

ARTICLE

An Imperial Adventus into a City of Warehouses: History, Modernity, and Urbanity in the Symbolic and Material Construction of Hamburg’s Free Port

Lasse Heerten 

Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany
Email: lasse.heerten@ruhr-uni-bochum.de

Abstract

The article analyzes the contemporary material, political, and symbolic construction of Hamburg’s free port, zooming in on its festive opening in 1888, when Kaiser Wilhelm II visited to perform this ceremonious act. Asking why the “Speicherstadt” (warehouse city) was right away dubbed a “city” even though this was an exclusively commercial space devoid of inhabitants, the article uses this case study to argue that process concepts like “urbanization” frame our perspectives in ways that eclipse how older ideas about urbanity still defined a late-nineteenth-century political imaginary. The article shows how the opening ceremony, staged as an imperial adventus, alongside the “Speicherstadt’s” neo-Gothic red-brick architecture, made recourse to established cultural forms that historians and other commentators often deem premodern. To counteract the prospect that port expansion could turn Hamburg into a working-class city, Hamburg’s bourgeois merchant elite tried to construct the free port as a global urban bourgeois space embodying the city’s history and its longevity as a space of urban trade privilege. The latter had erstwhile been defined by Hamburg’s city walls, which, as the article argues, were symbolically rebuilt in the form of the Speicherstadt. The latter was the “city” into which this modern-day imperial adventus led.

Keywords: Modern Germany; Kaiserreich; urbanization; Hamburg; cultural history

A “memorable day in the history of Hamburg is dawning,” the *Hamburger Nachrichten* announced in its morning edition on October 29, 1888.¹ The streets of the Free and Hanseatic City were festively decorated, filled by a crowd awaiting the first visit of a new emperor: Kaiser Wilhelm II was to arrive for the festive opening of the new free port. Coronated in June as successor to his father, Frederick III, who had reigned for a mere ninety-nine days following the death of Wilhelm I, Wilhelm II was the third monarch to assume the throne that year. Amplified by the coincidence that this was Wilhelm II’s first visit to Hamburg as emperor, the ceremonious act of opening the new port was designed and described in ways that resembled royal entries into early modern cities. In these ritualized encounters, monarchs visiting cities staged their political power—and so did the urban communes welcoming them. Particularly during monarchs’ first visits, cities paid homage to the sovereign, who, in turn, confirmed the urban commune’s privileges in

¹ “Dem Kaiser zum Gruß,” *Hamburger Nachrichten*, no. 258, October 29, 1888. Source translations are my own.

these “reciprocal events.”² In Hamburg in 1888, the centerpiece of the event was Wilhelm II’s ceremonious laying of the headstone of the Brooksbrücke, the bridge crossing the Zollkanal (“customs channel”) marking the border of the free port.³ At least symbolically, on this headstone and the free port it represented rested Hamburg’s claim for the new trade privileges that the emperor bestowed on the city.

The new free port was an outcome of the “Zollanschlussvertrag,” an agreement about the city’s custom status that Hamburg had entered with the imperial administration in 1881. Hamburg had joined the German Empire with its founding a decade before but retained its status as an independent customs area. Now, the city agreed to accede to the German customs territory, but, in return, was afforded a large free port area within the city. Moreover, the empire agreed to cofinance the new facilities to be constructed in the free port with up to 40 million marks.⁴ The project sparked a vibrant debate among Hamburg’s urban public. Contemporaries discussed in detail where the planned facilities should be situated and what the project meant for Hamburg’s prospects.⁵ However, the discussants quickly agreed on one point: this new warehouse district would be a “Speicherstadt,” a name that emerged early in these discussions.⁶ Yet this “city” was rather peculiar. As a part of the free port, it would be an exclusively commercial space: a city devoid of inhabitants. The boroughs of Kehrwieder and Wandrahm were torn down and approximately 25,000 people were removed to create space for the construction of the free port. The art historian Karin Maak describes the district as “a city in the place of a city” and notes that “Speicherstadt” was a contemporary category.⁷ However, calling an area of uninhabited warehouses a “city” has not struck scholars as a particularly odd designation. So far, historians have barely wondered why contemporaries coined this label.⁸

² Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Rituale* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2019 [2013]), 107; Winfried Dotzauer, “Die Ankunft des Herrschers. Der fürstliche ‘Einzug’ in die Stadt (bis zum Ende des Alten Reichs),” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 55, no. 2 (1973): 245–88; Klaus Tenfelde, “Adventus. Zur historischen Ikonologie des Festzugs,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 23, no. 1 (1982): 45–84.

³ That the Kaiser would come to Hamburg had been uncertain until shortly before the event. In a draft schedule produced in July, the Kaiser’s name was missing, and Imperial Chancellor Bismarck was to perform the first hammer stroke. Less than a month before the event, the court confirmed the Kaiser’s participation. Bismarck decided to stay away. “Verzeichnis der beim Hammerschlage beteiligten Personen,” Staatsarchiv Hamburg 111-1_7371, Frühere Signaturen: Cl. I Lit. T Nr. 2 Vol. 21 b; Friedrich August von Holstein, Telegram, October 5, 1888, GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 81 Hamburg nach 1807, file no. 1116; “Tages-Neuigkeiten,” *Hamburgischer Correspondent*, no. 286, October 14, 1888; Tobias von Elsner, *Kaisertage. Die Hamburger und das Wilhelminische Deutschland im Spiegel öffentlicher Festkultur* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1991), 137–39.

⁴ Peter Borowsky, “Hamburg und der Freihafen. Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft 1888–1914,” in *Schlaglichter historischer Forschung: Studien zur deutschen Geschichte im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2005), 109–37.

⁵ See the material in Staatsarchiv Hamburg 326-2 I_819; Staatsarchiv Hamburg 314-6_AA 7 a; Staatsarchiv Hamburg 321-2_B 1864; Staatsarchiv Hamburg 314-6, A11; and Karin Maak, *Die Speicherstadt im Hamburger Freihafen. Eine Stadt an Stelle der Stadt* (Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1985), 49–54.

⁶ See, for example, S., “Der Freihafen Hamburgs,” *Hamburger Nachrichten*, no. 25, January, 29, 1882; S., “Auf welche Weise soll der Zollanschluß Hamburgs beschafft werden?” *Reform*, no. 43, February 19, 1882.

⁷ Maak, *Die Speicherstadt im Hamburger Freihafen*, 133–46. Maak puts the first use of the term to 1886. See Ralf Lange, *Die Hamburger Speicherstadt. Geschichte. Architektur. Welterbe* (Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz, 2019), 12, for a usage of the term in 1897. According to Felix Mauch, “Speicher in der Stadt. Logistische Landschaften der Ersten Globalisierung,” *Technikgeschichte* 88, no. 2 (2021): 146n3, it would remain open when the term was first used. For uses from the early 1880s see, for example, S., “Der Freihafen Hamburgs”; S., “Auf welche Weise soll der Zollanschluß Hamburgs beschafft werden?”

⁸ So far, neither architectural histories of the “Speicherstadt” nor more recent analyses of the free port within larger infrastructural and colonial networks have raised this issue. For the former see Maak, *Die Speicherstadt im Hamburger Freihafen*, and Lange, *Die Hamburger Speicherstadt*. For the latter see Mauch, “Speicher in der Stadt”; Julia Laura Rischbieter, *Mikro-Ökonomie der Globalisierung. Kaffee, Kaufleute und Konsumenten im Kaiserreich 1870–1914* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2011), 81–90; Florian Wagner, “Nicht mehr als eine ferne Bekannte? Die koloniale Funktion der Speicherstadt (1880–2017),” in *Hamburg: Tor zur kolonialen Welt. Erinnerungsorte der (post-)kolonialen Globalisierung*, ed. Jürgen Zimmerer and Kim Sebastian Todzi (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), 489–502, or Mareike-Christin Bues, *Hamburg zwischen Globalisierung und Nation. Welthandel, Freihafen und Migration 1871–1914* (Munich: Utz, 2018), 72–84.

In the following, I argue that to understand the meanings of the designation “Speicherstadt” we need to reconstruct contemporary perceptions of what defines a space as “urban.” I propose that the new warehouse district was conceivable in these terms because it represented what contemporaries feared Hamburg would lose after its accession to the German Empire’s custom territory: the urban privilege of a merchant city. Already prior to the negotiations in 1881, emotions had boiled over in the debate about Hamburg’s custom status. When the Deutsche Zollverein (German Customs Union) was created in 1866, public opinion in the Free City was almost unfailingly opposed to Hamburg’s accession.⁹ Assessments of economic prospects were linked to projections of political identities. Free trade convictions were strong in Hamburg’s merchant caste, nourished by an understanding of Hamburg’s history as a sovereign state that had built its economic prosperity on its urban status. This position seemed endangered in the late 1870s, when a trade policy turn to protectionism propelled by Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck increased the pressure exerted on Hamburg to join the customs area.¹⁰ Moreover, the demolitions that created space for the new free port decisively changed Hamburg’s physical appearance. Before they were torn down, photographers immortalized many of the early-modern merchant houses of patrician families like the Godeffroys in pictures published in popular albums, buttressing their association with “old Hamburg.”¹¹ I argue that it was in reaction to these ruptures that the free port was constructed as a new space of urban privilege, semantically reflected in the name that contemporaries designated for the complex of warehouses: “Speicherstadt.”

That historians have so far not asked why the “Speicherstadt” was conceived as a city is also due to assumptions about a meta-process framing this scholarship: “urbanization.” To adapt Frederick Cooper’s verdict on “globalization”: there are two problems with the concept of *urbanization*, first the *urban*, and second the *-ization*.¹² Coinages ending on the latter suffix indicate that they signify a process in which something new is created. This implies that the said object, the thing being *-ized*, did not exist prior to the process: “The ‘thing’ we call a ‘city,’” David Harvey thus explains, “is the outcome of a ‘process’ that we call ‘urbanization.’” This leads the geographer to argue that we should privilege “urbanization” as a process in our thinking to overcome what he deems an “obsession with ‘the city’ as a thing.”¹³ This, however, does not solve the problem. Whether we define it as a “city” or something “urban”: this *-ization* still only creates the “thing” under study. Yet the existence of cities often preceded the process we call “urbanization.” While many modern societies witness an increasing enmeshment of people into urban ways of life, economics, and politics, cities already existed before these processes in most societies—and many contemporaries were cognizant of their cities’ history.

Historians have shown how intertwined nineteenth-century urban expansion was with the creation of new understandings of space and meanings of place.¹⁴ Although “urbanization” plays a lesser role as an analytical tool than it did when social-scientific methods

⁹ Ekkehard Böhm, “Wirtschaft und Politik in Hamburg zur Zeit der Reichsgründung,” *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Hamburgische Geschichte* 64 (1978): 31–53; Hans-Konrad Stein, “Interessenkonflikte zwischen Großkaufleuten, Handelskammer und Senat in der Frage des Zollanschlusses Hamburgs an das Reich 1866–1881,” *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Hamburgische Geschichte* 64 (1978): 55–89.

¹⁰ Stein, “Interessenkonflikte zwischen Großkaufleuten, Handelskammer und Senat in der Frage des Zollanschlusses Hamburgs an das Reich 1866–1881”; Cornelius Torp, *Die Herausforderung der Globalisierung. Wirtschaft und Politik in Deutschland 1860–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 147–77.

¹¹ I will analyze this further in my book *Water and Stone: The Port of Hamburg in the Age of Global Empires* (manuscript under preparation).

¹² Frederick Cooper, “What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African Historian’s Perspective,” *African Affairs* 100, no. 399 (2001): 189.

¹³ David Harvey, “Cities or Urbanization,” *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 1 (1996): 38–61, 50, 38.

