HafenCity is one of the biggest ambitious and high-profile inner-city schemes in the world. In Hamburg’s year as European Green Capital its performance is even more in the spotlight

Since HafenCity Hamburg’s beginnings a decade ago, international observers have been following its development closely. The sheer size of this large-scale development (157 hectares) and its location both directly in the city centre and on the edges of the River Elbe have certainly contributed to this. But it is the unique conception of HafenCity that seems to attract urban experts – investors, developers, scholars and city dwellers – around the globe: a careful mix of many different uses, a highly urban atmosphere, a good public transport system and an effective public administration of the whole process. In recent times, investors from abroad have started to take an active part in the development. Amongst several international investors already present in HafenCity is Sweden’s largest public property owners from abroad have started to take an active part in the development.

The eastern quarters will go into development from 2012 and the western part with the Elbphilharmonie concert hall (far left) has been largely completed, the central part is largely under construction or secured by sales and obligations to build. The eastern quarters will get full development from 2023.

The City of Hamburg is situated between the Alster lakes to the north and the River Elbe (foreground). The north down town HafenCity stretches along the mainland for 3.1 kilometres. The western part with the Elbphilharmonie concert hall (far left) has been largely completed, the central part is largely under construction or secured by sales and obligations to build.

Up to the worldwide standard? HafenCity in the international perspective

by Brian Baker (London)
And it seems that the Free and Hanseatic City was a good student. In 2009 a report by global real estate services provider CBRE assessed redevelopment efforts in port cities. CBRE found that HafenCity scored well on the two most important attributes for success – strong public sector support and good transport connectivity.

CBRE Senior Analyst Helen Gray says getting transport right is key: “It is obvious if it is done badly or there is an obstacle such as the highways at Toronto’s waterfront and Liverpool’s Albert Dock. If it is done well, it is less noticeable but very important to bring people into the area.”

As for public sector support, the development process of HafenCity is administered with great care to benefit the whole of the city (e.g. by conceiving public spaces with great quality). At the same time, participation and competition of private developers and users has always been encouraged. For Helen Gray, early successes in place-making were another important result of the process. The public sector support stimulated actively the mix of uses and public realm attractions to go on, she says. “They have also used architecture to good effect with a range of styles which creates interest amongst the local population.”

CBRE have applied the approach more widely and produced ten top essential place making elements in a 2011 report called “The Essential Link Between Design and Profit.” All of these elements have been important in HafenCity’s Masterplan and delivery. “To maximise value in large schemes, particularly in challenging locations, the fundamental aim for developers must be to make a place in which people want to live,” says Helen Gray. At the beginning of 2011, another report by the market research and analysis firm BilwierGesa evaluated the performance of inner city areas in Germany with regard to their chances of success for long-term real estate investment. HafenCity was rated the best new inner-city development location and scored as high as the traditional city centres of Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich and Hamburg. Recent deals include the acquisition of the Centurion Center, a building for mid-size firms, shops and restaurants in the Am Sandtorpark/Grasbrook neighbourhood, by the big German investment fund Union Investment. Union Investment Real Estate GmbH Senior Manager Dr Frank Billand says, “HafenCity is one of Europe’s most striking urban developments, featuring a vibrant mix of business, living, leisure and culture. The quality and architectural variety of the new buildings underline the development’s positioning as a prestigious office address. The Centurion Center thus represents a highly promising investment for Union Investment and its European open-ended real estate fund.” The benefits for the organisational and policy approach taken by Hamburg’s HafenCity were recognised in a 2010 OECD report on Organising Local Economic Development. It said that as a consequence of its diverse structure and flexible capabilities HafenCity was as well prepared for a market downturn as it was possible to be – and much more so than many large-scale international projects. In fact, HafenCity managed to get well through the recent global crisis in the financial and real estate markets. In the international perspective, it thus stands as one of the most promising inner-city waterfront projects to be found. This has also been reflected by leading international media such as the New York Times and CNN. In the series “Future cities”, CNN aired four films about Hamburg in 2010. Covering HafenCity extensively, it pointed out the significance of landscape architecture like the Elphiharmonie concert hall as well as the highly sustainable development strategies. “HafenCity has the potential to reinvent Hamburg on the world stage,” the report concluded.

**INTERVIEW**

**“A 21st century test case for planned urbanity”**

Loretta Lees is Professor of Human Geography at King’s College, University of London. She has published extensively on public space, architecture, gentrification and social mixing. She is co-organiser of the Urban Salon, a London-based forum for architecture, cities and international urbanism

**HafenCity News:** Highlight the principal strengths of the HafenCity process so far?

Loretta Lees: Notable strengths to date include the complex juxtaposition of residential, retail, commercial and leisure, both horizontally across the neighbourhoods and vertically within individual buildings, and the close attention to not just mixed-use but social mixing of people of different ages and stage of life and of people from different ethnic groups and sexual orientation.

**HafenCity News:** Is HafenCity more likely to succeed than some of the other current large master-planned new districts around the world?

Loretta Lees: The CEO Jurgen Bruns-Berentiegl is a trained urban geographer with a depth of knowledge about critical urban theory. He is familiar with the work of many leading academics in this field including Iris Marion Young and Henri Lefebvre. This is unusual, perhaps unique, amongst top executives in development schemes. The process in HafenCity is taking account of complaints from critical urbanists about sanitised, privatised, uni-cultural and anti-social developments. We have an intellectual at the helm. I think that’s why it might potentially succeed.

**HafenCity News:** You have said urbanity is “an ambivalent and contradic- tory” process. Why do you think that “planned urbanity” might work in HafenCity?

Loretta Lees: Until a population has been embedded for some time it is impossible to make a judgment. In many ways HafenCity will be a 21st century test case for planned urbanity. My gut feeling has always been that social mixing and anti-social developments will not work down the line but there has been such great attention to detail in HafenCity that it may prove me and others wrong. ... the risk now is that the effect of the financial cri- sis on developers and investors may lead to the disappearance of some of the conceptual ideas down the line. If all the residents are middle class or upper class, you won’t get mixing in the true sense.

**HafenCity News:** HafenCity tries to make sure that diverse uses and peo- ple co-exist in the area with very comprehensive schemes including the complex issues of social mixing. But perhaps exceptionally good U-Bahn connectivity is more likely to be a key driver towards an evolving urban feel than more direct social engineering interventions. What do you think?

Loretta Lees: Residents in HafenCity will automatically gain spatial capital due to the location so close to the existing city centre and the doorstep availability of sustainable mobility in the form of U-Bahn, walking and cycling. The U-Bahn will bring in more people from other parts of Hamburg and visitors to the city and further stimulate social mixing. The mobility is set there with the design as a hope- ful element for the new district.

**HafenCity News:** What are the weak- nesses in the development process in HafenCity?

Loretta Lees: The issue of social class. There is little discussion of this in Germany by policy makers and academics. Social class issues would have been raised more quickly in France, the Netherlands and the UK. The inclusion of the very poorest sections of society in the district is the principal challenge. Given the charges about gentrification from anti-gentrification activists in Ham- burg and elsewhere, the development needs to be more upfront about the ideas from critical urba- nism which underpin it and very clear about giving everyone their place in HafenCity.