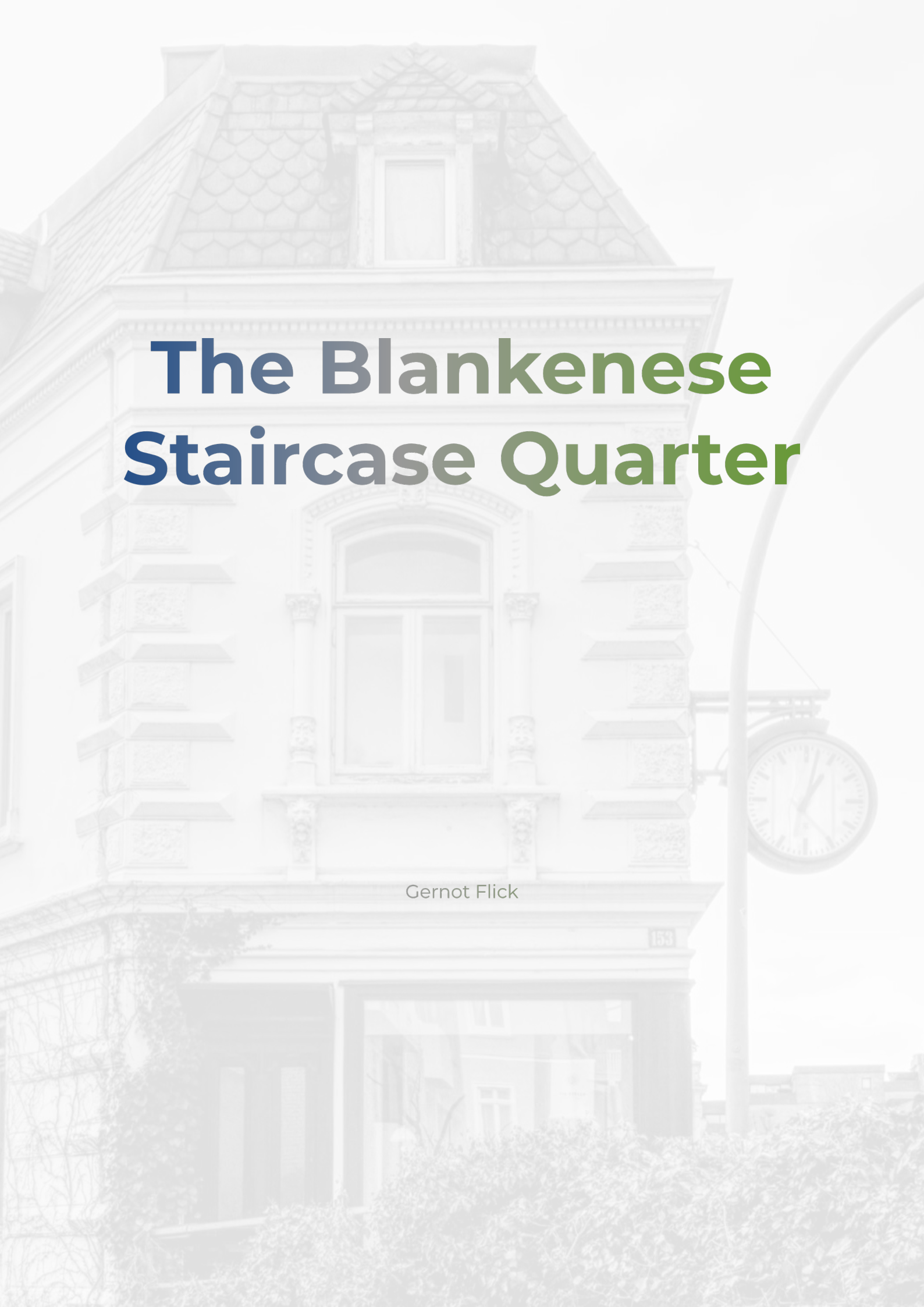




The Blankenese **Staircase Quarter**

Gernot Flick

Today, the Blankenese Staircase Quarter is one of Hamburg's most unusual historic urban districts. Situated between the River Elbe and the Süllberg hill, it consists of a dense network of staircases, narrow paths, sunken lanes, small alleys, gardens and houses that adapt to the steep slope overlooking the Elbe rather than imposing themselves upon it. Around 5,000 steps connect the so-called Lower Quarter along the riverbank with the Upper Quarter on the hillside and around the Süllberg. To this day, most houses cannot be reached by car.

