A high-rise icon for Hamburg

Following the opening of the world-famous Elbphilharmonie, Germany’s second-largest city aims to welcome another outstanding building.

A grand finale and a soaring overture: The Elbtower proposed by SIGNA Prime Selection AG and David Chipperfield Architects (Berlin) would not only bring Hamburg’s internationally renowned HafenCity to a majestic conclusion, but also herald the development of exciting new urban areas. At 235 meters in height, the tower would add yet another landmark building to Germany’s second-largest city – which only celebrated the opening of the famous Herzog & de Meuron-designed Elbphilharmonie concert hall in January 2017 – if the proposal is approved by the Hamburg Parliament. With a gross floor area of over 100,000 square meters, the Elbtower would offer new office space with spectacular views and excellent transportation links. A broad variety of usages including a hotel, bars, restaurants as well as retail and exhibition space would be accommodated in the publicly accessible base of the tower. Scheduled for construction in 2021, the project would underline Hamburg’s thriving urban development and strong market position.

A growing reputation

Hamburg enjoys a growing national and international reputation, ranking second out of all European cities in the 2017 edition of the prestigious Emerging Trends in Real Estate rankings published by the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC). Office market reports confirm that a new record was set in 2017: According to real estate agents Großmann & Berger, around 640,000 m² of office space were let to new tenants – 16 percent more than in the previous year. Figures published by Jones Lang Lasalle show the office vacancy rate to have dropped to 4.8% – its lowest level since 2002. The current dynamic on the market for rental offices in Hamburg indicates that demand is set to remain high, with Großmann & Berger forecasting a drop in supply from as early as 2018. The trend is also positive where growth in prime and average rents is concerned.

“The strength of the Elbtower brand will have a positive effect on such trends,” explains Prof. Jürgen Bruns-Berental, Chairman of the Executive Board of HafenCity Hamburg GmbH. He believes the whole city will benefit from the project: “Attractive, diverse usage mixes and exceptional architectural concepts are set to strengthen Hamburg’s positive growth prospects over the long term.” Speaking at the unveiling of Chipperfield’s design in early February, Hamburg’s Mayor Olaf Scholz was not just delighted to be announcing plans for yet another landmark building: “It is equally important that we have been able to find a private developer whose solid financial foundation and extensive experience of similarly complex projects put them in a position to ensure successful project implementation.”

Kindred spirits: The Elbtower seen from the west with the Elbphilharmonie rising majestically in front (Picture Credit © DCA/picture alliance/Christian Charisius/dpa)

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Developer SIGNA Prime Selection AG can claim to be one of the largest real estate corporations in Europe, with a current portfolio of 23 trophy properties and a gross asset value of some 8.5 billion Euros. “Our project goal is to create a place that appeals to and unites the whole of society by blending spatial and functional structures that cater to a diverse range of workplaces and users,” explains board member Timo Herzberg. David Chipperfield Architects gained international acclaim for the reconstruction of the Neues Museum in Berlin. Current projects include the Neue Nationalgalerie in Stockholm.

**An attractive neighborhood**

The Elbtower would add to a long list of attractions in one of the most vibrant quarters of HafenCity. Designed as a dense urban neighborhood with innovative buildings and trend-setting uses, the Elbbrücken quarter is set to complete the redevelopment of Hamburg’s former port area by 2025-2030. A high-rise building overlooking the river Elbe and several harbor basins has always been part of the vision for this quarter of the easternmost tip of HafenCity. Public transport connections are excellent, with a new interlinked subway and rapid transit station set to open in December 2018. In addition to close proximity to the main thoroughway between Hamburg and nearby highways, users of the quarter will also benefit from an innovative, sustainable mobility concept covering all of eastern HafenCity. The design for open spaces drawn up by Atelier Lissi (Berlin) foresees the creation of a broad promenade along the waterfront and a grand central square.

