

The *Elbphilharmonie*-Project in discussion: critical voices from Hamburg

A short insight into the current local debate

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The *Elbphilharmonie* was supposed to become the crowning highlight of Hamburg's large-scale project *HafenCity*, meant to set a new cultural landmark. However, at the beginning of 2012, the spectacular Philharmonic remains rather a vision than architectural reality and the project is discussed locally less as a "lighthouse project" and more as a "problem child".

Hamburg, Germany. The Hanseatic town with its 1,8 million inhabitants (ca. 4,3 million for the entire metropolitan area) is currently the third biggest city in the country – so far widely known for its port, the *Reeperbahn*, its soccer club FC St. Pauli and its numerous musicals. Above all, Hamburg is Germany's „Gateway to the World“. Set in a geographically advantageous position, the inland container port is economically of international importance and in continuous development. The multicultural city offers a wide range of culture and leisure time facilities. Like most of the cities in Germany, Hamburg is deeply in debt, and, in particular, the household budget for culture and education suffers from continuous cuts of public authorities/funds. Nevertheless, as a Hanseatic town, private patronage has a strong tradition and local millionaires and foundations can be attracted for sponsorship of prestigious projects. The best example is Hamburg's *Elbphilharmonie*, as ambitious crowning of the large-scale project *HafenCity* which was started in 1997.

Hamburg's motto is that of the „growing city“. In course of this urban development policy, the new *HafenCity* which is built on former port territory south of the heritage-protected *Speicherstadt* is going to extend the city about 40% of its surface area. The *HafenCity* project is currently Europe's biggest inner-city development project. The urban extension will be used for offices, residential, educational, leisure and supply purposes, led by the city government's objective to allow Hamburg to compete internationally for enterprises, visitors and inhabitants under the slogan „urban and maritime“.

Revitalization of the waterfront and the growing number of festivities are typical processes in harbor cities, that happen all over the world, recently, e.g. Sydney, Amsterdam, New York, Barcelona. The word coining "*HafenCity*" (= Harbor City) already expresses the international aspirations of the Hamburg project.

As a crowning highlight of the large-scale HafenCity project, the city was meant to get a new cultural landmark, the Elbphilharmonie, which is supposed to shape the skyline and to turn the Hanseatic City into an international "Music City".

„The Elbphilharmonie not only serves as a beckoning lighthouse for the new HafenCity, but also for

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Figures 1 and 2: *Elbphilharmonie*. Source: authors.

Music City Hamburg”, it is stated at the official project site.

Actually, Hamburg attracts tourists from all over the world, mainly thanks to its international reputation as musical city – high culture musical excellence, however, has been more a niche discipline so far.

When Hamburg project designer Gérard first presented the *Elbphilharmonie* in 2003, a previously hesitating city government as well as Hamburg citizens got thrilled by euphoric sensations, hooked by the idea creating a new spectacular cultural emblem in the dimension of Paris *Eiffel Tower* or the *Sydney Opera*. The confident statements of the architects about the psychological effects of their project: „The citizens of Hamburg are looking for a new interface between the city and the harbour, which will define the city culturally. The *Elbphilharmonie* offers just that”.

The new philharmonic hall which was planned by Swiss architects Pierre de Meuron, Jacques Herzog and Ascan Mergenthaler, is supposed to become a (multi-)functional complex, a “unifying work of art: an exceptional experience of architecture, music and the direct proximity to the water.” Besides the two concert halls, the building provides a parking space, a hotel, 45 residential flats and a panoramic platform at 37m height. The Star-architects von Herzog & de Meuron, who have been responsible for the *Elbphilharmonie* project since 2003, already completed various spectacular large-scale projects on international level like the London Tate Gallery of Modern Art, the Munich Allianz-Arena and the Beijing National Stadium for the 2008 Olympic Games. The *Elbphilharmonie* project in Hamburg now seeks to complete this ambitious series.

The gigantic glass construction intends to join the harbor’s historic face with contemporary architecture: A gigantic wave-shaped curved glass construction is set on top of the fronts of an ancient cocoa storehouse – *gigantic* at least on the animated plans, the final result of the impressive wave-shaped roof is going to be more modest. Since the hotel consumed more space than initially planned, the building had to be raised – but only at one of its sides. Thus, the „huge rough wave-

gorges”, supposed to become the breathtaking main characteristic of the building, had to get relatively flattened and as a result, they will then appear „less huge and less rough”.

In fact, the initial euphoria gave way for frustration for a great part of the local population. Most notably, due to the immense additional costs and the often repeated miscalculations during the construction process the *Elbphilharmonie* has turned into a popular public object of dispute. The public portion of costs of the city of Hamburg, increased from originally planned 77 million to 325 Million Euros, lately. The completion, initially planned for 2009, has been postponed, once more, at the turn of the year: Officially, the completion is envisaged for November 2014 now – unofficially, the year 2015 is already in discussion.

What remains are frustrated citizens and a desperate “intendant without a house”. Unlike the situation in other German cultural institutions, Christoph Lieben-Seutter, who was meant to become the artistic director of the *Elbphilharmonie*, is not fighting against the closing of his house but for its opening - he himself already doubtful of an completion of the concert hall in 2014. Likely, that he won’t have the chance to inaugurate his stage before the expiration of his contract in July 2015.

Regarding the ongoing criticism and frustrations, the architects Herzog and de Mouron recall the initial civil dedication and the early enthusiasm for the project in Hamburg: “[...] with regards to the *Elbphilharmonie* it is psychologically interesting that the project began as an idea that was carried up from the people; it was not imposed upon them from above. Sometimes it’s easy to lose sight of that when reading criticism in the press. But the first virtual pictures impressed people to such an extent that the public and the media exerted enormous pressure on politicians and investors to realize this project.”

Eventually, with its diva-like escapades, the *Elbphilharmonie* will certainly assure its proud throne in the international league of contemporary architecture. In this sense, it’s worth glancing back at the debates around the Sydney Opera House in 1973, for instance: The construction of the opera house took three times



Figures 3 and 4: *Elbphilharmonie*. Source: authors.

as long as originally planned and the building turned 14 times as costly as initially estimated. Back then, confronted with similar public criticism, architect Jörn Utzon argued self-confidently: "Construction costs and construction time? Who would wonder about the Cathedral of Chartres nowadays – it took more than hundred years to build it."

Figures 5 and 6: *Elbphilharmonie*. Source: authors.

Main sources

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