What appears today to be a deliberately designed, picturesque residential neighbourhood did not originate from a master plan. The Staircase Quarter is the result of centuries of development. Its distinctive character is primarily shaped by the landscape, the River Elbe and the way of life of the people who have lived here for centuries.

A Village near the Elbe

Blankenese was first mentioned in a document in 1301. At that time, it was a small village on the banks of the Elbe within the County of Holstein-Pinneberg. Its location was exceptional: the Geest ridge dropped steeply towards the river, while the elevated Süllberg offered an excellent vantage point overlooking the waterway.

The history of the Süllberg goes back even further. A bishop's castle and a provost's residence stood there as early as the Middle Ages. Its elevated position was important for controlling the Elbe and, in particular, monitoring the strategically significant ferry crossing. A count's castle was later built on the same site.

Blankenese itself, however, developed primarily as a village of fishermen, boatmen and river pilots. The Elbe was both the foundation of their livelihood and a major transport route. Fishing, shipping, pilotage, ferry services and, later, the fish trade shaped the lives of the local population for centuries.

The Blankenese ferry played a particularly important role. The Breckwoldt family, whose presence in Blankenese can be traced back to the late Middle Ages, was granted ferry rights in the early sixteenth century. The ferry connected the two banks of the Elbe and made Blankenese an important point along the river.

The Hillside Shaped Everyday Life

The defining feature of what later became the Staircase Quarter arose from a seemingly simple circumstance: the village was built on a hill.

Unlike a settlement on flat ground, streets here could not simply be laid out in a regular grid. Houses had to adapt to the terrain. Paths followed natural depressions in the landscape, sometimes running parallel to the slope and

sometimes climbing it along steep routes.

These old connections gradually developed into the staircases and footpaths we see today.

The first settlements on the hillside were probably considerably older than the buildings that have survived to the present day. The heritage authorities believe that settlement of the hillside area began by the sixteenth century at the latest. The oldest surviving buildings date from the eighteenth century.

This also explains why the network of paths appears so unusual. The staircases were not planned as one integrated system. They emerged wherever people needed the most direct route between their homes, plots of land, the village and the riverbank.

The Fishermen's Houses on the Hillside

The historic Staircase Quarter was originally not an area of grand villas. It was a working-class neighbourhood inhabited by Blankenese's fishermen and boatmen.

Typical were the so-called Tweehuses, small semi-detached houses in which two families, or different generations of the same family, lived under one roof. Characteristic features included timber framing, thatched roofs, small plots and houses built close together. Many properties also included a separate dwelling for older family members, where they could spend their retirement.

The houses were practical rather than ornamental. The ground floor contained living and working areas, while lofts and outbuildings were used for storage, equipment and other purposes. Everyday life unfolded directly on the hillside and along the Elbe.

One particularly important example is the Blankenese Fishermen's House. Architectural investigations and dendrochronological studies have suggested that parts of its timber framework may date from shortly after 1570. This makes it one of the oldest surviving residential buildings within the present-day boundaries of Hamburg.

The present-day Fishermen's House Museum therefore offers more than a glimpse into an old building. It provides insight into the original way of life throughout the neighbourhood.

Blankenese's Golden Age as a Fishing Village

During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Blankenese developed into an important fishing village. According to the City of Hamburg, Blankenese had one of Denmark's most powerful fishing fleets in

the early eighteenth century. The fishermen lived in simple houses, many of them thatched, built directly on the hillside and close to the water.

At that time, the Elbe was far more closely associated with local fishing and coastal shipping than it is today. The river provided livelihoods, but it also brought dangers. Storm surges, drifting ice, strong currents and shipping accidents were part of everyday life.

The close relationship with the Elbe therefore shaped not only the local economy but also the culture and family histories of the village. Many family names recur across several generations. Families of fishermen, boatmen and ship captains owned plots of land, houses and boats and were deeply rooted in the village's social fabric.

