

- 01 Sprinkenhof, built between 1927 and 1943 in three phases by Hans and Oskar Gerson and Fritz Hoger
- 02 Speicherstadt Wandrahmsfleet, a warehouse district



Report
Hamburg

Take it as red Hamburg

Preface

Since the 1800s this has been the city of bricks. It's a legacy that modern architects are happy to build upon as they stay true to a distinctive style.

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It is a German trait to always look for the *roten Faden*: the “red thread” (the leit-motif or the recurrent theme) that runs through a conversation, an article or a train of thought. In Hamburg’s architectural history, said thread is very definitely red – in the form of its brickwork.

Hamburg’s ubiquitous red bricks and “clinkers” – bricks fired so hot they vitrify, creating dense blocks that clink when hit – have indelibly coloured the cityscape. Their warm hues paint maroon, rust and crimson stripes through the city in municipal buildings, neo-gothic warehouses, modernist housing projects and now even the luxury buildings in Hamburg’s massive urban expansion: the HafenCity.

“The topic of the red bricks and red clinkers is inexhaustible,” says architect

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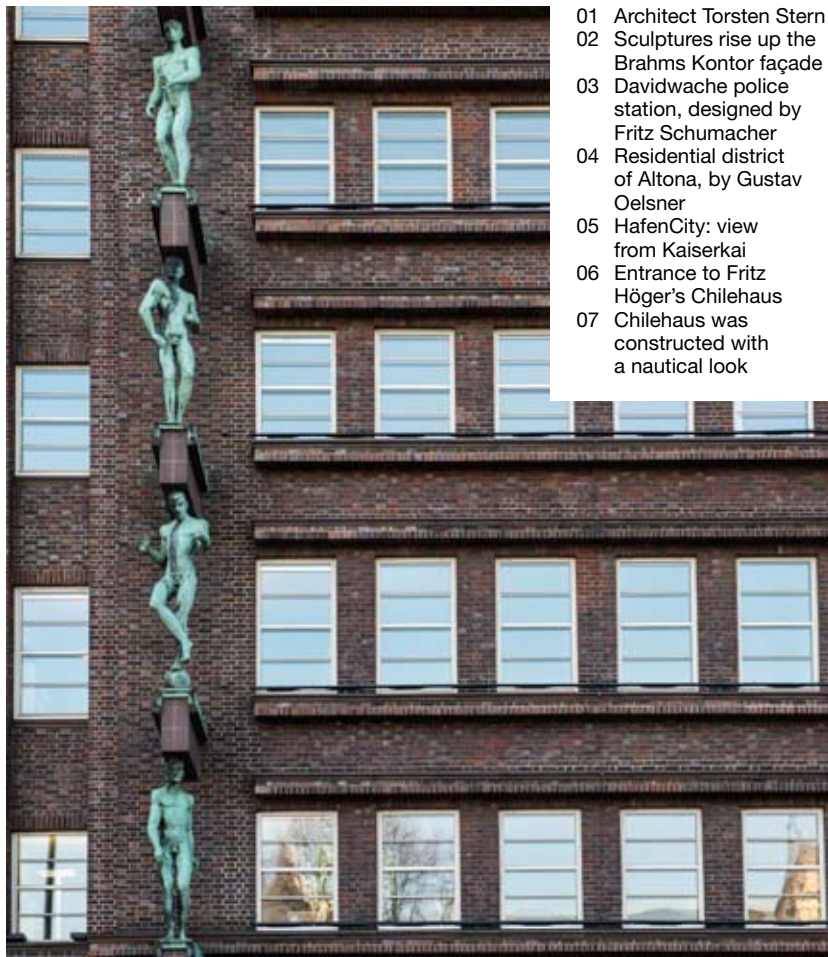


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Torsten Stern. “It is a deep-seated image people have when they think of Hamburg. It is also a charming tradition since it’s a local material that gives the city something special.” Stern specialises in large-scale interiors and is the founder of A-Tour, a group of architects who lead architectural tours through the Hanseatic city-state; he has even created a special tour focused on the material.

Why brick and why red? The materials date back to the city’s origins in the 1200s; it was durable and it was available (clay quarries lay just south of the city). The colour correlates to high iron content in the native soil. In the late 1800s, when the city was growing rapidly, its Speicherstadt (the harbour warehouse district) was erected in red-brick neo-gothic turrets, towers and vertical lines. “The look was trendy at the time; it was called the Hannover School and cropped up throughout northern Germany,” says Claas Gefroi, an architectural journalist and spokesperson for the Hamburg Architektenkammer (the chamber that all local architects must be members of; each federal state in Germany has one).

The Hannover School’s aesthetic was not unique to Hamburg but the Hanses-tadt’s signature style wasn’t far off – and it was largely due to one man. Architect and urban planner Fritz Schumacher took the office of Hamburg building director in 1909 and essentially branded the hometown material as the way to future urban living. Red brick became an architectural ideology. “I admire the gothic style,” the architect wrote. “But my efforts are to give new life to the



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- 01 Architect Torsten Stern
- 02 Sculptures rise up the Brahms Kontor façade
- 03 Davidwache police station, designed by Fritz Schumacher
- 04 Residential district of Altona, by Gustav Oelsner
- 05 HafenCity: view from Kaiserkai
- 06 Entrance to Fritz Höger’s Chilehaus
- 07 Chilehaus was constructed with a nautical look

Quiet riot
—
19th-century influence
Neoclassical
Not all of Hamburg is built from red clinker brick. Around the inner and outer Alster Lakes and on the green belt heading west along the Elbe (but not directly on its bank), an opposing architectural style is dominant: gleaming white neoclassical structures that reveal the city’s historical wealth (but not too ostentatiously). Primarily built in the late 19th century during one of Hamburg’s many growth spurts, the grand villas or white-stuccoed multifamily homes show Hamburg’s more peaceful, private side.