¹⁴ Yair Mintzker, *The Defortification of the German City, 1689–1866* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Kristin Poling, “Shantytowns and Pioneers beyond the City Wall: Berlin’s Urban Frontier in the Nineteenth

dominated the field, the notion still defines prevalent understandings of urban change. Focussing on forms of an “inner urbanization” as an individual or collective process creating urban subjectivities, scholars of the cultural history of urban transformation still utilize a version of this concept.¹⁵ Urban historians of the German Empire arguing along these lines often focus on Berlin.¹⁶ Contemporaries considered the empire’s capital a paradigmatic example of an exponential growth that created entirely new spatial entities: city life intensified, urban space expanded. Berlin’s dynamic growth prompted observers to describe the city with references to the United States, the paradigmatically “young” and rapidly developing empire of the “new world.”¹⁷ Considering the example of Hamburg provides a different image. The populations of Berlin and Hamburg experienced comparable growth rates, but contemporaries were aware of Hamburg’s long history as a merchant city.¹⁸ In effect, this urban trade center was not likened to the “new world” but to the dominant global power of the age: for many, the Hanseatic city was a continental “Stück Englands.”¹⁹

Studying the port city of Hamburg thus demands an analysis that integrates experiences of urban change and contemporary understandings of specific urban histories. Scholars from across several disciplines have long debated what constitutes “the urban” or “the city.”²⁰ To treat these notions historically, I suggest conceptualizing as a “city” that which contemporaries conceived as a “city,” and to study urban “spaces of experiences” from a perspective that allows for the appreciation of how people remake “cities” (or “towns,” “metropolises,” etc.) in dialogue with structural transformations.²¹ Such an approach could also help scholars to rethink long-held notions of “urbanization.” While the notion of “urbanization” makes us think of cities in terms of an urban growth that contemporaries needed to adapt to, for many contemporaries in Hamburg in the 1880s, particularly among its bourgeoisie, it was the opposite: they felt that what defined Hamburg as a “city” was being lost. Although this may have been different for newly arrived immigrants from the Reich’s provinces, bourgeois Hamburgers did not feel the need to go through the processes of an “inner urbanization” that many of their fellows in the Reich’s capital arguably experienced at the time.²² For these *Bürger*s of Hamburg, cities were defined by something else: they conceived them as

Century,” *Central European History* 47 (2014): 245–74; Anna Ross, “Down with the Walls! The Politics of Place in Spanish and German Urban Extension Planning, 1848–1914,” *Journal of Modern History* 90 (June 2018): 292–322.

¹⁵ Gottfried Korff, “Mentalitäten und Kommunikation in der Großstadt. Berliner Notizen zur ‘inneren’ Urbanisierung,” *Großstadt. Aspekte empirischer Kulturforschung*, ed. Theodor Kohlmann and Hermann Bausinger (Berlin: Staatliche Museen preußischer Kulturbesitz, 1985), 343–61.

¹⁶ Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Rolf Lindner, *Berlin, absolute Stadt. Eine kleine Anthropologie der großen Stadt* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2016) and, incorporating global comparative perspectives, Joseph Ben Prestel, *Emotional Cities: Debates on Urban Change in Berlin and Cairo, 1860–1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Poling, “Shantytowns and Pioneers beyond the City Wall.”

¹⁸ Compare Georg Simmel, *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2006 [1903]), to Ernst Baasch, “Der Einfluß des Handels auf das Geistesleben Hamburgs,” *Pfingstblätter des Hansischen Geschichtsvereins* 5 (1909): 1–57.

¹⁹ John Breuilley, “Ein Stück Englands? A Contrast between the Free-Trade Movements in Hamburg and Manchester,” in *Free Trade and Its Reception 1815–1960*, ed. Andrew Marrison (London: Routledge, 1998); Andrew Francis Bell, “Anglophilia: The Hamburg Bourgeoisie and the Importation of English Middle Class Culture in the Wilhelmine Era” (PhD diss. Brown University, 2001).

²⁰ See Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harvest, 1961). Scholars now tend to privilege the “urban” over the “city” as an analytical category. See the insightful Dorothee Brantz, “Assembling the Multitude: Questions about Agency in the Urban Environment,” *Urban History* 44, no. 1 (2017): 130–36.

²¹ Reinhart Koselleck, “‘Erfahrungsraum’ und ‘Erwartungshorizont’—zwei historische Kategorien,” in *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1989 [1979]), 349–75. Here I understand these “Erfahrungsräume” spatially and temporally.

²² There is still a lack of research on migrations from other parts of the empire, crucial for Hamburg’s growth. On Polish migration from within the empire—albeit to nearby Wilhelmsburg, then still Prussian—see Elke Hauschildt, *Polnische Arbeitsmigranten in Wilhelmsburg bei Hamburg während des Kaiserreichs und der Weimarer Republik* (Dortmund:

spaces of privilege, echoing understandings of the “city” usually considered premodern.²³ These conceptualizations still formed contemporary perceptions of “cities” in an era of “urbanization” and the “nation-state” in which such understandings, as these master narratives imply, should have been discarded already.²⁴

Hamburg’s bourgeoisie’s concerns did not merely invoke specters of the past. They were enmeshed in contemporary processes of transformation. The substantial growth of cities across the empire threatened to undermine the dominance of the empire’s ruling classes. Particularly feared by Prussia’s landed nobility, the East Elbian *Junkers*, industrial and urban expansion created a new working class and new forms of mass politics, exacerbating further the class strife barely contained by the anti-socialist laws that had been passed since 1878.²⁵ Similar concerns were felt in Hamburg. Port expansion helped generate a massive labor demand that was primarily met by the influx of internal migrants from other parts of the German Empire. The result was what is usually dubbed “urbanization”: Hamburg’s population almost quadrupled between the founding of the German Empire in 1871, when approximately 300,000 people lived in the city, to the eve of the First World War, when it passed the threshold of 1 million inhabitants—1.5 million if we include the larger metropolitan area (compare figures 1 and 2).²⁶ Port expansion also stimulated the overcrowding of slums closeby. As in other port cities, the creation of working-class waterfront quarters raised security concerns among a bourgeoisie that feared revolutionary upheavals and strikes paralyzing the ports as the centers of urban, and indeed global, economic life.²⁷ With growing political participation for the masses on the political horizon, port expansion thus indirectly threatened the dominance of the elites propagating the project: Hamburg’s merchant bourgeoisie feared that their brainchild, conceived to invigorate Hamburg’s position as a global port, could turn against its intellectual parents. I argue that, to exorcise the specter of revolution that their project summoned, Hamburg’s elites materially and politically constructed the free port as a global urban space marking its bourgeois character, eclipsing the fundamental role that laboring masses played in running the port.²⁸

To study the free port’s material and symbolic construction, I will analyze the festive opening on October 29, 1888, as a ritual recognizing Hamburg’s claims to urban privileges and combine this perspective with an analysis of the free port’s architectural forms. The ceremony was, in Arnold van Gennep’s words, a “rite d’agrégation,” proclaiming a closer bond between two powerful factions of the empire’s elite: the Prussian nobility and the Hanseatic merchant bourgeoisie.²⁹ During the years of economic crises initiated by the Panic of 1873, tariffs had become an object of political conflict in the German Empire, deeply dividing, among others, East Elbian landed nobles anxious to protect their agricultural products against foreign competition and Hanseatic merchants agitating for free

Forschungsstelle Ostmitteleuropa, 1986). For a stimulating account of „interior“ migration to Berlin, see Bettina Hitzer, *Im Netz der Liebe: Die protestantische Kirche und Ihre Zuwanderer in der Metropole Berlin* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006).

²³ Mintzker, *The Defortification of the German City, 1689–1866*.

²⁴ Marine Fiedler also emphasizes the longevity of cultural imaginaries usually considered “premodern” in her nuanced study of the merchant family Meyer: Marine Fiedler, *Von Hamburg nach Singapur. Translokale Erfahrungen einer Hamburger Kaufmannsfamilie in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2022).

²⁵ On “class” in the historiography of the German Empire, see Dennis Sweeney, “Class,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Imperial Germany*, ed. Matthew Jefferies (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016 [2015]), 261–86, and, for a lucid survey of the relationship among industrialization, urbanization, and working-class formation, see Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 47–61.

²⁶ Richard J. Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1987]), 52–61.

²⁷ Christine G. Krüger, “Slums und Villenviertel. Städtische Grenzziehungen und Sicherheitsentwürfe in London und Hamburg im ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert,” *Saeculum* 68, no. 1 (2018): 37–60.

²⁸ Here I disagree with scholars who argue that contemporary transformations prompted an “Entbürgerlichung” (Thomas Mann), i.e. the decay of the Hanseatic bourgeoisie’s cohesion as a group. Andreas Schulz, “Weltbürger und Geldaristokraten. Hanseatisches Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 259 (1994): 669. On class conflict in late nineteenth-century Hamburg see also Evans, *Death in Hamburg*, 78–108.

²⁹ Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage. Etude systématique des rites* (Paris: Picard, 1981 [1909]).



Figure 1. *Plan von Hamburg nebst Umgebung: Amtliche Ausgabe*, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, Kt H 180: I, 1868, Hamburg 1868.

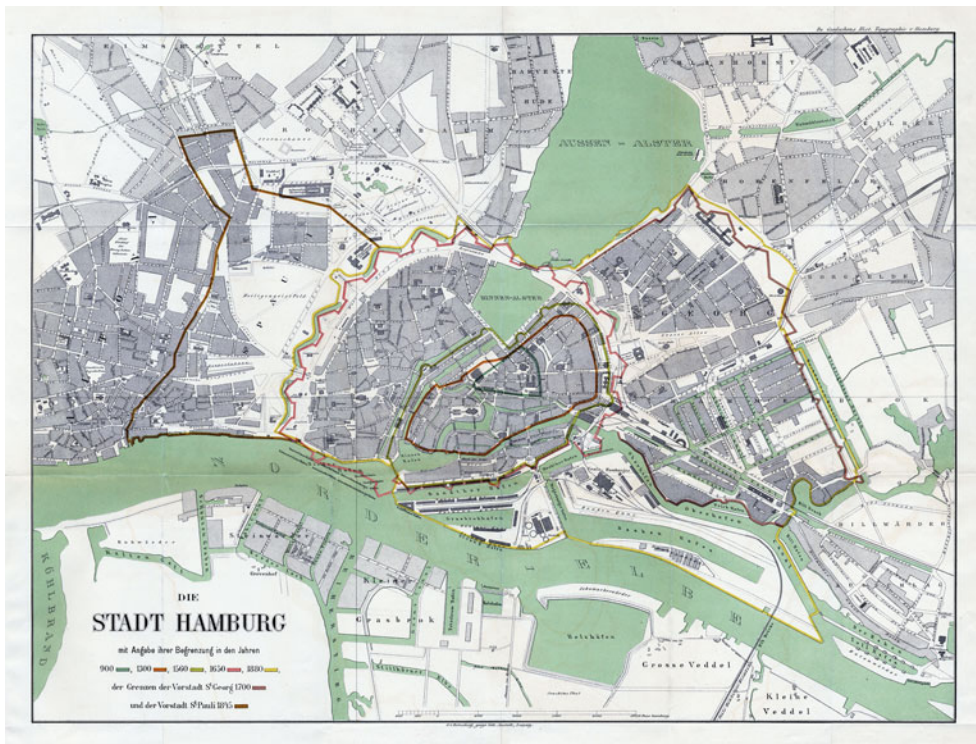


Figure 2. “Die Stadt Hamburg mit Angabe ihrer Begrenzung,” in C. F. Gaedechens, *Historische Topographie der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg und ihrer nächsten Umgebung von der Entstehung bis auf die Gegenwart* (Hamburg 1880). Via Wikimedia Commons.

trade.³⁰ The opening ceremony proclaimed a new political liaison between these groups: Hamburg's free port demonstrated that there would still be a place for free trade within this new German Empire of customs union. The ceremony and its media representations glossed over substantial political differences—differences between Hanseatic merchants and Prussian nobility and their respective, hardly congruent political visions, but also differences within these groups.³¹ The proclamation of this coalition was enabled by a perceived common interest in keeping urban, working-class politics at bay; this was not a vision of free trade for the masses, intended to keep food prices low. This event proclaimed the continuation of Hamburg's merchant bourgeoisie's free trade emporium within the German Empire.