Numerous staircase and pathway names still commemorate these families today.

From Fishing Village to Affluent Riverside Suburb

During the nineteenth century, Blankenese began to change fundamentally.

Shipping developed further, the fish trade became increasingly important, and society itself was changing. Wealthy Hamburg merchants, shipowners and other members of the middle and upper classes discovered the exceptional setting on the hillside overlooking the Elbe.

A decisive step came with the railway connection in 1867. The railway linked Blankenese directly with Altona, making it easier to travel to the rapidly growing city. Blankenese railway station opened on 19 May 1867. Improved transport connections triggered a veritable building boom.

Increasingly, larger country houses and villas were built alongside the old fishermen's cottages.

Two very different worlds now came together in the Staircase Quarter: the traditional world of fishermen and boatmen and the new world of wealthy merchants and shipowners.

This mixture remains visible in the architecture to this day.

The Contrast Between Fishermen's Cottages and Villas

It is precisely this mixture that gives the neighbourhood its historic appeal.

Larger residential houses, villas and, later, modernist buildings stand among small fishermen's cottages. The heritage authorities therefore explicitly classify the Staircase Quarter as a historic ensemble, noting that architectural evidence from several centuries has survived within a relatively

small area.

As a result, the neighbourhood has no single, uniform architectural style.

Alongside old timber-framed houses with thatched roofs are nineteenth-century homes, grand bourgeois villas, buildings from the 1920s and post-war constructions. One notable example of modernist architecture is Villa Goebel, designed by Karl Schneider, near what is now known as Charitas-Bischoff-Treppe.

This is another reason why the Staircase Quarter differs from an artificially preserved museum village. It remains an inhabited neighbourhood that has continued to evolve over several centuries.

Why There Are So Many Staircases

The approximately 5,000 steps are not simply a design feature that someone decided to introduce at a particular point in time. They are the result of the topography and the area's historical development.

The slope towards the Elbe is steep. At the same time, plots of land were small and the terrain was deeply indented. Constructing conventional roads would have required extensive earthworks and substantial alterations to the hillside. Narrow footpaths and staircases, by contrast, were much easier for residents to create.

Over time, this produced a dense network of:

- Staircases
- Narrow footpaths
- Sunken lanes
- Natural and man-made depressions in the terrain
- Small squares
- Private access paths
- Terraced gardens

In a sense, these paths are the streets of old Blankenese.

Even today, numerous houses can only be reached along such routes. This unusual access network is therefore not merely a tourist attraction but an essential feature of the historic settlement structure.

The Names Tell the Story

Anyone walking through the Staircase Quarter today can almost read its

history directly from the street signs.

Names such as Bartmanns Treppe, Bornholdts Treppe, Bröers Treppe, Krögers Treppe, Möllers Treppe, Oestmanns Treppe, Schnudts Treppe and Stehrs Treppe commemorate individuals and families associated with old Blankenese.

Many were fishermen, boatmen, ship captains or landowners.

These names differ fundamentally from the street names introduced in many later urban developments. In numerous cases, they preserve the memory of people whose properties or homes were directly connected with the respective path.

Other names simply describe the location or function of a route, such as Strandtreppe, Mitteltreppe or Süllbergstreppe.

The network of paths is therefore also a record of family history and settlement history.

The Transformation into a Villa District

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Blankenese had definitively developed from a fishing village into an affluent suburb on the Elbe.

This did not mean that the old fishing families disappeared entirely. For a long time, traditional houses and plots continued to exist alongside the new villas.

Blankenese increasingly became associated with merchants, shipowners and wealthy Hamburg residents. The hillside location was now valued not only for its proximity to the water but also for its views, landscape and prestigious residential setting.

The view across the Elbe became a central part of the area's appeal.

Incorporation into the Growing City

The political circumstances of the old village changed as well. Blankenese initially belonged to the County of Holstein-Pinneberg and later to the Duchy of Holstein. For more than two centuries, the area was under Danish rule. Following the Second Schleswig War, it came under Prussian administration in 1866.

