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## A New Face for Hamburg's Harborfront



Oliver Hartung for The New York Times

New buildings along the Elbe are part of the HafenCity project in Hamburg

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FROM the top of a bright orange, 42-foot-tall observation tower, it wasn't much of a stretch to look down at the thousands of amateur runners, all wearing the same white T-shirt as they jogged a four-kilometer route through [Hamburg](#), and imagine them as streams of worker ants, rushing through an enormous, half completed designer colony.

On a brisk Saturday last month, the runners snaked past construction cranes and over bridges and through crowds of strolling local families and tour groups. Some glanced up at the custom-made undulating glass windows of the half-finished Elbphilharmonie building towering above them, but others just ran by it.

The building is the cornerstone of [HafenCity](#), a new district at the site of Hamburg's central harbor on the Elbe River, which is one of the most ambitious urban construction sites in Europe. Though several portions of the district are still unfinished, HafenCity is filled on the weekends with tourists and residents eating at its waterside cafes, enjoying its vast open space and seeking a glimpse of its "starchitect"-designed buildings, 30 of which have been completed.

The spotlight so far has been on the Elbphilharmonie, a 350-million-euro (and counting) project, or more than \$433 million, with a tentative completion date of 2013. Designed by the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron to look like a glass wave cresting atop a brick warehouse, it is at the end of the Am Sandtorkai peninsula, and will eventually house the NDR Symphony Orchestra's concert hall, a five-star hotel and about 60 luxury apartments.

There have been expensive mistakes and delays — all witnessed by visitors drawn as much by its architecture as by its expanding construction costs. But the project, which has exceeded its initial budget by more than 200 million euros and its initial completion date by two years, is slowly taking its eventual shape: a glass wave 12 stories on one side and 18 on the other. When it's finally done, the Elbphilharmonie will be HafenCity's architectural crown jewel.

HafenCity itself won't be finished for another 10 to 15 years. But since 2000, when Hamburg came up with the now nine-billion-euro master plan to transform 388 acres of its vast central harbor into a brand new district, increasing the size of the city center by 40 percent, things have been moving at a steady clip.

Richard Sennett, professor of sociology at New York University and author of "The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities," said of HafenCity recently: "The western part of the project is state of the art and really intelligent. The sustainability is not just window dressing. It's for real. They thought big in a way that makes sense in the future. And they managed to accomplish it by a kind of collective will of the city."

Already Sandtorkai, one of the 10 neighborhoods that will make up HafenCity, is complete; 50 percent of the area is either under construction or ready for it to start. Roughly 1,500 people are already living in HafenCity, and about 6,000 people are commuting to work there.

While the Elbphilharmonie is HafenCity's architectural diva, there are plenty of other buildings to see. [Richard Meier](#) recently built the Hamburg-America-Center, a building with a curved glass facade within the Grasbrook quarter. The Erick van Egeraat-designed Waterfront Towers in the southern end of the Überseequartier feature dramatic facades that look as though they are made of jagged glass and natural stone puzzle pieces. (Next door will be HafenCity's first hotel, the seafarer-themed 25 Hours, due to open next March.)

On the other side of HafenCity, in the Brooktorkai neighborhood, will be the architectural bookend to the Elbphilharmonie: the new headquarters of the Spiegel publishing group and a little sister building called the Ericus-Contor. Designed by the Danish architect Henning Larsen, the two U-shaped, gleaming glass buildings will be visible from Hamburg's main train station.

Already finished is the Unilever headquarters and the neighboring Marco Polo Tower, both conceived by Behnisch Architekten, a German firm known for its environmentally friendly designs. Both projects are by the water on the southeast corner of the Strandkai neighborhood near the Cruise Center and the observation tower; the Unilever building looks like an airy seven-story glass cruise ship, and the Marco

Polo building, which is home to some of HafenCity's most exclusive multimillion-euro apartments, is like an abstract flower-shaped tower surrounded by petal-like balconies.

Martin Haas, a partner in Behnisch Architekten, who oversaw both buildings, said that in the end, what is truly important to the people who live and use the HafenCity is not the splashy designer architecture but instead, "the spaces in between the buildings." He added: "And in the HafenCity you find a lot of quality public spaces. You can see how important the urban planners understood the importance of that by seeing how much money was spent on designing public spaces."

One can experience the importance of HafenCity's public spaces firsthand by strolling from the Magellan Terraces, to the Elbphilharmonie and along Am Kaiserkai to the Unilever building and the surrounding Marco Polo Terraces. The success of the Magellan Terraces, two plazas by the water's edge designed by the Spanish architect Benedetta Tagliabue of EMBT Arquitectes, was clear just from the number of children skateboarding along its edges.