I will reconstruct the contemporary making of this event, its staging in Hamburg's urban space and in the media.³² Here, I will draw on the rich research on rituals, particularly on rituals practiced in "early modern" cities, as these forms reverberated in how the opening of the free port was staged: as a modern imperial adventus. As the free port's opening showed, contemporaries resorted to established cultural and symbolic forms to make sense of Hamburg's transformations and the new spatial format of the free port. I will use the chronology of the event as a loose structure to move through the city toward the "Speicherstadt." Along the way, I will zoom in on some significant sites. To analyze more closely what Robert Lee dubs the "social life of port architecture," I will embed my reading within comparative perspectives, relating the free port's construction to wider transformations of urban space and the built environment, notably defortification, the Gothic revival, and the reembrace of red brick as a building material.³³

Already prior to the "Zollanschluss-Feier," press reports established the temporalities of this tighter bond between "the old Hanse town" and a youthful nation embodied by "Germany's young Kaiser."³⁴ The *Hamburger Nachrichten*, which had turned itself into Prussia's mouthpiece in the Hanseatic city, declared that "a youthfully vigorous, energetic Monarch approaches us" whose abilities had appointed him "as the future's lord and master." The "jubilant city" of Hamburg would stage a reception surpassing all others granted to powerful visitors "within its walls," the newspaper adds somewhat anachronistically given that Hamburg's fortifications had already been demolished early in the century. Still, with hyperbolic exclamation the article ends: "Thus, God bless the entry of our Kaiser within Hamburg's walls!"; God willing, this "solemn reception" would be "the starting point of the most beautiful future ...!"³⁵ The *Kölnische Zeitung*, the empire's most widely read newspaper at the time, interpreted Hamburg's accession to the imperial custom's territory as the completion of a work that "our people's best" have tirelessly strived for: a German customs union. The "crenelations of the towers on Hamburg's coat of arms now embellish the headstone of the German customs building." Inspired by the vista of the "great new port and warehouse facilities, surpassed by no seaport on the globe," the *Kölnische Zeitung*

³⁰ Cornelius Torp, "The 'Coalition of 'Rye and Iron'" under the Pressure of Globalization: A Reinterpretation of Germany's Political Economy before 1914," *Central European History* 43, no. 3 (2010): 401–27.

³¹ For a classic account stressing the significance of East Elbian aristocratic conservatives' retention of power and the political "failure" of urban bourgeois liberals, see Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983 [1973]), and as a survey of the literature Sweeney, "Class." On different factions in discussions about the "Zollanschluss" in Hamburg, see Stein, "Interessenkonflikte zwischen Großkaufleuten, Handelskammer und Senat in der Frage des Zollanschlusses Hamburgs an das Reich 1866–1881."

³² For a detailed description of the event, see also Elsner, *Kaisertage*, 95–220.

³³ Robert Lee, "The Social Life of Port Architecture: History, Politics, Commerce and Culture," *ICOMOS: Hefte des Deutschen Nationalkomitees* 54 (2012): 33–52.

³⁴ "Dem Kaiser zum Gruß." See also "Tagesbericht: Zum Kaiserbesuch," *Hamburgischer Correspondent*, October 18, 1888; "Zum Kaiserbesuch" *Hamburger Nachrichten*, October 28, 1888.

³⁵ "Dem Kaiser zum Gruß." See also "Der Kaiser in Hamburg," *Hamburgische Börsenhalle*, no. 257, October 29, 1888.

felt “a new time arriving.” Hamburg would welcome the “young Kaiser” with the words: “With the new Kaiser joyously into the new era!”³⁶

The *Reform*, a local publication and offspring of the failed revolution of 1848, recognized three principal factions pertaining to the expected reactions to Wilhelm II’s visit. “A relatively small part” of the population—probably widely congruent with the readership of the *Hamburger Nachrichten*—would be given to “enunciations of Byzantine idolatry.” Another part of the population—“unfortunately” a much bigger one, as the federal elections of the previous year had shown, in which two of the three Hamburg Reichstag seats went to the Socialist Workers’ Party of Germany—would persist in a “gloomy restraint.” Not concerning itself any further with these “deplorable facts,” the article turned to the third faction, which for the *Reform* still represented the “actual core of the population,” even if election results said otherwise: “the free independent bourgeoisie, men full of mettle, cast in a truly Hanseatic mould, those Hamburgers who are proud of their membership in this community but are at the same time upright Germans, loyal to homeland and hometown....” Asserting Hamburg’s purported bourgeois identity, the *Reform* projected a ritual bond between the independent *Bürger* of noble stock from the “shores of the old city” of the Hanseatic league, and the “youthfully vigorous leader.”³⁷

Not all journalists noted that a juridical caesura, initiating what many expected to be a new era, had in fact occurred before the ceremony: Hamburg’s factual accession to German customs territory. The *Times*, however, did cover this “event of some moment, not only in the history of German unity but in the commerce of the world.”³⁸ On October 15, the London newspaper imagined that it “must have been with some emotion that some of the Hamburg citizens awoke this morning....” Yet “the regret of the worthy burghers for the rupture to-day of the tradition of centuries” would be tempered, the British newspaper surmised, by Hamburg’s “almost certain future” as the German Empire’s major seaport and industrial metropolis.³⁹ The caesura was momentous—but barely perceived. US Vice Consul to Hamburg Charles H. Burke reported a few days after “the annexation” that “nearly everything connected therewith is operating smoothly, and were it not for an army of customs officers..., it would hardly be noticeable that so important a change had taken place in the city.”⁴⁰

A fortnight later this change was symbolically enacted. At twenty to noon, an acoustic signal pronounced that the imperial train had arrived on Hamburg soil. Then the bells of the neo-Gothic church St. Nikolai, built after plans of the English architect Sir George Gilbert Scott, and consecrated in 1863, “raised” their “reverberating deep voice,” as the report in *Hamburgs Handel und Verkehr* declared in an anthropomorphizing fashion more typical for early modern understandings of architectural constructions.⁴¹ At noon, the Kaiser arrived at the Lombardsbrücke, where the procession was welcomed by a delegation of political and military dignitaries around Hamburg’s First Mayor Johannes Versmann.⁴² In early

³⁶ “Der Kaiser in Hamburg, I,” *Kölnische Zeitung*, no. 300, October 28, 1888.

³⁷ “Der Besuch des Deutschen Kaisers,” *Reform*, no. 257, October 28, 1888; “Zum 29. Oktober,” *Reform*, no. 257, October 28, 1888.

³⁸ “The Last of the German Free Ports,” *Times*, October 13, 1888, 8.

³⁹ “Hamburg,” *Times*, October 15, 1888, 6. The article was also printed in the *New York Times* with a changed title: “New Hamburg,” *New York Times*, November 2, 1888, 2.

⁴⁰ Charles H. Burke, “Hamburg’s Annexation to German Customs Union,” *Reports from the Consuls of the United States* 101, no. 1 (January 1889): 71–80.

⁴¹ “Die Zollanschluss-Festlichkeiten (29. October und 3. November 1888),” in *Hamburgs Handel und Verkehr. Illustriertes Export-Handbuch 1888/1890* (1889), 130c; Daniel Jütte, “Living Stones: The House as Actor in Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Urban History* 42.4 (2016): 659–87; Antje Fehrmann: “...their feelings of patriotism were stirred up in a wonderful manner”: Sir George Gilbert Scott und der Bau der Hamburger Nikolaikirche nach 1842,” in *Kulturelle Transfers zwischen Großbritannien und dem Kontinent, 1680–1968*, ed. Christina Strunck (Petersberg: Michael Imhof, 2019), 62–81.

⁴² “Programm für die Anwesenheit Seiner Majestät des Kaisers in Hamburg am 29. October 1888,” Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 622-1/66, Familienarchiv Meyer, B 26; “Die Zollanschluss-Festlichkeiten,” 130c.

modern monarchical entries to the city, the fortifications formed “a material and ritual border.” Foreign rulers were welcomed outside the walls by delegates of the city council, then led into the city.⁴³ Read against this background, the bridge was a fitting rendezvous point, its location lending it “paramount significance” during festivities.⁴⁴ This significance can be derived from the site’s history. As part of the construction of the massive fortifications erected in the seventeenth century, a strip of land, stone, and wood was formed that separated the Außenalster outside the city walls from the Binnenalster within. After the walls were razed in a process by fits and starts that extended across the first half of the nineteenth century, this part of the glacis was used for railway tracks. In 1865, the already reconstructed wooden bridge was replaced by a stone bridge: the Lombardsbrücke, where, in 1888, the Kaiser was welcomed on the site where the city walls had once been.⁴⁵

Hailed along the way by the many onlookers observing the event from the shores of the Alster and from sailing boats on the lake, the imperial delegation moved to the Alsterlust restaurant for breakfast. Then, the emperor boarded a small steamship adorned with an oversized figurehead of a swan for a boat tour of the Alster. Iconographically, the ship’s design referenced the swans as symbols of the Alster and the medieval tale of the Knight of the Swan, on which Richard Wagner’s opera *Lohengrin* was based. Mounted on this swan-adorned boat, Wilhelm II was introduced to Hamburg’s crowds as a Lohengrin in the flesh, sent by God to unite the German Empire.⁴⁶ After disembarking at the Jungfernstieg, the delegation proceeded through the city toward the free port, the carriage with the Kaiser on board leading the way. For the *Manchester Guardian*, the scenery “resembled a triumphal procession.”⁴⁷ Masses of curious onlookers crowded the streets and windowsills of the flag-adorned buildings close to the route, vying for the best views (see figure 3). These crowds provided not only a vivid backdrop to this *via triumphalis* but, through their calls, cheers, and presence as a mass, contributed to creating a *tableau vivant* of popular imperial power. So did the several teams of photographers among the crowd who tried to capture the procession from the best possible angles.⁴⁸ The photographers created *tableaux inanimés* of the scene, instantiating the event by making images of it for posterity.⁴⁹

Yet it was not only the Kaiser to which the crowd and photographers applied their attention. The “principal current of the spectators,” the *Hamburger Nachrichten* explained, turned toward the free port. They were admiring the “splendidly blazoned free port warehouses and ... the ships decked out with flags from all countries and peoples, a view that few cities” could provide.⁵⁰ The journalist Hermann Lüders, who accompanied the Kaiser to cover

⁴³ Stollberg-Rilinger, *Rituale*, 108.

⁴⁴ *Hamburg und seine Bauten* (Hamburg: Architekten- und Ingenieur-Verein zu Hamburg, 1890), 359.

⁴⁵ *Hamburg: Historisch-topographische und baugeschichtliche Mittheilungen. Den Mitgliedern der XV. Versammlung deutscher Architekten und Ingenieure dargebracht von dem architectonischen Vereine* (Hamburg: Otto Meißner, 1868), 91; Gert Kähler, “‘The Times They are A-Changin’ . Eine barocke Verteidigungsanlage als Chance,” in *Von der Festung bis Pflanzen und Blumen: Die Hamburger Wallanlagen*, ed. Heino Grunert (Munich: Dölling und Galitz, 2020), 12–43, esp. 32–38; Karl-Klaus Weber, “Hamburg, die uneinnehmbare Stadt. Die Festungswerke Johan van Valckenburgs,” in *Der Krieg vor den Toren: Hamburg im Dreißigjährigen Krieg, 1618–1648*, ed. Martin Knauer and Sven Tode (Hamburg: Verein für Hamburgische Geschichte, 2000), 77–100.

⁴⁶ Elsner, *Kaisertage*, 168–70; Brage Bei der Wieden, *Mensch und Schwan. Kulturhistorische Perspektiven zur Wahrnehmung von Tieren* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 88; Tim Blanning, “Richard Wagner and the German Nation: The Prothero Lecture,” *Transactions of the RHS* 25 (2015): 95–112.

⁴⁷ “The Emperor William at Hamburg,” *The Manchester Guardian*, October 30, 1888, 8.

⁴⁸ For examples of these photographs, see the file “Zollanschluss-Feierlichkeiten, 1888,” Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Familienarchiv Petersen, 622-1_80 D 41. Not the analysis of the festivities as a “media event” that the title promises but with some notes on the work of photographers during the event: Dominik Kloss, “Die Hamburger Zollanschlussfeierlichkeiten 1888 als Medienereignis,” in *Stadt Bild Wandel. Hamburg in Fotografien 1870–1914/2014*, ed. Olaf Matthes (Hamburg: Junius, 2015), 64–69.

⁴⁹ See Martin Jay, “Photography and the Event,” in *Double Exposure: Memory and Photography*, ed. Olga Shevchenko (London, 2017 [2014]), 91–111.

⁵⁰ “Zum Kaiserbesuch,” *Hamburger Nachrichten* Extra-Ausgabe, October 29, 1888.