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Yellow-brick road

Interwar ethos

Danish school

A third colour runs through Hamburg but only in the districts of Altona (see picture, left) and Ottensen. Here, housing projects and municipal buildings are often clad in yellow-brownish clinker brick. Why? Altona was long Danish, then politically a separate city until after the Second World War, and thus had a different master builder. Gustav Oelsner preferred yellow over Fritz Schumacher’s red and obtained his raw materials from a different clay quarry. The two were friends and often praised one another’s work; like Schumacher, Oelsner was ousted in 1933 and began a long exile in the US and Turkey until 1949. His visual legacy lives on.



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movement for red brick out of the material itself. An architectural language will be developed that will be characteristic of Hamburg’s individuality and at the same time useful for modern urban needs.”

“He was of the opinion that red brick is something that belongs here,” says Gefroi. “It has to do with the wind and rain and water. It has a certain honesty.” Schumacher got busy and erected schools, municipal buildings, office buildings and major housing estates. All appeared in the material, especially in the 1920s, with increasingly modernist traits such as flat rooftops, horizontal bands of windows (usually framed in white) and functionality. Early examples include the famous Davidwache police station on the Reeperbahn and the Hamburg art school, both of which still exhibit a bit of ornament; later came more reduced Schumacher designs, including the Hamburg Finance Agency at Gänsemarkt (1926) whose windows wind around a maroon façade.

As an architect Schumacher designed a seemingly endless list of buildings himself but also delegated to colleagues such as Fritz Höger, whose Chilehaus is perhaps Hamburg’s best-known architectural landmark. Built from 1922 to 1924 it is representative of an architectural movement named after the material: brick expressionism. Also involved were Hans and Oskar Gerson who, in collaboration with Höger, built the imposing Sprinkenhof office building from 1927 to 1943, a stone’s throw from the Brahms Kontorhaus built by architects including Werner Lundt und Georg Kallmorgen from 1904 to 1931.

Schumacher also planned and orchestrated the construction of vast residential estates such as Jarrestadt, just northeast of the Alster Lakes. Here he hired local architects including Karl Schneider and Heinrich Bornhoff to design high-quality, efficient, modernist buildings containing compact apartments for workers, à la Le Corbusier’s “machines for living”. Smaller estates are sprinkled through Hamburg-Dulsberg and red-brick buildings dot other parts of the city. They have long integrated themselves into the city’s property jargon: if a Hamburger mentions he or she has a

new apartment the first question is often “Prewar or red clinker?”

The red came to stand for Hamburg’s autonomy, its sensitivity to social issues and utopian visions of modernity (as local as his vision was, Schumacher was definitely Bauhaus-influenced). “You could say it is Hamburg’s vernacular architecture,” says Gefroi with a hint of hesitation. He wonders whether Hamburg would have been so red and bricky without Schumacher but admits that Schumacher’s vision – promptly truncated by the Nazis who threw the far too liberal and modernist urban planner out of his position in the early 1930s – has amazingly carried on through the decades.

Postwar housing reused the bricks found in piles of rubble (admittedly of lower quality). Later structures such as the Hanseviertel shopping centre built by Gerkan, Marg und Partner (an architectural firm that built not only Tegel Airport in Berlin but also planned the ill-fated new Berlin Airport) in the late 1970s echo the style. In the 1980s, Hamburg’s building director Egbert Kossak mandated the use of red brick, creating a backlash in glass in the years following; newer developments (under Jörn Walter, building director since 1999) see a return to tradition. “Now we are going back to the roots,” says Stern. “You can build in red brick but you don’t have to. You do it where it fits.”

It fits in redevelopments such as the Holzhafen on the River Elbe where Köln-based architects Astoc used an imported orange-red clinker brick (the nearby quarries are empty these days; clay is obtained from a bit further away in Denmark or Holland) as cladding for a large multi-use building finished in 2013; its mass is broken by perforations and a winding footprint. A car park in the old Speicherstadt, just steps from the HafenCity, quotes the subtle brickwork of a century ago. Even the Ecumenical Forum, a 2012 office and residential building by Wandel Hoefer Lorch housing “19 Christian denominations”, creatively uses red clinker in its interiors and curvy exteriors.

From some vantage points in the stormy HafenCity the shades of red



- 01 Jarrestadt is a residential housing complex in the Winterhude district
- 02 Architect Claas Gefroi
- 03 Architects are in discussions on how to modernise Jarrestadt’s landmark buildings
- 04 Main entrance to the Sprinkenhof



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and ochre in very old and very new constructions overlap in a beautiful, multidimensional way. But Stern points out one last *roten Faden* that has run for centuries through this city-state built on independence, free trade and lots of rough salt water and wind: practicality. Red bricks withstand it all. “Don’t forget Hamburgers are merchants; they watch their money,” he says. “They don’t build in red brick only because they think it is beautiful but because they know it will last.” It certainly has. — (M)



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