a prime vehicle for legitimizing the UMPs and defining their success in the eyes of the public.

Recently, Susan Fainstein and the authors of a IJURR-symposium on new UMPs have emphasized that the latest generation of mix-use projects provides high diversity and flexibility in the uses, built forms and financing models, which 'is mirrored in the diversity and flexibility of socioeconomic, cultural, aesthetic and environmental arguments advanced to justify the massive public cost and private gain' which often accompany them (Lehrer and Laidley 2008: 798). At the same time however, Fainstein remarks, 'a striking physical similarity among the schemes, irrespective of the city in which they are located' (Fainstein 2008: 768). My aim is to show that, despite this asserted 'physical similarity' of many UMPs today (*ibid.*), the use and interpretation of architecture as a signifier can be very different depending on the context and the audience. As the case study will demonstrate, the challenge of gaining visibility by means of architecture towards both a local as well as an international audience opens a conflicting field of interpretations in which neither 'global' nor 'local' building elements are certain, nor is there a clear-cut way of how to create urbanity in a UMP by means of architecture.

### **HafenCity in Hamburg**

The HafenCity is the largest urban development project currently under way in the city of Hamburg. Located on a 123 hectare site in the Northern Harbour, HafenCity is also one of the largest projects of its kind in Europe. The reconversion of the derelict port facilities is meant to foster sectoral transformation, to increase competitiveness and to attract investment. The size of the project is enormous: situated in walking distance to the city centre between the historic Speicherstadt warehouse district and the River Elbe, the HafenCity will increase the size of Hamburg's city centre by 40 percent – it has been termed the project of the century for

the city. First ideas for the renewal of this port area had been discussed in the 1980s, although the definitive announcement of the project only followed a decade later in 1997. The then First Mayor of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, Henning Voscherau, presented the plans to the public after having already covertly obtained most of the necessary land for the city in order to prevent speculation. After the City Parliament agreed on the development decision, the whole property package, called 'Harbour and City', was transferred to the GHS Hamburg Port Area Development Corporation (since 2004 HafenCity Hamburg GmbH, a 100% subsidiary of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg), which was charged with the development and the marketing of the HafenCity. The scheme includes the compensation of the Hamburg Harbour and Warehouse Company (today HHHLA Hamburg Harbour and Logistics Company) for conveying the area of the Northern Harbour. Gains from the land sales at HafenCity are used to refinance the construction of new, modern port facilities at Altenwerder (opened in 2002).

In 1999 the GHS commissioned an international urban development competition, which was won by the German-Dutch team 'hamburgplan' with Kees Christiaanse/ASTOC. Based on their concept in 2000, a master plan was enacted by the local parliament, which frames the urban development of the project. The master plan divides the area into 12 quarters with a variety of uses and building typologies which are scheduled for step-by-step completion. The uses planned entail apartments, service-sector office space, retail and hospitality outlets, as well as several cultural facilities, among them the Elbphilharmonie concert hall designed by the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron and the Science Center designed by OMA of Rem Koolhaas. Construction started in 2002. In 2005 the first quarter, the Sandtor Quay, and in 2009 the second quarter, the Dalmane Quay, were completed. The envisioned timeframe for the completion of the whole area covers 25 years. It is envisaged that, after finalization in 2020-2025, the area should provide 5,500 apartments with housing for 12,000 people and office and business premises for 40,000 jobs.

The aim of the HafenCity project is to constitute a modern, diversified urban centre which will expand the existing City and provide a wide array of urban functions. This ambition to create an explicitly urban environment corresponds with a range of other current large-scale European development projects (e.g. Majoor 2008). Another aim of the project is to bring the city 'back to the water', as the historic centre is recessed from the riverfront of the river Elbe and the port facilities have precluded access to the river front for the public. In order to realize these plans the organizational and legal framework of the urban and architectural design process has been comparatively complex. HafenCity Hamburg GmbH has been taking decisions with regard to urban design and architecture on the basis of strict and at the same time ambitious and time-consuming procedures.

The master plan by Kees Christiaanse, instead of providing a deterministic urban planning design, opted for an open concept 'in order to define the underlying structures while leaving a certain amount of leeway for various types of building initiatives within the framework of a set of rules' (Christiaanse and Nepl 2008: 75). The specifications of the master plan

consisted only in the definition of the various quarters and their building typologies. After the master plan had been adopted by the local parliament, further specifications were developed in the qualification phase on the basis of workshops involving planners, city authorities and project managers and competitive bidding processes. After land plot sizes and buildings volumes have been determined, invitations for tender are issued for individual building areas. The property purchase option which is then awarded obliges the individual developer to start construction within a certain time-frame on the basis of mandatory architectural competitions (ibid.: 75 ff.).