Figure 3. Georg Koppmann, *Schlusssteinlegung der Zollanschlußbauten Hamburgs am 29ten October 1888* (Hamburg, 1888), 2.

his travels for the illustrated weekly *Über Land und Meer*, explained that the free port's "enormous constructions" evoked "wonder and amazement" in the beholder. The impression that this "row of powerful brick buildings" "arise at the banks of the Elbe" "like a gigantic fortress" was also conveyed by contemporary postcards (see [figure 4](#)). Following dominant iconographic patterns, such photographs were usually taken from the riverside, emphasizing the importance of the city's waters for representations of Hamburg. Practical matters played a role, too: only a part of this row of buildings could have been captured from the city, where the views were otherwise obstructed by surrounding buildings, for instance in the Mattentwiete, through which the emperor approached the free port (see [figure 5](#)).⁵¹

To reach the Speicherstadt, the Kaiser had to cross the Zollkanal, a new arm of the Elbe, cut as a fluid border between the free port and German customs territory. These separate entities were spatially and symbolically connected through a new bridge, the Brooksbrücke (see [figure 6](#)).⁵² As the Brooksbrücke's design and decorations emphasized, Hamburg's free port was a key site interlocking terrestrial and aquatic networks, enabling the creation of the empire as a terraqueous entity.⁵³ The bridge's side facing the city was

⁵¹ Hermann Lüders, "Der Kaisertag in Hamburg," *Über Land und Meer* 61, no. 7 (1888–1889): 152. Claudia Schnurmann, "Hamburg in der Perzeption heimwehkranker Migranten des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts," in *Fluchtpunkt Hamburg. Zur Geschichte von Flucht und Migration in Hamburg von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Nele Maya Fahrenbruck and Johanna Meyer-Lenz (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018), 194.

⁵² *Hamburg und seine Bauten*, 398–99. For stimulating historical reflections on bridges, see Jürgen Osterhammel, "Grenzen und Brücken," in *Die Flughöhe der Adler. Historische Essays zur globalen Gegenwart* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2017), 82–100.

⁵³ Alison Bashford, "Terraqueous Histories," *Historical Journal* 60, no. 2 (2017): 253–72. On the German Empire between maritime and continental visions, see Geoff Eley, "Empire by Land or Sea? Germany's Imperial



Figure 4. Sandthorquai, postcard c. 1895, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-00426.

adorned with two allegorical female figures, statues of Germania and Hammonia, “symbols of the still closer bond of our town and the Reich.”⁵⁴ For the festivities, the bridge was decorated with flags of the German Empire and the City of Hamburg.⁵⁵ During the event, the “emblems of land transport, an actual locomotive, and various bales of goods” were positioned on the eastern side of the bridge. On the bridge’s western side, the “emblems of shipping, a fully laden ship ready to sail” epitomized Hamburg’s global maritime trade links.⁵⁶ The presence of three young Cameroonians among the crew of the ship further emphasized the free port’s character as a site of colonial connectivity.⁵⁷ Marking the Brooksbrücke’s entrance to the free port were two towers forming a large portal, the dominant architectural feature of the bridge.⁵⁸ Carried out in “medieval forms,” the towers were strongly reminiscent of premodern city gates.⁵⁹ The eastern gate, pointing inland toward Prussia’s heartland, was adorned with the empire’s coat of arms entwined with oak leaves. Hamburg’s city arms,

Imaginary, 1840–1945,” in *German Colonialism in a Global Age*, ed. Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 19–45. On ports and the imaginary of connections, Sujit Sivasundaram, “Towards a Critical History of Connection: The Port of Colombo, the Geographical ‘Circuit’ and the Visual Politics of New Imperialism c. 1880–1914,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59 (2017): 346–84.

⁵⁴ “Die Zollanschluss-Festlichkeiten,” 130f.

⁵⁵ See the file “Dekorierung der Brooksbrücke zur Feier des Zollanschlusses, 1888,” Staatsarchiv Hamburg 321-2 B_568.

⁵⁶ “Zum Kaiserbesuch,” *Hamburger Nachrichten* Extra-Ausgabe, October 29, 1888.

⁵⁷ These young men stayed at the Elbe to learn a trade, probably with Franz Heinrich Schmidt’s engineering company in Altona. “Zum Kaiserbesuch,” *Hamburger Nachrichten* Extra-Ausgabe, October 29, 1888; “Die Zollanschluss-Festlichkeiten,” 130f.

“Zum Kaiserbesuch,” *Hamburger Nachrichten* Extra-Ausgabe, October 29, 1888.

⁵⁸ See Franz Andreas Meyer’s drawings produced during the planning stages. “Neubau der Brooksbrücke über den Zollkanal,” 1884–1915, Staatsarchiv Hamburg 326-2 I_827.

⁵⁹ *Hamburg und seine Bauten*, 380.

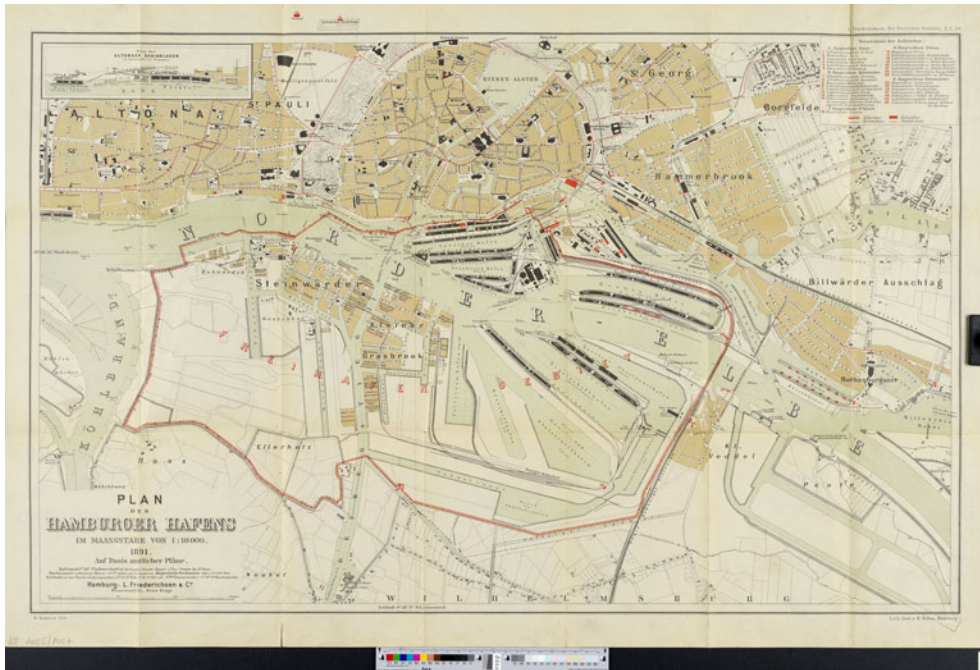


Figure 5. Ludwig Friederichsen, “Plan des Hamburger Hafens” in *ibid.*, *Die Elbe von Helgoland bis Hamburg* (Hamburg, 1891), https://digitalisate.sub.uni-hamburg.de/recherche/detail?tx_dlf%5Bdouble%5D=0&tx_dlf%5Bid%5D=13235&tx_dlf%5Bpage%5D=1&tx_dlf%5Bpagegrid%5D=0&cHash=bf39b56cd214b926eb43928cf55096fc (note that the designation in the library’s catalogue is incorrect).

the walls, and three towers symbolizing civic autonomy, were carved into the stone of the western gate; girdled with water plants, this was the side facing the sea via the Elbe.⁶⁰

As the gate indicates, a key to understanding the material and political construction of the Speicherstadt lies in the durability of the political significance of city walls. Media reports on the “Zollanschluss-Feierlichkeiten” repeatedly explained that the Kaiser was welcomed in Hamburg’s “walls”—even though these had already been torn down for decades.⁶¹ As Yair Mintzker has shown, city walls did not, as the process is often described, simply “disappear” in the nineteenth century when cities expanded beyond their prior confines—and nor did their emotional and symbolic significance. Urban enceintes remained meaningful for the spatial and symbolic definition of cities well into the nineteenth century. Trade privileges had long been tied to urban space: walls defined cities as spaces of commerce. Burghers identified with the privileges city walls signified in a corporative “walled” society; they “stood for one’s identity and privileges, marking an area that literally “made one free” (*Stadtluft macht frei*),” particularly in city republics like Hamburg.⁶²

⁶⁰ *Hamburg und seine Bauten*, 379–82.

⁶¹ See, for example, “Dem Kaiser zum Gruß”; “Der Kaiser in Hamburg,” *Hamburger Nachrichten*, no. 257, October 28, 1888, 257; “Der Kaiser in Hamburg,” *Hamburgische Börsenhalle*, no. 257, October 29, 1888; Lüders, “Der Kaisertag in Hamburg,” 152.

⁶² Mintzker, *The Defortification of the German City, 1689–1866*, 243; Dirk Brietzke, “Topographie einer wehrhaften Stadt. Die Bedeutung der Befestigungsanlagen für die Entwicklung und das Selbstverständnis Hamburgs im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert,” in *Von der Festung bis Planten un Blumen*, 44–67. As a primary source example from late-eighteenth-century Hamburg, see Ferdinand Beneke, *Die Tagebücher 1/2. Die Tagebücher 1796 bis 1798*, ed. Frank Hatje, Ariane Smith, Juliane Bremer, et al. (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012), 23. Further see also Daniel Jütte, *The Strait Gate: Thresholds and Power in Western History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 209–51; Daniel Jütte, “Entering a City: On a Lost Early Modern Practice,” *Urban History* 41.2 (2014): 204–27; Guadalupe García, *Beyond the Walled City: Colonial Exclusion in Havana* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); James D. Tracy,



Figure 6. Brooksbrücke, postcard c. 1895, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-00415.

Accordingly, defortification was a complex and convoluted process, intertwined with larger spatial and political transformations. In Hamburg, defortification was initiated in 1804 to avoid a long siege by Napoleonic forces. However, French forces occupied the city in 1806, and a few years later ordered the walls reconstructed. Defortification was reinitiated again after the French forces were finally ousted in 1814, and parts of the ramparts were turned into public parks.⁶³ But some sections of the walls and its functions were kept intact for almost another half-century. The city maintained the presence of police and customs officers at the gates. Nocturnal travelers still had to pay a special tax to be allowed to enter the city when the gates were locked at night. Even after the city walls had relinquished their military functions, Hamburg remained a “protected city in terms of its police and taxation policies” until 1860 when the system of the *Torsperre* was abolished.⁶⁴ Although an official map dating from 1868 still represented a city defined by borders marked by already-raised fortifications, maps published little more than a decade later visualized Hamburg’s physical expansion outward (see figures 1 and 2). In the nineteenth century, cities were transformed from “closed, hierarchical cosmos of bodies (corporations)” into an “an open world in which people, commodities, and ideas were constantly moving.”⁶⁵ As national borders were being constructed, the physical and imaginary borders of the city

ed., *City Walls: The Urban Enceinte in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Joshua Ehrlich, “The Meanings of a Port City Boundary: Calcutta’s Maratha Ditch, c. 1700–1950,” *Past & Present* 257, no. 1 (2022): 168–208.

⁶³ Mintzker, *The Defortification of the German City, 1689–1866*, 158–68.

⁶⁴ Mintzker, *The Defortification of the German City, 1689–1866*, 218–19. On this system and its longevity, see Burghart Schmidt, “Die Torsperre in Hamburg. Staatliches Kontrollinstrument, finanzielle Einnahmequelle oder ‘Überbleibsel aus der Knechtschaftszeit,’” *Mitteilungen des Hamburger Arbeitskreises für Regionalgeschichte* 37 (2000): 27–36.

⁶⁵ Mintzker, *The Defortification of the German City, 1689–1866*, 225.



Figure 7. Georg Koppmann, *Schlusssteinlegung der Zollanschlußbauten Hamburg's am 29ten October 1888*, Hamburg 1888, 12.

were being torn down. Urban and national space merged. But for many contemporaries, defortification and the resulting loss of the city's clear-cut physique was a traumatic experience, a "tragic" event.⁶⁶

Two decades after the end of the *Torsperre*, new bridges and walls, gates and towers that marked a space of urban privileges were being built in Hamburg: the Speicherstadt. During the 1888 adventus, the square next to the Brooksbrücke was the site of the ritual's climactic moment, the "solemn act" of the laying of the free port's keystone (see figure 7).⁶⁷ The site's decorations, the *Hamburger Nachrichten* opined, were well aligned with the free port's "Gothic architecture." Across the tower gate, the planning committee had positioned a "giant painting" that featured "a view of Hamburg, seen from the Elbe, depicted as a citadel."⁶⁸ Contemporaries were familiar with such depictions of their walled city of the past, popularized for instance through the Suhr brothers' lithographs of "old Hamburg," which helped keep the fortifications' significance alive (see figure 8).⁶⁹

Shortly after 1:00 clock, under the eyes of the guests invited to witness the event from the stands built for the occasion, as well as those who tried to catch a glimpse from wherever they could find a place, Kaiser Wilhelm II crossed the Brooksbrücke. Accompanied by Hamburg's

⁶⁶ Quoted in Mintzker, *The Defortification of the German City, 1689–1866*, 1.

⁶⁷ "Die Zollanschluß-Festlichkeiten," 130d.