In 1919, neighbouring Dockenhuden was merged with Blankenese. In 1927, against the wishes of many residents, Blankenese became part of the larger city of Altona under the Greater Altona Act. Finally, under the Greater Hamburg Act of 1937/38, Altona, together with Blankenese, was

incorporated into Hamburg.

The Staircases and the Origins of Their Names

- Bartmanns Treppe named after Captain and landowner Bartmann (1823–1867) around 1927
- Beckers Treppe named after Karl Heinrich Becker (1807–1888), watchmaker and landowner before 1903
- Bornholdts Treppe named after Hans Bornholdt (1787–1866), fisherman around 1895
- Bröers Treppe named after Peter Bröers (1797–1867), fisherman and landowner before 1903
- Charitas-Bischoff-Treppe named after the writer Charitas Bischoff (1848–1925) 1928
- Flashoffs Treppe named after Franz Josef Flashoff, master glazier and landowner before 1903
- Krögers Treppe named after Jürgen Kröger (1811–1889), captain and landowner before 1903
- Lesemanns Treppe named after Johann Nicolaus Lesemann (1759–1804), a former landowner before 1929
- Mitteltreppe a purely geographical name meaning “Middle Staircase” 1949
- Möllers Treppe named after Claus Möller (1802–1873), shipowner and captain, and a former landowner around 1927
- Oestmanns Treppe named after the old Blankenese boatmen’s family Oestmann, particularly Jürgen Oestmann (1731–1812) before 1930
- Schlagemihls Treppe named after a landowner of that name before 1928
- Schnudts Treppe named after Jürgen Hermann Schnudt (1827–1904), a former landowner before 1927
- Sechslingstreppe named after a former toll of one Sechsling, a small historical coin, payable when passing through 1903
- Stehrs Treppe named after the Stehr family of fishermen, documented in Blankenese since 1590
- Strandtreppe a functional name meaning “Beach Staircase”, leading to the Elbe beach 1949
- Süllbergstreppe named for its location on the Süllberg before 1903

The Names Reveal Much About Old Blankenese

One particularly striking feature is that ten of the seventeen names derive from individuals or families. This is no coincidence. Blankenese was originally a fishing and pilotage village, and many properties on the hillside belonged to local fishing, boatmen's and ship captains' families for generations. The names can therefore be grouped broadly as follows.

Traditional fishing and boatmen's families

- Bornholdt
- Bröers
- Kröger
- Oestmann
- Stehr
- Möller
- Schnudt

Other landowners and occupations

- Becker: watchmaker
- Bartmann: captain
- Flashoff: master glazier
- Schlagemihl: landowner
- Lesemann: former landowner

A figure from cultural and public life

- Charitas Bischoff

Names describing location or function

- Mitteltreppe
- Strandtreppe
- Süllbergstreppe
- Sechslingstreppe

The underlying street-name register explicitly identifies the individuals behind the historic names and, in some cases, records their occupations and property ownership.

Other Named Paths and Footways

Anyone exploring the entire historic network of paths in the Staircase Quarter should also take note of several routes that do not include the word Treppe (staircase) in their names.

Path or footway and the origin of the name

- Borracks Weg named after Wilhelm Borrack (1810–1888), master baker and landowner
- Brandts Weg named after F. Brandt (1790–1870), captain and local council representative
- Baur's Weg named after Georg Friedrich Baur (1768–1865), merchant
- Bremers Weg named after Johann Bremer (1796–1869), captain
- Paarmann's Weg named after Christ. Hinrich Marten Paarmann (1807–1882), basket maker
- Sagebiel's Weg named after a former landowner and ferry-house proprietor, Sagebiel
- Sachtestieg named after Paul Sachte, Blankenese's earliest known bailiff
- Töpferstieg named after a pottery workshop that operated there briefly in 1873
- Süllbergsweg named for its location on the Süllberg
- Steiler Weg a descriptive name meaning "Steep Path"
- Rutsch hn old, colloquial local name
- Krumdal / Krumdals Weg derived from an old field name
- Op'n Kamp low German for "in the field" or "on the field"
- Notenbarg an old historical field name
- Pepers Diek named after a former pond that has since been filled in
- Hessestieg a historic footpath in the Staircase Quarter
- Plumpenstieg a historic footpath