

HafenCity - the genesis of an idea

The idea of a new inner-city district was conceived soon after the fall of the Wall and the Iron Curtain. Before publication of the blueprint for HafenCity, the Masterplan, in 2000, important fundamentals had already been put in place in the 1990s



The periphery of the port - shown here before construction of the Hanseatic Trade Center - was an unused port area for decades and was separated from the city by a customs fence until 2003 (© Source: HafenCity Hamburg GmbH)

On February 29, 2000, Hamburg's Senate made history by giving its approval to the Masterplan for the new inner-city district of HafenCity. It was on this date at the latest that, after almost ten years of preparation, a decisive, metaphorical "foundation stone" for its realization was laid.

The chance to transform the edges of the port around the city center was partially perceived back in the 1990s. Hamburg's role in Europe improved dramatically with the fall of the Wall and the Iron Curtain: from being a city on the easternmost edge of the Western World, it has become the metropolitan heart of a continent growing together again, and a place with enormous potential. This opened up the way for Hamburg to become a crucial hub in Central Europe. Connections with Northern Europe were also being upgraded and the whole Baltic Sea area grew enormously in significance. This process gave Hamburg huge potential for development - but it had to be exploited quickly, to prevent other competing regions from overtaking.

It was 1991 when the city's former first mayor, Henning Voscherau, unofficially commissioned a study to look into the transformation of the inner-city port fringes. Port capacity had been built up south of the River Elbe, which had left centrally sited areas on the north banks of the river either idle or under-used, since they were unsuitable for container operations. To begin with, just a handful of people were in on the project: if Voscherau's plans had become known too early, there would have been resistance in the port industry as well as resistance to the acquisition of buildings or companies - which would have raised the stakes in terms of cost.

Under this cloak of discretion, then, the city was able to take control of crucial parts of the area, since although the majority of the land belonged to Hamburg, the buildings on it mostly belonged to private businesses. Buildings and companies were acquired through the then 100% Hamburg-owned Hamburger Hafen und Lagerhausgesellschaft mbH (now HHLA Hafen und Logistik AG) and its 100% city-owned subsidiary, founded in 1995, GHS Gesellschaft für Hafen- und Standortentwicklung (since 2004, HafenCity Hamburg GmbH). HHLA's former chairman, Peter Dietrich, played a key role.

The first study on the urban regeneration of the port peripheries, then still confidential, was commissioned from the well-known Hamburg architect, Professor Volkwin Marg. The study he presented in December 1996 laid out many of the development principles that are now taking effect in the new part of town - for example the urban structure and the principle of mixed uses.

Then, on May 7, 1997, Henning Voscherau finally presented "Vision HafenCity", as it stood then, to the public. In a speech in Hamburg's Übersee Club, he made the case for the inner city to regain its waterfront; at that time this only applied to a few sections (primarily the River Elbe embankment in

Altona, between Fischmarkt and Museumshafen), a process initiated by the then City Planning Director, Professor Egbert Kossak. Yet at that stage, it only affected comparatively narrow sections right on the riverfront. Now, however, an area of around 157 hectares was to be developed into an upmarket inner-city district with mixed residential, work, cultural and leisure uses.

Particular political legitimation for the removal of the HafenCity area from the Port of Hamburg was provided by the simultaneous establishment of a special fund under public law to hold "city and port" assets, public land in the ownership of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. The burden of financing the new, state-of-the-art container terminal at Altenwerder was also transferred to this special fund; the original intention was that this should also be financed out of the proceeds of sales of land. Thus, the HafenCity development and the special fund under public law were to finance not only the inner-city HafenCity project and its accompanying infrastructure, but also the modern port facility at Altenwerder, for which no funds were set aside in the city budget. This also provided the political legitimation for removing the HafenCity area from the confines of port territory, without coming into conflict with the port industry.

An urban planning ideas competition (draft masterplan) for HafenCity was launched at the end of April 1999 and, after intensive initial studies in 1997 and 1998 carried out by Hamburg authorities and GHS (Gesellschaft für Hafen und Standortentwicklung), the decision was announced on October 2, 1999. The winner, declared by an international jury, was Hamburgplan, a Dutch-German team with Kees Christiaanse / ASTOC. The Masterplan, which amounted to the formulation of the urban redevelopment plan for HafenCity, was then approved by the Hamburg Senate on February 29, 2000. The Masterplan was subsequently opened up to public discussion through a series of exhibitions and other events.

Already set in stone in the Masterplan was the intensive interaction between existing and new buildings and the water, the elevation of buildings as a flood protection concept, the public character of many ground-floor uses, and the fine-grained mix of uses. Also detailed in the plan was the development of the various neighborhoods within HafenCity and their successive realization into the 2020s. The Masterplan also enunciated the goal of making HafenCity the figurehead for a new business, social, cultural and urban economic breakthrough: what took shape in HafenCity would leave its stamp on Hamburg's city center for many decades - not to mention the coming century. The new city district therefore not only had to be futuristic, it was also to develop as a model for the European inner city of the 21st century. At the same time, the Masterplan was flexible enough to be highly adaptable to any future changes that might affect the development process.