⁶⁸ "Zum Kaiserbesuch," *Hamburger Nachrichten* Extra-Ausgabe, October 29, 1888.

⁶⁹ On the Suhr brothers, see Alfred Lichtwark, *Herrmann Kauffmann und die Kunst in Hamburg von 1800–1850* (Munich: Verlagsanstalt für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1893), 25–26.



Figure 8. Peter Suhr, “Aussicht vom neuen Brook (jetzt Kehr wieder) über die Brooksbrücke 1587”, *Hamburg’s Vergangenheit in bildlichen Darstellungen* (Hamburg, 1838), Part I, 6.

First and Second Mayors Versmann and Carl Petersen and Count Helmuth von Moltke, he was welcomed by Hamburg’s senate with Senator and President of the *Bürgerschaft* Johann Georg Mönckeberg at their head. Wilhelm II stepped under a velvet panoply, where an adjutant disposed the emperor of his coat. At such public events, it was more challenging to conceal Wilhelm’s impaired left arm than in photographic or painted portraits. This was not an issue for the *Hamburger Nachrichten*. Its reports declared that, once the coat was dispatched, “the youthful, beautifully masculine build of the Kaiser in the tight, richly bemedaled uniform emerged equaling a young god of war.”⁷⁰ For Hermann Lüders, evoking the temporalities characteristic for the event’s staging, it was a “moving spectacle to see the young ruler amidst a crowd of many thousands cheering down from all windows and roofs, surrounded by the proud buildings of the modern era, and old, venerable Hamburg with its opulently lively Elbe in the back....”⁷¹ The First Mayor read out the official deed, emphasizing the hope that the ceremony would mark the beginning of a new era for the city of Hamburg and for the entire empire’s global trade. The Brooksbrücke, vaulted “over the bed of the newly formed arm of the Elbe,” now “indissolubly connects Hamburg’s new free port with the German customs territory,” Versmann declared.⁷² After the speech, the head of Hamburg’s deputation for construction handed a hammer and trowel made of silver and ivory over to the emperor. Wilhelm II tossed mortar on the stone and carried out three hammer strokes pronouncing: “To the honour of God, to the benefit of the empire, to Hamburg’s good!”⁷³ On the ground

⁷⁰ “Die Zollanschluss-Festlichkeiten,” 130f–g.

⁷¹ Lüders “Der Kaisertag in Hamburg,” 153.

⁷² “Die Zollanschluss-Festlichkeiten,” 130g–h; Elsner, *Kaisertage*, 183–84.

⁷³ “Ordnung der Feier der Schlußsteinlegung in Anlaß der Vollendung der Arbeiten für den Anschluß Hamburgs and das Deutsche Zollgebiet,” Staatsarchiv Hamburg 132-5_2_Ält.Reg. F III e Fasc. 5. “Die Zollanschluss-Festlichkeiten,” 130h–i; Elsner, *Kaisertage*, 185–88.

of the Speicherstadt, the emperor symbolically granted Hamburg its new urban privileges, bounded in the space of the free port.

Historians have analyzed the Speicherstadt's architecture as appealing to a historically manifested particularism and desire to carve out a special place for Hamburg within the German Empire.⁷⁴ The port facilities' design was modeled on North German "red brick Gothic," referencing medieval and early modern Hanseatic architecture. As Karin Maak notes, the Speicherstadt was a "'Zukunftsstadt' that veiled its progressiveness under the foil of the medieval, bounded and defiant like a medieval town or castle."⁷⁵ Hamburg's chief engineer Franz Andreas Meyer, who planned and oversaw the construction of the Speicherstadt, and virtually his entire staff had studied with the champion of North German neo-Gothic Conrad Wilhelm Hase at the Polytechnic Institute in Hanover.⁷⁶ Many engineers and architects at the time used advanced technological means to build large infrastructural complexes but clad their ultramodern constructions in facades evoking locally rooted traditions. These stylistic assertions facilitated a reenchantment of the *entzauberte* modern world through projections of local tradition, and in Hamburg, notably, the charismatic leadership of the "Hanseaten."⁷⁷

The northern German Gothic revival was tied to the "renaissance of the Hanseatic League" and a wider embrace of maritime empire-building. In the late nineteenth century, the premodern Hanseatic League was being enshrined in new national-imperial cosmologies. As the historian Dietrich Schäfer, an antisemitic nationalist who would become an influential advocate of the imperial navy posited in 1885, the Hanseatic League had been "medieval Germany on the seas." Now, the history of the Hanse was turned into a repository for the construction of an imperial imaginary of a modern Germany on the seas.⁷⁸ Like other empires, the German Empire "was a variable political form." Characterized by "repertoires of power," these were "macropolities in constant formation," mobile, unfixated "imperial formations."⁷⁹ Hamburg's port, transport infrastructures, and merchant elite were connected to different imperial formations. They were of less import (but not of none) for military expansion overland and overseas, of bigger significance for the acquisition of formal colonies, and crucial for colonial commodity trade and global commercial power.⁸⁰ For Schäfer and others, this was the lesson to be drawn from the history of the Hanse—and its demise—which, for him, was due to the League's lack of political power: imperial

⁷⁴ Maiken Umbach, "A Tale of Second Cities: Autonomy, Culture, and the Law in Hamburg and Barcelona in the Late Nineteenth Century," *American Historical Review* 110, no. 3 (2005): 659–92; Maiken Umbach, *German Cities and Bourgeois Modernism, 1890–1924* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ch. 3; Maak, *Die Speicherstadt im Hamburger Freihafen*. On Hamburg particularism more generally, see also Jennifer Jenkins, *Provincial Modernity: Local Culture and Liberal Politics in Fin-de-siècle Hamburg* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003). Evans, *Death in Hamburg*, puts more emphasis on Hamburg's Prussianization as a result of the city-state's political failure during the cholera crisis of 1892.

⁷⁵ Maak, *Die Speicherstadt im Hamburger Freihafen*, 133.

⁷⁶ Günther Kokkelink and Monika Lemke-Kokkelink, *Baukunst in Norddeutschland. Architektur und Kunsthandwerk der Hannoverschen Schule 1850–1900* (Hannover: Schlütersche, 1998).

⁷⁷ Umbach, "A Tale of Second Cities"; Lu Seegers, "Hamburg und das Hanseatische," in *Hamburg: Tor zur kolonialen Welt*, 247–49. For the general argument, see James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

⁷⁸ Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 154–59; Dietrich Schäfer, *Die Hanse und ihre Handelspolitik* (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1885), 4; Karl-Ludwig Ay, "Schäfer, Dietrich," in *Neue Deutsche Biographie (NDB)*, vol. 22 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005), 504–05.

⁷⁹ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 16; Ann Laura Stoler, "On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty," *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 135–36, 128.

⁸⁰ Two older studies convey this well: Ekkehard Böhm, *Überseehandel und Flottenbau: Hanseatische Kaufmannschaft und deutsche Seerüstung 1879–1902* (Düsseldorf: Bertelsmann Universitätsverlag, 1972); Helmut Washausen, *Hamburg und die Kolonialpolitik des Deutschen Reiches 1880 bis 1890* (Hamburg: Hans Christians, 1968).

trade and the state should expand in conjunction. The German Empire and the Hanseatic trade emporium needed each other.⁸¹

Within this context, the free port's neo-Gothic architecture is usually interpreted along the lines of "invented tradition," but the temporalities of this architecture were more complex than this designation implies.⁸² Describing this architectural style, in northern Germany as elsewhere, as "Gothic" was a modern "misnomer," coined by neoclassicists who wanted to emphasize the "barbarity" of the high medieval architecture that they wrongly linked to the Goths of the late Roman invasions.⁸³ Overlooking the strong Islamic influence on this architecture's medieval incarnation, Gothic was discovered from the late eighteenth century onward as a quintessentially Christian European style posited against Enlightenment neoclassicism.⁸⁴ In Hamburg, "neo-Hansa" Gothic accordingly "broke with the city's typical architectural style: white, neo-classical buildings." White plaster buildings had been dominant in the first construction projects executed after Hamburg's Great Fire of 1842, notably in the neo-Renaissance designs of the *Alsterarkaden*. In 1876, the Hamburg architects Haack and Wilhelm Hauers could still declare—or rather, as advocates of red-brick Gothic, deplore—that the citizens of their and indeed most port cities preferred light colors.⁸⁵ However, this "white" Hamburg had only begun to be constructed in the late eighteenth century. Buildings with their brickwork laid bare had been a common feature of Hamburg's architecture until the mid-eighteenth century. "Gothic" was an ill-suited designation, but the construction of a "red" Hamburg of brick in the second half of the long nineteenth century was a re-embrace of those bygone building styles that had been replaced by Enlightenment visions of Republican architecture.⁸⁶

Such architectural historicism in nineteenth-century commercial architecture, as Simon Gunn emphasizes with regard to the warehouses of Victorian Manchester, did not necessarily "denote nostalgia for the past or a retreat from the modern."⁸⁷ For Scott, the architect of one of Hamburg's first major neo-Gothic buildings, St. Nikolai, the Gothic revival was "a deep-seated, earnest, and energetic revolution in the human mind, and one which ... pervades all the countries where Gothic architecture once flourished. It is a craving after the resumption of our national architecture, the only genuine exponent of the civilization of the modern as distinguished from the ancient world..."⁸⁸ As Jan Ziolkowski emphasizes in his work on the modern embrace of cultural forms understood as "Gothic," "what appears medieval at first glance may contain much that is modern—and vice versa." The appropriation of older architectural styles was a way to express a local, distinctly European identity that was traditional *and* modern.⁸⁹

The building that would become the linchpin for the design of the free port preceded the construction of this infrastructural complex: the Kaiserspeicher, Hamburg's first modern multistory warehouse, completed in 1875. Already in the planning stages, Meyer decided

⁸¹ Schäfer, *Die Hanse und ihre Handelspolitik*, 32.

⁸² Umbach, *German Cities and Bourgeois Modernism, 1890-1924*, 70. Umbach of course refers to the notion framed by *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric John Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Canto, 1992 [1983]).

⁸³ Jerrold E. Hogle, "Introduction: Modernity and the Proliferation of the Gothic," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.

⁸⁴ Diana Drake, *Stealing from the Saracens: How Islamic Architecture Shaped Europe* (London: Hurst, 2020).

⁸⁵ *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, June 24, 1876, 258.

⁸⁶ Hermann Hipp, "Zum Backsteinbau des 19. Jahrhunderts. Seine Anfänge in Hamburg und anderen Städten," in *Das alte Hamburg (1500-1848/1849). Vergleiche—Beziehungen*, ed. Arno Herzig (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1989), 225-69.

⁸⁷ Simon Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle-Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 41.

⁸⁸ George Gilbert Scott, *Remarks on Secular & Domestic Architecture, Present & Future* (London: John Murray, 1857), 11-12.

⁸⁹ Jan Ziolkowski, *The Juggler of Notre Dame and the Medievalizing of Modernity*, vol. 3, *The American Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2018), 249.