**Strong demand**

Given all this, it can be no surprise that development sites in Elbbrücken are in high demand, with exclusive options already granted for five plots. The proposed projects will provide a variety of companies with a dynamic and inspiring working environment, and include Germany’s first wooden high-rise building, a large innovative healthcare institution, the new, highly sustainable headquarters of a solar energy firm (including flexible niches for start-ups), and a rental bike station and a “Switchh” point offering a variety of car-sharing options will make the Elbbrücken a major new transport hub that will also be of significant importance to the adjoining urban development areas of Elbbrücken and Grasbrook. The designs for open spaces drawn up by Atelier Lissi (Berlin) foresees the creation of a broad promenade along the waterfront and a grand central square.

**Public transport is key**

Public transport and cycling are on the rise throughout central Hamburg. In the case of HafenCity, the implementation of a new, innovative mobility concept blending excellent public transport links with a range of other sustainable options such as car, bicycle, car sharing and e-mobility is already under way. One vital element of this concept is the opening of a new subway station designed by Gerkan, Marg and Partner (gmp) in Elbbrücken in December 2018. The building’s architecture – and in particular its sweeping roof resembling a mesh of steel girders clad in shimmering glass rhombi – has already become a popular photo opportunity in its own right. In addition to the subway station, Deutsche Bahn is building a new rapid transit station that will be connected to the subway station by a glass bridge. As a result, the new subway that connects HafenCity with Hamburg’s central station and the city center will be linked to the S5 – the most heavily used rapid transit service in the city. Additional bus stops, a rental bike station, and a “Switchh” point offering a variety of car-sharing options will make the Elbbrücken a new transport hub that will also be of significant importance to the adjoining urban development areas of Elbbrücken and Grasbrook. The new subway and rapid transit station will start operating in December 2018 (Picture Credit: gmp).

**Connecting the dots**: The Elbtower will link Hamburg’s soon-to-be-completed HafenCity to the new urban development areas of Billebogen and Grasbrook (Picture Credit: Atelier Lissi / David Chipperfield Architects).
“The Elbtower needs the urban fabric around it”

Without urban surroundings the Elbtower would be a bad idea, but once HafenCity has developed as far as the Elbrücken, it will make perfectly sense, says architect Christoph Felger.

When crossing the Elbrücken into Hamburg over the last few years, did you ever think to yourself “The city needs a high rise building here”? To tell you the truth: No, I did not. After all, you can hardly see the building site from either the road or the rail bridge. I believe the location’s true strength will only become tangible once the development of HafenCity and the neighboring areas has reached a more advanced stage – because the Elbtower needs to be embedded into that urban fabric. The link to the new transport hub would also play a vital role.

It was only in 2017 that Hamburg welcomed a new architectural icon in the shape of the Elphilharmonie. Were you inspired – or intimidated – by it during the design process?

The Elphilharmonie must undoubtedly be regarded as Hamburg’s most iconic building – and that will continue to be the case for many, many years to come. We spent quite some time deliberating the tower’s attitude in that respect. We didn’t want it to be too shy, but we obviously didn’t want it to be too brash either. In the end, we come up with this design. I’m very taken by its subtle elegance and ease of interaction, by its symbolic gesture towards both the city and the concert hall. I would say it maintains a respectful distance without standing in awe of its peers. If you study our design in detail, you will find we have included some exaggerated concave forms that clearly demonstrate how we were inspired by the Herzog & de Meuron building.

So Hamburg and HafenCity could become home to two architectural icons after all?

Yes, I think the Elbtower would become an icon. Not as a result of its height alone, but also because of its own unmistakable character. And anyway, why should Hamburg not have more than one landmark building of international standing? Just look at how lively HafenCity is already becoming. I must admit that I was quite skeptical at the start. In particular, I thought the Masterplan allowed for too many individual buildings aspiring for signature architecture. But look at what the mixed-use concept has already brought to HafenCity. In the long run, I’m certain it will become a great addition to a wonderful city.

The next steps

The project proposal submitted by SIGNA/DCA was selected by an interdisciplinary jury at the end of January further to an intensive architectural competition and contract negotiations that began in November 2017. In addition to quality in terms of urban planning and architecture, jury’s selection was also largely informed by financial reliability and feasibility. All of the eight designs considered will be on display at an exhibition at HafenCity Information Center Kesselhaus from March 3rd through March 18th. Sir David Chipperfield will open the exhibition with a talk on architectural design at 6 p.m. on March 2nd. The development contract is set to be put before the Hamburg Parliament for its approval in spring 2018.