

## **The Warehouse City of Hamburg: Constructing the narrative(s) of the urban heritage**

Constantin Canavas, Prof. Dr.-Ing.  
Hamburg University of Applied Sciences

### **Abstract**

Urban heritage in the form of buildings perceived as iconic symbols of economic or manufacturing activities reflects the assessment of these activities in a given society – an assessment which is subjected to changes during historically specified periods of transition. The present study exemplifies this issue by focusing on the Warehouses of Hamburg from the perspective of the history of art and technology.

A major claim of the study is that the red-brick architectonic complex known as the Warehouse City (*Speicherstadt*) of Hamburg was erected in the free-port area from the very beginning (since 1883) as contemporary and future urban heritage by linking a historicist architecture with the political vision of the new-born German Reich and its colonial ambitions as they would be materialised through the overseas trade. The erection of the Warehouse City on the Elbe Island of Wandrahm in the urban frame of Hamburg was only made possible by the dislocation of some 20,000 people and the destruction of their dwellings – a fact that hardly appears in the official dominant narrative of the Warehouse City as historical and cultural heritage of the Hanseatic City of Hamburg.

The historical analysis shows how the new-erected Warehouse buildings almost lost their *raison d'être* by the end of the WWI as Germany lost its colonies from where the colonial products were supposed to come in huge amounts to be stored provisionally in the Warehouse City of Hamburg. By the end of the WWII many Warehouses laid in ruins after destructive air bombing. Some of them were rebuilt – in the old style of architectonic heritage! However, the new trade deal and new sea-transport techniques rendered the Warehouse City – still standing, restored or rebuilt – practically useless with respect to the purpose of its erection, whereas its location in the heart of an expanding city rendered it an object of new urban speculations. The inclusion of the building complex into the national preservation list in 1991 prevented (further) destructive re-use interventions, whereas the annulation of the free-port regime in 2003 made it accessible to touristic activities and transformed it to a stage for the spectacular urban extension of the Hafen-City over the river Elbe. In this perspective the listing of the Warehouse City of Hamburg as World Heritage in 2015 confers a touristic upgrading to an area with reduced commercial value, as well as a price enhancement in the development of the neighbouring Hafen-City area for which the listed Warehouse City constitutes the glamorous, night-illuminated and historically “polished” background.