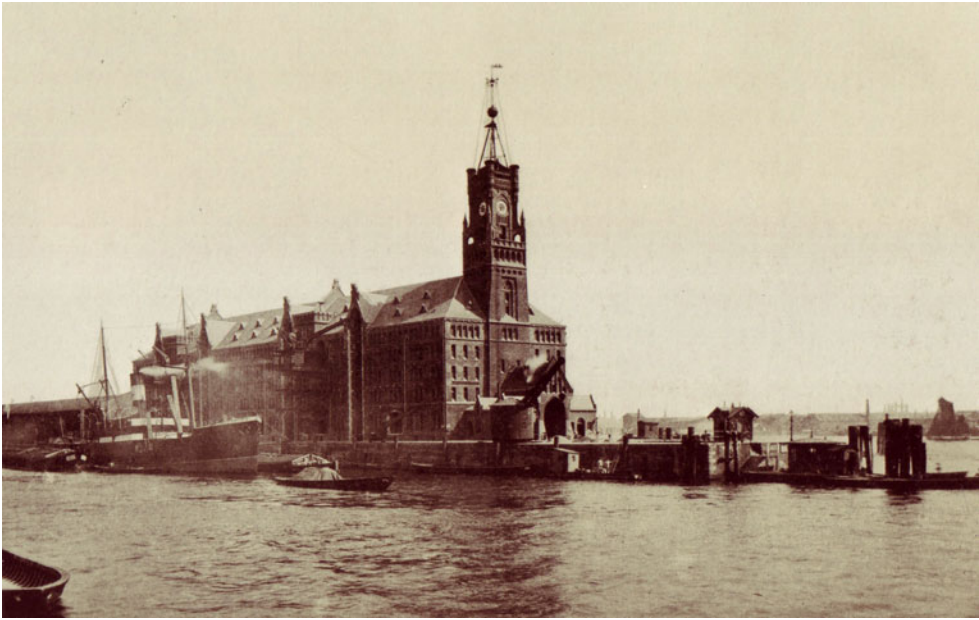


Figure 9. Wilhelm Dreesen, Kaiserquai-Speicher mit Zeitball, c. 1890, first published in *ibid.*, *Die Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg und ihre Umgebung*: nach photographischen Aufnahmen (Hamburg 1894). Via Wikimedia Commons.

that, to form a harmonious ensemble, the free port's new warehouses should be built with sloping roof structures with tilt angles like that of the Kaiserspeicher, turning the latter into a benchmark for the Speicherstadt's design.⁹⁰ Constructed after plans of the Hase disciple Hauers and Hamburg's most influential hydraulic engineer, Johannes Dalmann, the Kaiserspeicher's architecture resembled that of a Gothic church with a nave and a tower (see [figure 9](#)). As a bird's-eye-perspective illustration in *Gartenlaube* emphasizes, the warehouse, situated next to the Kaiserquai and Dalmannquai, was designed for direct transfers from seagoing vessels to rail, with tracks leading into the interior of the trapezoid structure (see [figure 10](#)).⁹¹ The creation of modern cities as spaces of circulation was connected with the latter's ordering through central sites that interlocked and synchronized different mobilities. The Kaiserspeicher was one such structure, built to facilitate, channel, and control the seemingly frictionless flow of commodities.⁹² Designed "monumentally with bare brickwork," and situated on the Kaiserhöft, an engineered promontory extending into the port, the Kaiserspeicher was a widely visible site.⁹³ This position helped turn it into an iconic sight and enabled the structure's use for navigational purposes. Clock faces were placed on all four sides of its tower, not indicating the time, however, but the water level. Above the tower on a scaffold, a time ball was installed. Deployed to synchronize traffic in the

⁹⁰ Frank M. Hinz, *Planung und Finanzierung der Speicherstadt in Hamburg. Gemischtwirtschaftliche Unternehmensgründungen im 19. Jahrhundert unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Hamburger Freihafen-Lagerhaus-Gesellschaft* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 2000), 248–49, 274–76; Lange, *Die Hamburger Speicherstadt*, 131–33.

⁹¹ *Hamburg und seine Bauten*, 428.

⁹² Lasse Heerten, "Mooring Mobilities, Fixing Flows: Port Cities and Globalization in the Age of Steam," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2021): 350–74; Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London: Verso Books, 2003), 155–56.

⁹³ C. Hennings, "Reisebericht. Beitrag zur Lagerhausfrage," *Rigaer Handels-Archiv* 8 (1881): 359–60, esp. 359.

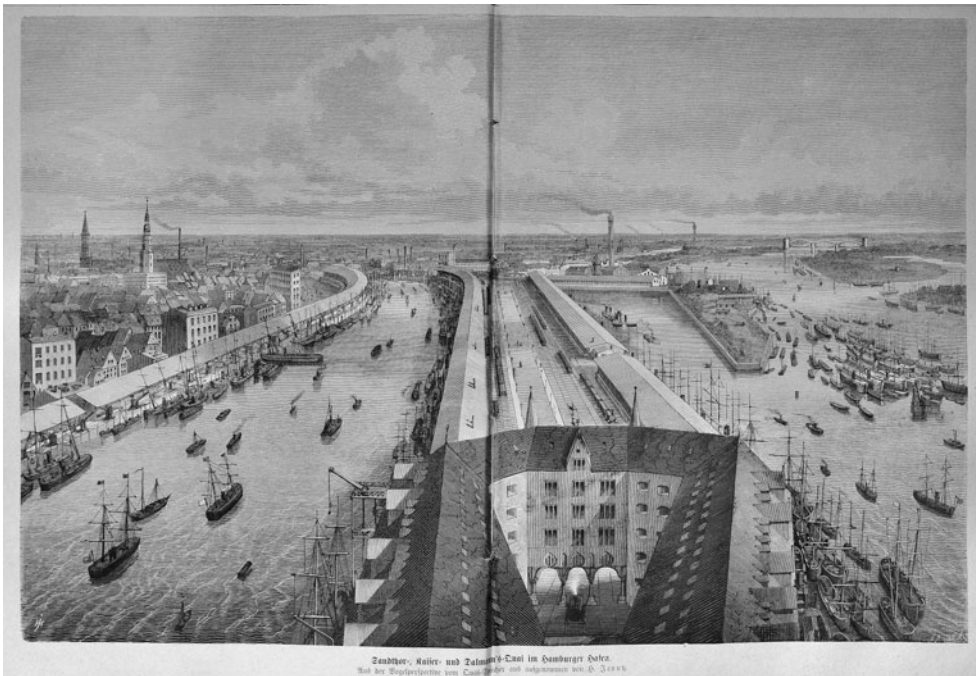


Figure 10. H. Jenny, “Sandtor-, Kaiser- und Dalmannskai im Hamburger Hafen,” *Die Gartenlaube*, no. 4 (1877), 68–69.

port, exactly at 12:00 noon, Greenwich time, the ball, raised ten minutes before, was dropped to provide navigators and captains with a visual signal to set their marine chronometers—sounds would not have been noticeable in the noisy steam-age ports.⁹⁴ Docks and warehouses epitomized, as Dara Orenstein writes, “a city’s mastery of time and space.”⁹⁵

The Kaiserspeicher’s architecture emphasized a verticality designed to enable the horizontal synchronization of transport networks. As Patrick Joyce argues in his analysis of Victorian town halls, more important than their—often neo-Gothic—architectural style was the “visual economy” the buildings represented, to which “the vertical of time was central”: “In the often closed, congested Victorian city the siting of the tower in relation to the accompanying street pattern created powerful visual effects....”⁹⁶ This effect was maybe even more powerful in ports such as Hamburg, where tall, vertical constructions like the Kaiserspeicher towered over these bustling sites of traffic, transport, and transfer. A painting by Hugo Schnars-Alquist depicting one of Wilhelm II’s later visits to the city in 1904 is “fraught with symbolic traits” but conveys this sense forcefully (see figure 11).⁹⁷ The imperial yacht *Hohenzollern* with its white hull and golden funnels could be seen to appear like a foreign object in this composition of light and brownish blue, of gray, black, and dark red. It is, however, rather casually depicted as only one of many vessels. The feature standing out in

⁹⁴ *Hamburg und seine Bauten*, 426–28; “Auskunftsersuchen des französischen Generalkonsuls über den Zeitball auf dem Kaispeicher A am Kaiserkai, 1898–1899,” Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Senatskommission für die Reichs- und auswärtigen Angelegenheiten, 132-1_L2139. On sounds in the port, see Lars Amenda, “Hafenkonzert. Geräusche und Gesellschaft in Hamburg im 20. Jahrhundert,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 8 (2011): 201–16.

⁹⁵ Dara Orenstein, *Out of Stock: The Warehouse in the History of Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 88.

⁹⁶ Patrick, *The Rule of Freedom*, 166, 167.

⁹⁷ Jörgen Bracker, “Kaiserbesuch im Hafen,” in *Alster, Elbe und die See. Hamburgs Schifffahrt und Hafen in Gemälden, Zeichnungen und Aquarellen des Museums für Hamburgische Geschichte*, ed. Jörgen Bracker and Carsten Prang (Hamburg: Topographikon, 1981), 236–37.



Figure 11. Hugo Schnars-Alquist, “Kaiserbesuch im Hafen”, oil on canvas, 1904, Museum für Hamburgische Geschichte, Inv. No. 1956,19. I thank Olaf Matthes for his help in obtaining the reproduction.

this urban seascape is the red-brick Kaiserspeicher: a massive edifice towering over the port, the Speicher seems to provide structure to the traffic directed toward it in a loosely triangular but horizontal arrangement.

The interplay of materiality and design defined this architectural style. “Eisengotik,” as Hamburg-based architectural critic Paul Bröcker dubbed it in the early twentieth century, was part of the embrace of historicism in contemporary industrial architecture, but, with its emphasis on verticality, the style was particularly suited for constructions using new techniques and materials.⁹⁸ When, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, American architects began designing skyscrapers, they studied medieval churches for guidance and inspiration, turning Gothic into “the design and construction style of choice for verticality until the twentieth century,” which can be seen to have harbingered “the quintessence of the modern.”⁹⁹ Not only were steel, iron, and glass key for these constructions—brick was, too. Scott opined already in the 1850s that no other material was “so well suited” to modern commercial architecture.¹⁰⁰ Fritz Schumacher, who would leave a lasting mark on Hamburg’s built environment as the city’s building director between 1909 and 1933, was critical of the Hanover school and no advocate of Gothic medievalism. However, he also embraced brick as the building material that expressed Hamburg particularism, grown from the “soil of the northern German littoral.”¹⁰¹ The Speicherstadt’s red-brick architecture projected a modernity formed out of the clay of the Elbe’s coastal marshlands. Lüders could thus explain in his report on Wilhelm II’s adventus that the Speicherstadt’s buildings reflected the “serious, forceful character” of the “denizens of the Nordic seas.”¹⁰²

That brick was the preferred material to showcase Hamburg’s modern commercial architecture’s rootedness in local soil is brought across forcefully in Bröcker’s writings in the early

⁹⁸ Paul Bröcker, “Die Architektur des modernen Kaufmannshauses,” in Paul Bröcker and Fritz Höger, *Die Architektur des hamburgischen Geschäftshauses. Ein zeitgemäßes Wort für die Ausbildung der Mönckebergstraße* (Hamburg: Boysen & Maasch, 1910), 55; Paul Bröcker, “Die Stilepochen unseres Kaufmannshauses und ihr Übereinstimmen mit den Wirtschaftsperioden. Die Vertikale in seiner Architektur,” in *Die Architektur des hamburgischen Geschäftshauses*, 5–16. On historicism in industrial architecture, see Matthew Jefferies, *Politics and Culture in Wilhelmine Germany: The Case of Industrial Architecture* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), 12–52.

⁹⁹ Ziolkowski, *The American Middle Ages*, 240–41.

¹⁰⁰ Scott, *Remarks on Secular & Domestic Architecture, Present & Future*, 216.

¹⁰¹ Fritz Schumacher, “Die neuen Regungen des Hamburger Backsteinbaus in der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts,” *Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung* 43, no. 23/24 (March 21, 1923): 136; Jenkins, *Provincial Modernity*, 288–93.

¹⁰² Lüders, “Der Kaisertag in Hamburg,” 152.

twentieth century.¹⁰³ Bröcker declared that a building's concrete or iron interior forms a skeleton, a "Knochengüst," resembling that in the human body. Whether bodies or buildings, these frames are the same everywhere, Bröcker explains. What distinguishes them is their skin: "The construction of the human skeleton tells us: this is a person. And the colour of the skin tells us: this is a paleface, a redhead, a Japanese. In the same way, the brick skin of an office block should tell us: this is a Hamburg building!" Bröcker's analogies did not stop at anthropomorphizing architecture, racializing it, too: "Who would want to deny oneself being considered a European, a German because of his bodily appearance?" In an age of colonial empire, red brick was becoming the skin of Hamburg's "white" architectural body.¹⁰⁴

Yet brick neo-Gothic could express different localisms: Hamburg was not the only city of brick, certainly not the only port city. Since the 1850s, architects had begun turning Bremen and Bremerhaven into cities of brick, using this material for the design of neo-Gothic churches or commercial and navigational buildings such as Bremerhaven's lighthouse or the Hafnhaus in the free port, which also opened in 1888.¹⁰⁵ Similar buildings were put up in the empire's Baltic sea ports as Stralsund, where an entire island, the Hafensinsel, was constructed along these stylistic lines.¹⁰⁶ The expressionist poet Bruno Pompecki wrote about Gdańsk, then under German rule, that its "old gables" shone warmly "brick-red."¹⁰⁷ This architectural idiom was also used for the architectural design for navy buildings, notably in Kiel's naval harbor and for the massive Marineschule Mürwik in Flensburg.¹⁰⁸

Nineteenth-century neo-Gothic was a style used to express local identities not only in the German Empire but across the globe. Global Gothic had many sources yet was significantly formed by the British Empire and its commercial hegemony.¹⁰⁹ In the century's first decades, the docks of London and Liverpool had become an attraction for American visitors who, as Tamara Plakins Thornton has shown, described them in the romantic language of the sublime, aestheticizing them as manifestations of a new form of global commerce. Observers "stressed the Gothic qualities of the docks," emphasizing their vast but measurable scale representing the massive quantities of commodities handled there. Ports, docks, warehouses, and the red-brick Gothic associated with them signified an emergent new global capitalism.¹¹⁰ This was no coincidence: Liverpool and Manchester, where merchants tied the global networks of colonial commodity trade and the plantation complex to Britain's new industrial capitalism, formed an interurban core of this new global economy.¹¹¹ Later in the century, the Speicherstadt similarly projected the values of a new global capitalism in which the traditions of merchant commerce were connected to new industrial architectures, infrastructures, and production techniques. For Bröcker, Hamburg's cityscape was supposed to look "international und heimatlich zugleich," exhibiting the city's "Weltbürgerschaft," invoking

¹⁰³ On Bröcker and Hamburg as a "city of brick," see Matthew Jefferies, *Hamburg: A Cultural History* (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2011), 123–50; Matthew Jefferies, "A City in Distress? Paul Bröcker and the New Architecture of Hamburg, 1900–1918," in *The City in Central Europe: Culture and Society from 1800 to the Present*, ed. Malcolm Gee, Tim Kirk, and Jill Steward (Ashgate: Aldershot, 1999), 9–26.