Opinions about the thus far realized urban qualities of the project are divided. Even though only the lesser part of the whole project has been completed so far, some positive observations are already permitted. The mix of uses has been given high priority in the HafenCity. Together with the density (the average floor space index of 2.5 is relatively high), the preference for small plots along with the diversification of ownership, the subdivision into distinguished quarters as well as the decision not to permit any roofed pedestrian areas and the emphasis placed on the treatment of the open spaces, the creation of a lively urban setting is certainly probable. This focus on the specifically urban qualities of the project is also explained by the lessons learned in Hamburg's historic centre. After the successive adaption of floor space for commercial and office use which has mostly eliminated residential space, the city centre is utterly dead after closing hours – a fact the city planners have been aware of for a long time. However, only lately has this led to some changes in the urban planning strategies, as exemplified in the decision to rebuy some of the remaining blocks of historic working-class tenements in the city centre after a citizens' group had launched protests against their demolition and subsequent replacement with commercial blocks (Briegleb 2009).

Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that the HafenCity is a socially exclusive area. Critics argue that it lacks social diversity and that the apartments (despite various options of ownership among which you can also find cooperative models) are all upscale. Another point of critique has been the transfer of revenues to refinance the new port infrastructure in Altenwerder instead of investing in socially depressed areas. Also, the continuously growing investment in the Elbphilharmonie concert hall which is for the greatest part financed by the city has been heavily criticized. The completion of the costly building – a futuristic glass and steel structure on top of an historic warehouse – has been postponed several times; the estimated costs have grown from 77 Million Euro up to 323,5 million according to latest reports. Finally, the awarding of the contract for the commercial heart of HafenCity, the whole quarter around Magdeburger Hafen, to a single consortium of German and Dutch investors has been criticised as the privatization of what should be public space. The argument on behalf of the HafenCity Hamburg GmbH was that that in order to avoid an enclosed mall, the contracting of a single developer for the whole area (which is planned to provide 40,000 m<sup>2</sup> of retail space) had been the only economically viable solution.

### Architecture as a Signifier

‘Metropolitan but also maritime’ (Hamburg Hafen City GmbH 2009: 13) – this can be taken as the guiding theme of the HafenCity. The developers of the project claim that ‘HafenCity is being designed to have a city centre character, whilst preserving the typical appearance of a port, where land meets water’ (HafenCity Hamburg GmbH 2010a). Thus, the requirement for the architecture and the urban design of the new quarters is twofold. The buildings and urban spaces are meant to be visibly new, even futuristic, in order to represent a ‘new kind of urbanity’ (HafenCity Hamburg GmbH 2010b) and ‘new forms of inner city coexistence’ (ibid.). At the same time, they are meant to contribute to the reinterpretation of the *genius loci* and the area’s authentic port character, as a description of the project by the developing agency states clearly:

‘Thus a completely new and futuristic addition to the city center with its own stylistic vocabulary is gradually emerging. Yet the reinterpretation of the place orients itself toward the established city center, its milieu informed by the old Speicherstadt warehouses and historic port structures, as well as a few conserved buildings. HafenCity carries forward Hamburg’s identity as a maritime city; at the same time, a model for European city development in the 21st century’ (Hamburg Hafen City GmbH 2009: 4).

The ambivalence of this twofold requirement is visible in the structures completed so far. On the one hand, the overall layout of the master plan is conservative as well as pragmatic in its adoption of the scale and grid patterns of the existing structures in the inner city and the Speicherstadt. The individual buildings of the finished quarters at Sandtor Quay and Dalmane Quay, however, are heterogeneous and use a wide range of materials and formal solutions. Together with the planned landmark buildings of Elbphilharmonie and the Science Center, the HafenCity is thus seen as contributing to the city’s ‘increasingly global outlook’ (Dawson 2006: 70) and as signifying that ‘Hamburg goes global’ (ibid.).

At the same time, it has paradoxically been the heterogeneity of the buildings at Sandtor Quay and Dalmane Quay which has drawn criticism (e.g. Kähler 2008). Even though the quality of most of the buildings is – as critics agree – undoubtedly high, it is claimed that a large number of them overstate the individual architectural statement as opposed to the unity of the whole ensemble. Indeed, even Kees Christiaanse has admitted that this overemphasis of a particularly original impression represents a disadvantage of the competitive bidding process and impairs the overall personality of the neighbourhood (Christiaanse and Neppel 2008: 77f.). What is interesting is how the criticism makes reference to an alleged *genius loci* and a local ‘Hanseatic’ building tradition characterized by sobriety and understatement – attributes which are usually explained by Hamburg’s past as a trading port and sovereign city-state. This is exemplified in an interview with Hadi Teherani, one of the most successful Hamburg-based architects. He criticizes precisely the heterogeneity of the buildings completed so far as being not place-specific enough:

‘To design such a huge, inner-urban area, is a once in the century opportunity. But the buildings at Dalmane Quay are not typical for the location: tightly positioned individual architectural statements, the material very variegated: yellow brick, red brick, and white plaster. A completely un-hamburg-like mish-mash<sup>1</sup>’ (Teherani 2008; translation by the author).