Along that same route one can also see the importance of destination-worthy little cafes and restaurants. Next door to the Elbphilharmonie, and always buzzing, is the cozy Carls, a bistro where you can get little bites, from homemade quiche to cakes, throughout the day. On a sunny day it's almost impossible to find an outdoor table at the Kaiser Perle, an Art Deco style cafe built into a decorative brick wall along Am Kaiserkai. Not far away, families happily wait in line for cones at a Häagen-Dazs shop.

The best reason to walk across the length of HafenCity toward the train station is to have an excellent meal at the quirky and crooked Oberhafen Kantine, a relic of the harbor's working past, in the middle of what feels like an industrial no man's land.

Once a simple seafarer's cafeteria, the kitchen has been taken over by one of Hamburg's best chefs, Thorsten Gillert, who has retained many of the traditional dishes (like Labskaus, a hearty mix of corned beef, herring, potatoes and beets) but has taken the ingredients up several notches.

This little culinary gem is in the center of what is designated to be HafenCity's creative center. Unlike the area's other neighborhoods, where most real estate was sold for high profit margins to major corporations or developers, some of the old warehouses and industrial spaces here in the Oberhafen will be kept and leased to art-related associations and projects.

Across the Elbe and beyond the train tracks stands an old warehouse that once stored fruits and vegetables shipped in from other exotic ports. The building is now owned by Marc van den Broek, and it is a storage spot for artwork instead of bananas. Mr. van den Broek, an artist and entrepreneur who recently sold a building and moved from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is familiar with the value of industrial neighborhoods on the edge.

From his stylish office at the top of the building, Mr. van den Broek has been observing HafenCity as it grows. He, like many of the local residents, swings back and forth with his opinion about the project. On the more cynical side, he jokes that so far the site seems to benefit only the wealthy. "The only attraction in the HafenCity if you live there, is the tourists coming on buses to see where you live and to say, 'That guy must have a lot of money if he can afford to live here.'"

On the other hand, Mr. van den Broek said that even if the Elbphilharmonie ended up costing a billion euros, most people would eventually end up not caring, even if much of it comes from public financing.

“The Parisians also thought that the Eiffel Tower would cost too much,” he said. “In 20 years, after the Elbphilharmonie is finally done, no one will consider it a waste of money anymore.”

## IF YOU GO

### WHERE TO STAY

Around the corner from Hamburg’s Reeperbahn and a 10-minute walk from [HafenCity](#), the three-year-old **Empire Riverside Hotel** (Bernhard-Nocht-Strasse 97; 49-40-31-11-9-0 [www.empire-riverside.de](http://www.empire-riverside.de)) was designed by David Chipperfield. Ask for a room above the 10th floor for better views.

Closer yet to HafenCity is a sister property, **Hafen Hamburg** (Seewartenstrasse 9; 49-40-31-11-3-0; [www.hotel-hafen-hamburg.de](http://www.hotel-hafen-hamburg.de)), a 353-room hotel perched over the harbor.

### WHERE TO EAT

**Carls** (Am Kaiserkai 69; 49-40-300-322-400; [www.carls-brasserie.de](http://www.carls-brasserie.de)) is a bistro and brasserie that offers French dishes as well as an excellent view of the Elbphilharmonie.

The **Kaiser Perle** (Am Kaiserkai 47; 49-40-300-688-95; [www.kaiserperle.de](http://www.kaiserperle.de)) is a friendly cafe that’s open only when the weather is good. If it’s not open, walk a minute to **Kaisers** (Am Kaiserkai 23; 49-40-36091790; [www.kaisers-hamburg.de](http://www.kaisers-hamburg.de)), which like Kaiser Perle (it has the same owners) serves good coffee and international daily specials.

The **Oberhafen Kantine** (Stockmeyerstrasse 39; [www.oberhafenkantine-hamburg.de](http://www.oberhafenkantine-hamburg.de)) was once a sailors’ cafe but was taken over a few years ago by the Hamburg chef Thorsten Gillert, who kept most of the rustic local dishes while improving the ingredients. The tiny, crooked two-story building is worth the effort to find (it’s in an industrial site).

### WHAT TO DO

There are free tours in English every Saturday leaving from the HafenCity InfoCenter at the **Kesselhaus** (Am Sandtorkai 30; 49-40-36901-799). There are also guided tours in English on demand for groups, which must be booked in advance.