

## The north-south divide: making the leap across the Elbe

10 August, 2013 By Peter Sheard

By examining Hamburg's international building and garden shows taking place on Wilhelmsburg, Peter Sheard questions whether a similar strategy can be adopted to confront London's space problems

Hamburg is a city defined by water. Its history and its harbours pay testament to the waterways that run through them; in particular the river Elbe, which acts as an artery, a barrier and a threat. It is also a Rubicon, across which most of the city's prosperous dwellers rarely cross. South of the river has connotations: check out any tourist map of the city and it will not show what exists below the north bank of the Elbe.

What does exist is Europe's largest river island, Wilhelmsburg, a 35km<sup>2</sup> patchwork of communities, docks, farmland and floodplains and home to 50,000 people, most of whom are immigrants with distinctive cultures and more than 100 different nationalities. For years, the island has been perceived as a problem: economically deprived, socially fragmented, and environmentally scarred with declining old industries and a tendency to flooding.

Paradoxically, the quandary for Hamburg is that it is bursting at the seams and physically constrained, with very limited choices as to where to expand. South is about the only choice. As a result, in 2004 the city announced the 'Leap across the Elbe', a programme to create a new exemplar community which both reinvigorates Wilhelmsburg while setting a benchmark for other challenged areas.

Key to this 'leap' has been the adoption over the last six years of a major International Building Exhibition (IBA) and a supporting International Garden Show (IGS).

More than 60 IBA projects aim to push boundaries of design and innovation in architecture and urban planning, while promoting social and environmental evolution. Their ambition is defined by three themes: safeguarding the climate, encouraging cultural diversity, and making 'new spaces for the city' – the so-called 'metrozones'. These metrozones represent the most overt indicators of change and are focused on the non-spaces of the city: those ill-designated peripheral zones which are well connected and diverse, yet neglected.

One of the most transformational moves has been to demolish many of the harbour walls and reconnect people with the water. This is most potently seen at the Spreehaven on the island's northern edge where the old dock is being changed into an equivalent of the Inner Alster, the lake at the heart of Hamburg.



The GLA 2020 Vision predicts London will reach a population of 8.2 million in 2016 and both they and the Mayor are pushing for boundaries to be challenged to 'invest and build, innovate and create'. One of the most topical and pressing issues is the question of airport expansion and the choice between east (estuary) and west (Heathrow) is fundamental to the city's decision as to where to expand.

The mayor is pretty clear on his attitude, seeing a four-hub airport as essential. So, if one assumes that an estuary airport becomes a logical reality, there could be a shift in the centre of gravity of London to the east, which could allow Newham, its hinterlands, and the Royal Docks in particular, to provide a unique area of redevelopment and growth for the next 20 years.

This would require a complete upgrade in ambition for the Docks from its present manifestation as low-rise housing and exhibition space. The leap here would be to relocate City Airport to the estuary, thereby removing many development constraints (not least building height), and as an alternative locate the main terminal at the Docks linked to Canary Wharf, Greenwich, the City and out east to the estuary. The terminal could then become the heart of the most ambitious airport hub in Europe and the gateway to the UK. As such, the Docks could begin to trade again and embody the 'neo-Victorian surge of investment in mass transport' envisaged by the GLA.



At Wilhelmsburg itself, the main concentration of new IBA buildings show how a previously fragmented community can be reconstructed and given a new heart. Dominating the area is the new state ministry building with its curving, striped facade, a new angular landscape bridge and station, and a groups of exemplar housing such as the multi-flexible, camouflaged Hybrid Houses – a series of water houses showing how carbon-neutral homes can be located in flood zones – and the BIQ house with its biochemical facade of algae-filled glass panels.

Parts of the IBA seem a bit scattered, random, with some of the innovation and experimentation veering very close to gimmickry. The danger of this approach is that what is produced is a collection of exemplar architectural pieces, or little enclaves of improvement, which do little beyond their own narrow remit. But overall Hamburg's IBA is about breaking down barriers, which it does very successfully.