¹⁰⁴ Bröcker, "Die Architektur des modernen Kaufmannshauses," 52.

¹⁰⁵ Simon Loschen, "Ueber mittelalterliche Backsteinarchitektur in Bremen, insbesondere am Katharinenkloster," *Bremisches Jahrbuch* 1 (1863): 309–14; *Bremen und seine Bauten* (Bremen: Carl Schünemann, 1900), 250, 721, 735.

¹⁰⁶ Torsten Knuth, *Passion und Mission des Stralsunder Stadtbaumeisters Ernst von Haselberg (1827–1905)* (PhD diss., Greifswald, 2011), 77–78, 128.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Peter Oliver Loew, *Danzig: Biographie einer Stadt* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2011), 170.

¹⁰⁸ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 155.

¹⁰⁹ Alex Bremner, *Imperial Gothic: Religious Architecture and High Anglican Culture in the British Empire, c. 1840–70* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Ziolkowski, *The American Middle Ages*, 107–48.

¹¹⁰ Tamara Plakins Thornton, "Capitalist Aesthetics: Americans Look at the London and Liverpool Docks," in *Capitalism takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 169–98, esp. 177.

¹¹¹ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014), chaps. 6–8.

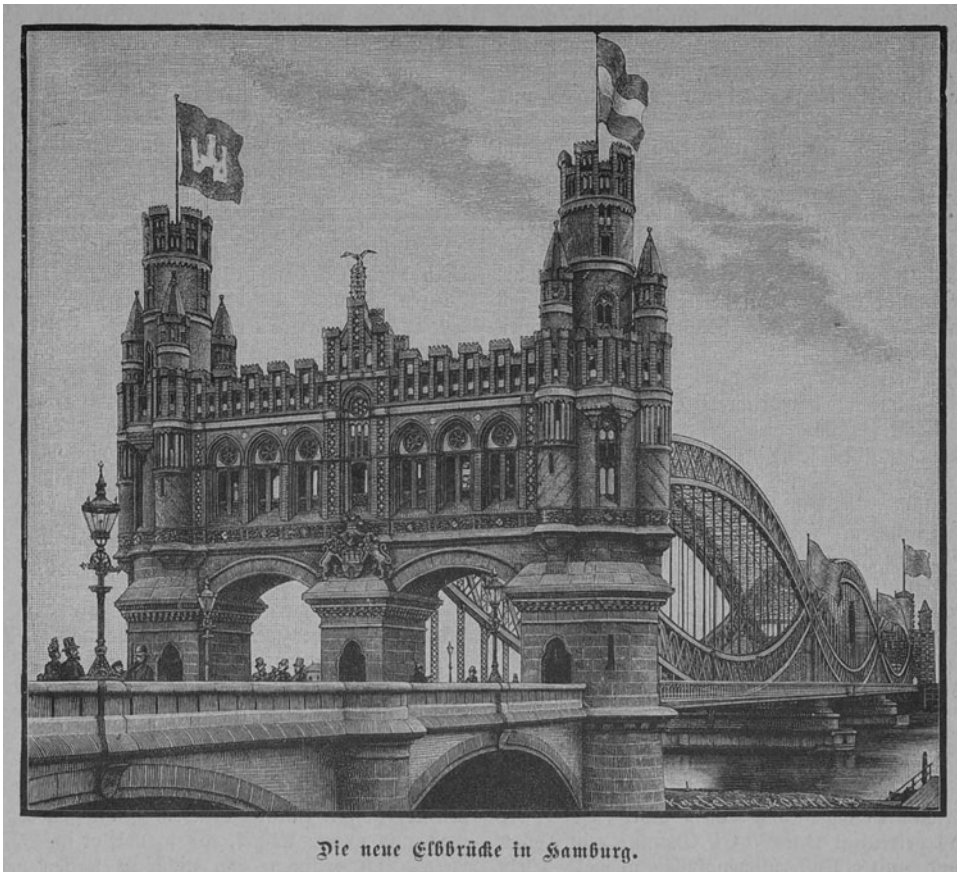


Figure 12. “Kleine Bilder aus der Gegenwart: Hamburgs neue Elbbrücke,” *Die Gartenlaube* XXXVI, no. 2 (1888), 29.

a contemporary imperial cosmopolitanism.¹¹² Red-brick Gothic, shaped by imperial formations, provided an architectural idiom that was perceived to be locally rooted and at the same time global, imperial, modern.

Back to the imperial procession. Only after the festive completion of the Brooksbrücke and hence the recognition of Hamburg’s urban privileges was the Kaiser to continue his round trip on open water. This, Lüders explained, was the event’s part that was actually “Hamburgisch”: the tour of the port.¹¹³ The emperor boarded a barge that took him upriver along the Zollkanal and Oberhafenkanal toward the Billhörner Brücke. There the Kaiser mounted a coach that drove him across the Neue Elbbrücke, completed the year before (see [figure 12](#)).¹¹⁴ Built for horse carriages, the bridge supplemented Hamburg’s first bridge across the Elbe, the Eisenbahn-Elbbrücke, constructed in 1872 for rail and pedestrian traffic. Both bridges were marked by portals resembling premodern city gates, a medievalism that

¹¹² Paul Bröcker, *Hamburg in Not! Ein eiliger Hilferuf und ein Vorschlag zur Rettung der vaterstädtischen Baukultur* (Hamburg: Eggers & Bröcker, 1908), 10; Bröcker, “Die Architektur des modernen Kaufmannshauses,” 52. On cosmopolitanism and nineteenth-century imperialism, see Valeska Huber, Jan C. Jansen, and Martin Rempe ed., “Cosmopolitanism in the Nineteenth Century,” *Humanity* 12, no. 1 (2021).

¹¹³ Lüders, “Der Kaisertag in Hamburg,” 153.

¹¹⁴ “Zum Kaiserbesuch,” *Hamburger Nachrichten* Extra-Ausgabe, October 29, 1888; “Die Zollanschluss-Festlichkeiten,” 130i.

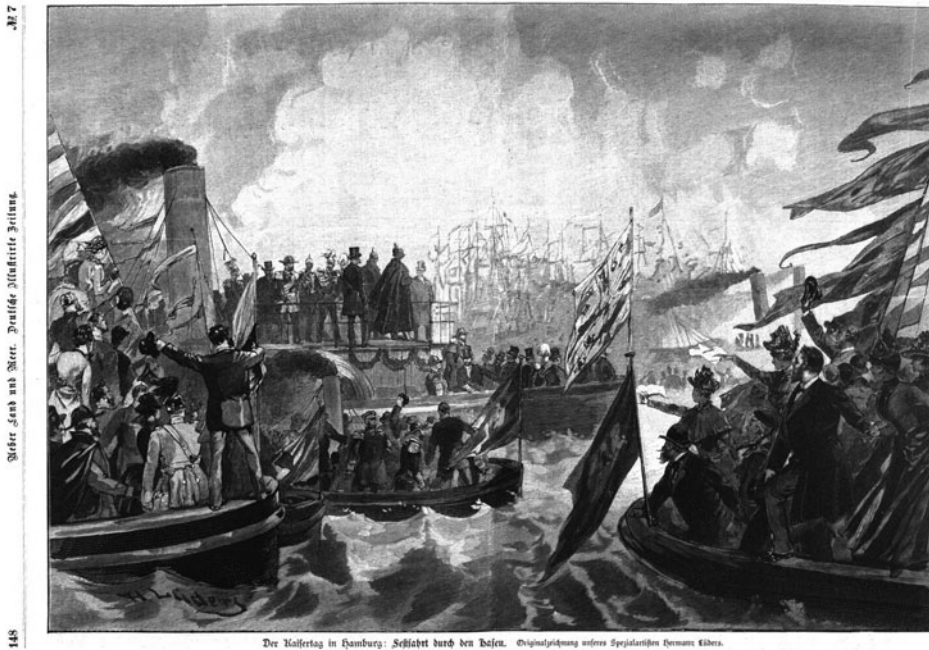


Figure 13. *Über Land und Meer: Deutsche Illustrierte Zeitung* 61 (October 1889), 148.

was typical for large bridge constructions in the German Empire.¹¹⁵ Completed in conjunction with the Speicherstadt, the new bridge's neo-Gothic design was conceived by a team of architects and engineers that included several disciples of Hase's Hanover school, notably Meyer and Hauers, the latter the portal's designer.¹¹⁶ As the *Gartenlaube* wrote, the "monumental portal" of the bridge, completed in 1887, would equal the "brick style of medieval architecture.... The overall character measures up to the proud constructions of the various Hanse towns that commanded their highest level of power in the Middle Ages."¹¹⁷ The bridges also mark the border between maritime and inland water transport. Once again, the key moments of this *rite d'agrégation* were staged in boundary spaces of connection.

At the jetty next to the bridge, the Kaiser boarded the steamer *Patriot* for a long harbor tour, during which the new port facilities' architecture was explained to him by head engineer Meyer.¹¹⁸ Most illustrated newspapers ran full-page wood engravings of the harbor tour as the visual centerpiece of their reports (see figure 13).¹¹⁹ Yet words and images could not do justice to this experience, Lüders explained: "The cheers of the crowd, the smoke of the hundreds of chimneys, the choirs aboard several ships, the fluttering pennants, the rough Elbe, all of this developed into an impression that no participant will forget."¹²⁰ Twenty-year-old Harry Graf Kessler watched the emperor from the deck of a steamer next to the railway bridge. As he

¹¹⁵ Gustav Kopal, "Die Elbbrücken der Paris-Hamburger Eisenbahn," *Die Gartenlaube* 17 (1872): 274–76; *Hamburg und seine Bauten*, 361–62, 372–75; Osterhammel, "Grenzen und Brücken," 93.

¹¹⁶ "Kleine Bilder aus der Gegenwart: Hamburgs neue Elbbrücke," *Die Gartenlaube* 2 (1888): 29; Kähler, "The Times They are A-Changin'," 25.

¹¹⁷ "Kleine Bilder aus der Gegenwart: Hamburgs neue Elbbrücke," 29.

¹¹⁸ "Zum Kaiserbesuch," *Hamburger Nachrichten* Extra-Ausgabe, October 29, 1888; "Die Zollanschluss-Festlichkeiten," 130i.

¹¹⁹ Dr. Richard Tannert, "Die Zollanschluß-Festlichkeiten in Hamburg," *Illustrirte Zeitung*, no. 2367, November 10, 1888, 461–62; Lüders, "Der Kaisertag in Hamburg," 148. See also the material in the files 720-1_2_233-02 = 05_1888.018a and 720-1_2_233-02 = 05_1888.018b, Staatsarchiv Hamburg.

¹²⁰ Lüders, "Der Kaisertag in Hamburg," 153.



Figure 14. Hans Makart, “The Entrance of Emperor Charles V into Antwerp,” oil on canvas, 1878. Copyright: bpk / Hamburger Kunsthalle / Elke Walford (photographer).

noted in his diary, Wilhelm II “came at about two; he stood on the captain’s deck with Moltke, looking very straight and well, and a number of other officials; the sight of the crowd of launches and steamers on the Elbe, the crowd of people on the shore, the sea of heads, the deafening hurrahs, was most grand. As the Emperor passed the military band on one of the steamers struck up the Tannhäuser march....”¹²¹ With Wagnerian fanfare, the dawn of Germany’s imperial future was solemnly pronounced. And it began on Hamburg’s waters.