To understand this argument, one has to know that Hamburg’s cityscape is indeed visibly shaped by two types of building structures: the ‘white’ neo-classical villas of the bourgeoisie in the affluent quarters around the Alster river from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and the brick-made large housing estates and municipal buildings dating from the era of the city’s legendary building director Fritz Schumacher. In the years from 1908 until his retirement in 1933, Schumacher changed the face of the city through his building programme, which combined urban development objectives with architectural guidelines, the most important being the preference for brick as the local building material. Schumacher was responsible for the design of some of the best known examples of Brick Expressionism of the 1920s in Northern Germany. It is because of him that the specific optic of brick facades has over decades constituted the most typical image of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. Only since the mid 1990s have local architects began to free themselves of this tradition by experimenting with new materials but also by re-interpreting brick in a new and playful manner.

The argument of authenticity and place-specificity has also been raised in criticism of the design of the public spaces. The competition for the landscape design of the first part of HafenCity was won by EMBT of Barcelona in 2002. Benedetta Tagliabue and her team exported the expressive formal idiom which they had used for their projects in Barcelona to this city in north Germany. Their design aims at ‘creating atmosphere’ (Petrow 2008) through a playful treatment of the relationship between water and land, employing piers and pontoons, ramps, stairways and terraces as well as a wide range of sculptural and ornamental elements. Even though EMBT made ample use of brick in their design, the playful and ornamental design idiom was criticized as ‘un-Hanseatic’ (ibid.) and reproached as a “Mediterranean design-disneyland” (Dörting 2008: 73) and not place-specific enough.

At the same time, both the architectural statements as well as the authenticity of HafenCity were seemingly not considered to be distinct enough to be visible to the outsider and to create recognizable images that could secure media attention. Such attention is meant to be achieved by the architectural icons of the Elbphilharmonie and the Science Center. It is argued that the Elbphilharmonie in particular, with its incorporation of an historic warehouse in the design, constitutes ‘a perfect symbol for Hamburg’ (Hafen City Hamburg GmbH 2010c) by ‘combining port architecture and architectural creativity’ (ibid.). The necessity of these iconic

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<sup>1</sup> „Die Chance, ein so riesiges und citynahes Areal zu gestalten, ist ein Jahrhundertereignis. Aber die Häuser am Dalmannkai sind nicht typisch für den Standort: eng gestellte, architektonische Einzelmeinungen, das Material sehr bunt: Gelbklinker, Rotklinker, weißer Putz. Ein völlig unhamburgisches Sammelsurium“.



buildings is explained by their ability to represent the significance of the HafenCity with regard to outsiders, as the current building director Jörn Walter states clearly:

‘HafenCity needs such flagship projects to show what it constitutes for Hamburg also to the outsider. It needs special uses and special architecture for the most prominent locations. This can’t be day-to-day business, because these flagship projects shape the future image of Hamburg<sup>2</sup>’ (Walter 2008: 38; translation by the author).

Thus, the HafenCity Hamburg GmbH in its promotion of the project – at least partially – emphasizes the project’s authenticity and its incorporation of original port infrastructure and at the same time uses iconic buildings – most importantly the Elbphilharmonie – to gain attention and secure distinctiveness of the project.

## Conclusions

HafenCity is being developed as a compact, urban structure with a few iconic elements. Without doubt, the urban design framework of HafenCity in its flexible, phasing logic is advanced and can be considered as the state-of-the-art in large-scale urban development. Additionally, the question of sustainability and technological innovation ranges high in the development of HafenCity. Nevertheless, the Hamburg master plan is also criticized as being too traditionalistic and lacking innovation by some voices in the planning community and has seemingly not created much enthusiasm among citizens.

The above cited discussions and evaluations of the project document how the debates relating to the architecture of HafenCity are very much centered on the notion of place-specificity. Interestingly, the lines of argument are not predictable: It is the heterogeneity of the architectural statements which has drawn critique, even though the small plot size and the density were explicitly meant to foster the urban character of the quarter. This critique has recently led to a revision of the design framework for HafenCity: the remaining quarters are now made to consider allegedly place-specific elements of the city’s urban fabric to a higher extent, most importantly by adopting brick facades which have over decades constituted the most typical image of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. This shows that the high quality of the individual design solutions in the case of HafenCity is not sufficient to secure cohesiveness in the eyes of the public, strategic concessions are made to enhance the place-specific character of the new urban spaces.

In this aspect, however, the case of HafenCity also demonstrates what constitutes a challenge for contemporary architecture and design in general: to create modern urban spaces that meet people’s needs for identification and affiliation without employing historicist and neo-

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<sup>2</sup> „Die HafenCity braucht solche Leuchtturmprojekte, um das, was sie für Hamburg darstellt, auch nach außen zu zeigen. Sie braucht an den prominenten Standorten besondere Nutzungen und besondere Architekturen. Das darf kein Tagesgeschäft sein, denn diese „Leuchttürme“ prägen das künftige Bild von Hamburg“.

traditionalist design idioms. Ultimately, the question of how to make an UMP distinguishable from other projects and uniquely identified with the particular city is also a political decision. Which architectural elements are presented and interpreted as place-specific or, alternatively, as presenting global standards, and how they are used to criticize or promote UMPs remains, ultimately, very much dependent on the local context and its planning history.

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