The most dramatic symbol of Wilhelmsburg's renaissance is the International Garden Show, the new Inselpark for a 'mobile, multicultural, health-conscious society'. The concept of a 'park for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' is a clever move. Hamburg has had three post-war garden festivals which have left a glorious legacy of parks, so the idea of its extension onto the island works on many levels.

Seventy million euros can provide a lot of park, but many of the IBA principles pervade the park's planning, including the 100 hectares of open space designed to accommodate a number of existing *Kleingarten* (high-end allotments), which lay out a journey through landscape art, plant diversity and environments themed with religions, water, sports and nature. International influences abound with 80 Jules Verne-inspired gardens reflecting Hamburg's diversity – all entertaining festival material.

The shipping container gardens and plazas are fun and iconic; the baroque water gardens with solar-powered geysers and fountains made of taps and sinks are memorable; colourful Buddhist iconography woven around existing trees is delightful; and a calm stone filled garden filled with steel rods on which balance shards of slate is arresting.

In the same tradition as the *Kleingarten*, the theme of wellbeing dominates the long-term aspirations of Inselpark. Activity is promoted with the main flower hall, which doubles as north Germany's largest indoor swimming pool. And there are sculptural climbing walls, skateparks and high wire gardens.

Human ecology is supplemented by environment restoration – particularly the site's canals and lakes, which have been enhanced with new biotopes and hydraulics. Indeed, some of the most memorable images of the park are the reconfigured waterways with their floating platforms and reed beds; the refurbished 1911 waterworks transformed with terraces and gardens sloping down to the water; and the playful activity gardens with their aqua football pitch and surreal golf course.

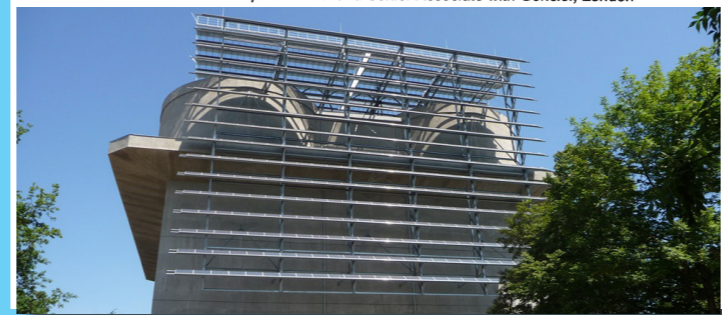
So what can other cities learn from Hamburg? Certainly, it is not the only city trying to come to terms with the vagaries of economic change and inequality. Take London and the barrier-effect of the Thames, in particular the Royal Docks where the legacy of its trading past still presents more problems than solutions. This is a 'metrozone' if there ever was one. Even more so than Hamburg, London needs to grow and it is similarly constrained. Perhaps a 'leap' is required here also.



Unlike Hamburg, the slate is pretty clean at the Docks, and residential development could be dense and tall with significant buildings reaching down to and along a new Embankment extending beyond an upgraded Thames Barrier. Like Hamburg, the focus for the new community should be a grand park, a green lung for the whole of East London. The opportunities for innovative design are endless in terms of park design, architecture, urban design and transport engineering, among many other disciplines. And an IBA-like exhibition could help promote, guide and communicate the efforts.

One of the most impressive aspects of Hamburg's IBA and IGS programmes is that they reach out to communities that are most affected by change but at the same time have the most to gain, resulting in a significant degree of political support and consistency. This would be essential at the Docks. But it is the comprehensiveness of the 'Leap across the Elbe' that could well prove to be its truest and most potent legacy, best exemplified by its environmental and public realm gestures. Wilhelmsburg will be known for the quality of its parks, its watersides as well as its vibrancy and multiculturalism – a community that has addressed its past and become part of the Hamburg metropolis, yet is still its own place. Perception is key. The 'leap' doesn't have to be only physical, it can be psychological too.

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