The celebrations ended where they had begun—on the former ramparts. The day’s closing act was a festive dinner held in the new red-brick Kunsthalle, constructed in the 1860s on the grounds of the former Bastion Vincent, about 500 meters east of the Lombardsbrücke. The location brought the staging full circle. The main part of the festive society assembled in the Makart-Saal. On the walls behind the party was a massive historical painting, fifty square meters large: Hans Makart’s “Entry of Charles V into Antwerp” (see [figure 14](#)). The painting depicted the Holy Roman Empire’s newly coronated ruler’s entrance into Antwerp—a North Sea port city that, at the time represented, 1520, was, according to Fernand Braudel, the “centre of the *entire* international economy.”¹²² Makart’s painting, first exhibited in Vienna in 1878 and then at the Paris International Exposition, aroused public controversies. Contemporaries were irritated by the five nude female figures in the painting; not by the nudity per se, but by its use outside of an allegorical context in a painting that was rather loosely based on a historical event.¹²³ For the art historian Robert Stiasny,

¹²¹ Harry Graf Kessler, “Tagebucheintrag (Editionstext), Hamburg, 29.10.1888,” in *Das Tagebuch 1880–1937. Online-Ausgabe*, ed. Roland S. Kamzelak (<https://www.dla-marbach.de/edview/?project=HGKTA&document=1225>). Kessler lived in Hamburg at the time, but, having been educated at St. George’s School, Ascot, for two years before, he still wrote his diary in English. Laird M. Easton, *The Red Count: The Life and Times of Harry Kessler* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), chap. 2.

¹²² Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, vol. 3, *The Perspective of the World*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992 [1979]), 143.

¹²³ Amelie Baader, “Biografie eines Skandals: Hans Makarts Einzug Karls V. in Antwerpen,” in *Making History: Hans Makart und die Salonmalerei des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Amelie Baader and Markus Bertsch (Petersberg: Michael Imhof,

writing shortly after Makart's death in 1884, it was an "aesthetic atrocity" to let so lightly dressed maidens "trudge" through the street and its faeces "at the head of a military procession."¹²⁴ The display of the young women's naked bodies signified something else, too: the male omnipotence of a young ruler.¹²⁵ The Habsburg Emperor Charles V, later generations knew, came to rule over an empire on which "the sun never set."¹²⁶ In 1888, with the arrival of another young emperor, the painting expressed what the future promised for Hamburg and this new German Empire: the rise to global power, with its commercial hub in a port city by the North Sea.

Second Mayor Petersen opened the evening in the Kunsthalle with a toast, stressing that "we, majesty, bring from the old, at all times self-sacrificingly loyal Hanse town and the lower Saxon tribe settled here in its serious and calm but firm and persistent sense a faithful heart." After three cheers to his honor, Wilhelm II replied. It was not the first time that he "sojourned in your walls": his path always led him through the city's "hospitable walls" on visits to his "so beloved" fleet. Not only the site of the festivities, but also the Kaiser's address hence referenced the city walls. The event, its staging, and media reports also emphasized Hamburg's function as a global urban imperial connector. The emperor addressed Hamburg as a city of merchants: "You are the ones who connect our fatherland with invisible ties to distant parts of the globe, transport our products, and more than that; you are the ones who transmit our thoughts and ideas to the wider world...."¹²⁷ In Hamburg in 1888, a new imperial "horizon of expectations" was ritually opened during an event staged in and formed by a "space of experience" defined by centuries of urban history, still present in this "urban palimpsest."¹²⁸

A close examination of contemporary source material shows how intertwined imaginings of the free port and Hamburg's urbanity remained despite the new boundaries created with the free port area. At first sight, the new spatial arrangement produced by the latter could be held to illustrate a meta-process that frames the scholarship on port cities: the spatial separation of cities and ports. Many scholars describe how ports and urban space were increasingly disconnected in the nineteenth century with the construction of closed dock facilities or free port areas, initiating the separation of ports and cities that is so characteristic for the spatial structures of container shipping in our global present. As Jürgen Osterhammel writes, "new-style ports" were constructed as "self-enclosed organisms with their own administration, conceived as a technical whole and both spatially and mentally remote from the city."¹²⁹ For instance the free port in Bremen, however—also opened in 1888 after less successful negotiations with the empire that

2020), 29–39; Hessel Miedema, "Hans Makart, De intocht van Karel V. Een diachrone evaluatie," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 49 (1998): 282–307.

¹²⁴ Robert Stiassny, *Hans Makart und seine bleibende Bedeutung* (Leipzig: Edwin Schloemp, 1886), 9.

¹²⁵ Reinhard Pohanka, "Die Phantasie von Macht und Erotik—Hans Makart und der Einzug Karls V. in Antwerpen," in *Hans Makart, Malerfürst (1840–1884)*, ed. Renata Kassal-Mikula (Vienna: Museen der Stadt Wien, 2000), 40–44.

¹²⁶ See, for example, "Vor der Eroberung des Goldlandes Peru," *Die Gartenlaube* 33, no. 34 (1885): 562.

¹²⁷ "Hamburg, 30. October," *Hamburger Nachrichten*, no. 259, October 30, 1888.

¹²⁸ Koselleck, "'Erfahrungsraum' und 'Erwartungshorizont'—zwei historische Kategorien"; Andreas Huyssen described late-twentieth-century Berlin as an urban palimpsest, but the term grasps the temporalities of urban space more broadly. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹²⁹ Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 278. See also Brian Hoyle, "Global and Local Change on the Port-City Waterfront," *Geographical Review* 90 (2000): 395–417; Helmuth Berking and Jochen Schwenk, *Hafenstädte. Bremerhaven und Rostock im Wandel* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2011), 32–36; Dirk Schubert, "Seaport Cities: Phases of Spatial Restructuring and Types and Dimensions of Revedevelopment," in *Port Cities: Dynamic Landscapes and Global Networks*, ed. Carola Hein (London: Routledge, 2011), 54–69. For a historiographical critique of these assumptions see Heerten, "Mooring Mobilities, Fixing Flows, 350–74.

supported Hamburg's Hanseatic sister city only with 16 million Marks—was deliberately built closer to the city than the existing ports. The latter had been constructed after the Weser's siltation, a process now combated with steam-powered dredges, enabling closer links between port and city.¹³⁰

If Hamburg's Speicherstadt was, as Felix Mauch writes, a “parallel world” devoid of urbanity, why did contemporaries immediately call it a city?¹³¹ The construction of Hamburg's warehouse district as urban space signals that the notion of “urbanization” frames our perspective in ways that tend to eclipse the long genealogies of understandings of “cities” that continued to frame how contemporaries imagined their hometowns. Cities are defined by the layers of historical experience that materially or mentally linger on in these urban spaces. The temporalities of urban transformation are more complex than sociological process concepts like “urbanization” indicate. Similarly, presentist assumptions about the port-city separation frame our perspective in a way that leads us to overlook how, at the time, ports remained the spatial center of their cities—for the merchant caste, for the masses that provided the port labor, and for the imagination of port cities as cities.

In the twentieth century, Hamburg would become known as the “gate to the world” (“*Tor zur Welt*”). By now, as we think of urban space as quintessentially open, most of us have forgotten this sobriquet's semantic links to the walled city of the past. Yet there is no gate without a wall. Situated within the new open city, the free port was an enclosed zone with special customs law regulations, marked by clear boundaries. At the same time, the free port was a space that, regarding commerce, elevated modern urban spatial openness even further: within this enclosed space, all barriers that could hinder the circulation of commodities were supposed to be removed.¹³² Ports channeled multi-layered connections within bounded spaces: in the age of steam, port cities were “centers” and “islands,” too.¹³³ In the case of Hamburg, this space was an enclave within the expanding city—situated on actual islands within the Elbe but also in the heart of the city, defining Hamburg's urbanity.

In Hamburg, the bounded space of the free port was architecturally and politically constructed to signify urban privilege. The spatial and economic structures in which the free port was created meant that, politically, the free port came to represent Hamburg's privileges as a global urban trade “emporium” exactly after its administrative separation from the city in terms of customs law. Historian Daniel Jütte explains that “boundaries are not simply sites of disruption, but also sites of creation and production.” They are “means of claim-making,” as Tamar Herzog adds.¹³⁴ Jütte's plea to “transcend ... the boundary between pre-modern and modern” and to “think about long-term genealogies” to understand the productive qualities of boundaries, is particularly relevant for the case discussed here.¹³⁵ In the nineteenth century, many contemporaries in Hamburg and across Europe thought of themselves as “modern”—but they did not invent this modernity from scratch. They resorted to established conceptual and cultural forms to express ideas about history, urbanity, and modernity. Mentally and culturally, the walls of the past lingered on as urban *lieux de mémoire*, still marking the mental maps of Hamburg's bourgeois citizens. With the red-brick walls, towers, and gates of the Speicherstadt, they symbolically and, to some degree, materially reconstructed Hamburg's fortifications of the past.

Moreover, the free port can be seen as a continuation of the “complex ... set of internal boundaries” within premodern cities. These “enclaves and compounds formed distinct

¹³⁰ Ed. Suling, “Der Freibeizirk zu Bremen,” in *Bremen und seine Bauten*, 721–32.

¹³¹ Mauch, “Speicher in der Stadt,” 155.

¹³² Orenstein, *Out of Stock*. On “circulation” and modern urban space, see also Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), chap. 10; Patrick, *The Rule of Freedom*, 155–56.

¹³³ Ehrlich, “The Meanings of a Port City Boundary,” 168, 208.

¹³⁴ Suzanne Conklin Akbari et al., “AHR Conversation: Walls, Borders, and Boundaries in World History,” *American Historical Review* 122, no. 5 (2017): 1519, 1521.

¹³⁵ Akbari, “AHR Conversation,” 1506.

political—and often also distinct juridical—entities in the midst of urban space” and were not only spatially significant but also indicated “belonging to a particular social community.”¹³⁶ In late-nineteenth-century Hamburg, one such space was the newly created free port, juridically defined as an exclusively commercial space, culturally marked as distinctly bourgeois—and separated from the rapidly growing working-class waterfront quarters right next to it. Accordingly, considering class relations is key if we want to understand the transformations that defined Hamburg’s free port. The new open city was no longer the corporative urban society of the past. The growth of the laboring masses threatened to turn Hamburg into a non-bourgeois metropolis. For the survival of the old merchant republic in this new imperial age, the “Speicherstadt” was constructed as an urban bastion defending bourgeois privileges: represented by the free port as a synecdoche for the entire city, Hamburg was to remain a space of trade, commerce, and urban privilege. The opening ceremony deemphasized internal differences within the empire’s elites. However, newly elected affinities and a conservative recourse to established cultural forms bonded Hamburg’s Hanseats with Prussia’s aristocratic elites, creating a new imperial politics of class. With the “Speicherstadt,” Hamburg’s merchant elite materially displayed the continuation of urban privileges in a new imperial age, recasting the city’s bourgeois global character in the stones of the free port of the future.¹³⁷ This staging was why this modern-day adventus led the German Emperor into a city. However, this city was not merely the city of Hamburg, but also a city of warehouses.

Acknowledgments. The research for this article has been funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Project number 278804377). I presented earlier drafts of this article at workshops at the University of Helsinki, the National Maritime Museum in London, the Universität Leipzig, and the Ruhr-Universität Bochum. I thank all participants at these workshops, Monica Black and the anonymous reviewers at *Central European History*, and Sandra Maß and Megan Maruschke for feedback and suggestions.

Competing interests. None

Lasse Heerten is lecturer and researcher in transnational history at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum and head of the project “Imperial Gateway: Hamburg, the German Empire, and the Making of a Global Port,” funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation). A historian of modern Europe and its entanglements in a colonial and postcolonial world, he has authored *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) and articles published in, among others, *The American Historical Review*, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, and the *Journal of Historical Sociology*. He is currently writing his second book, tentatively titled *Water and Stone: The Port of Hamburg in the Age of Global Empires*.

¹³⁶ Akbari, “AHR Conversation,” 1527–28.

¹³⁷ I take the notion of “recasting” from Charles Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade After World War I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016 [1975]).

Cite this article: Lasse Heerten. “An Imperial Adventus into a City of Warehouses: History, Modernity, and Urbanity in the Symbolic and Material Construction of Hamburg’s Free Port,” *Central European History* (September 2024): 57, 311–337. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938923000845>.