

## The Legacy of the Brigade Ernst May in Magnitogorsk Today. An Excursion Report

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Any discussion of the architectural and urbanistic heritage of the “Brigade Ernst May” in Magnitogorsk, this model city of the first Soviet Five-Year Plan, necessarily has to begin with the previous planning history and especially with the All-Union competition “Socialistic Settlement at the Magnitogorsk Metallurgical Combine,” advertised in December 1929 and awarded in March 1930. The designs of Ivan Leonidov and his group OSA, published in the journal *Sovremennaja Arkhitektura* (3/1930), became icons of Soviet avantgarde architecture and international modernism. As the authors of the volume *Städtebau im Schatten Stalins* (2003)<sup>1</sup>, edited by Harald Bodenschatz and Christiane Post, clearly demonstrate, this competition still belonged to the period of programmatic fundamental debates within the Soviet Union, in which different cultural-revolutionary approaches to modern urban development competed with one another. In the following period, 1930/31, foreign experts were involved, the planning culture was focused on implementation, and the projects were based on the principles of modern urban development. The great urbanistic turn followed in 1931/32, when outdated urban structures were pragmatically accepted and urban development was integrated into the Five-Year planning. In the process, the foreign experts lost their influence. The resolution for the master plan for Moscow in 1935 marks the end of this transition towards

“socialistic urban planning in the Stalin era”, a shift towards new grandeur and the hybrid combination of “modern” and “traditional orientation”.<sup>2</sup>

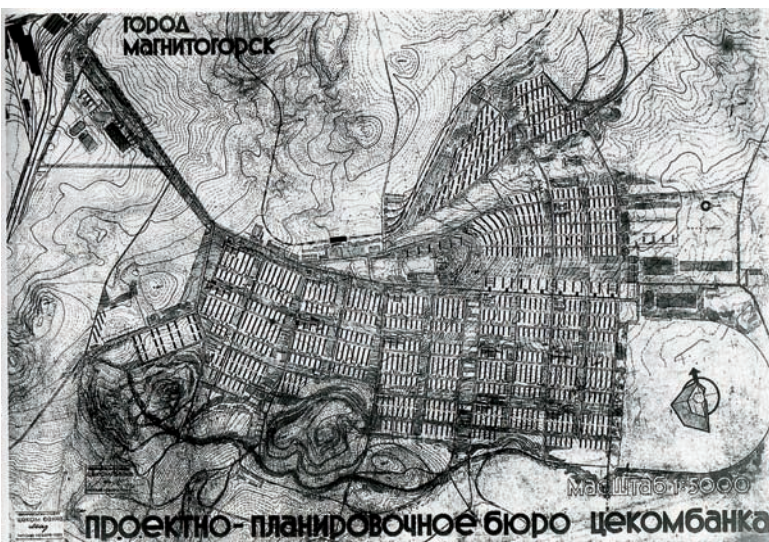
The jury of the Magnitogorsk competition in 1929/30 did not award the first prize, but recommended to implement Leonidov’s settlement scheme. The idea of the linear city design was meant as an attempt to reconcile the opposites of city and countryside. Leonidov most radically exemplified this idea in the competition, while jury member Nikolai Miljutin at the same time popularized it in his famous foundational book *Sozgorod* (1930) with the well-known “schematic plan for Magnitogorsk according to the assembly line system”. It also provided the link for the later master planning by Ernst May and his group. Ernst May had arrived in Moscow at the beginning of October 1930 and immediately went to Magnitogorsk. By this time, the foundation stone for the first residential building in the First District had already been laid (in July 1930).

Interestingly, not only are the sources for the actual building history of Magnitogorsk still scarce, but also almost all accounts of Magnitogorsk’s architectural and urbanistic history are being undertaken without any recognizable attempt to deal with the buildings as they still exist today or with the current urbanistic and social situation. There were no images of the actual condition of the buildings and of the

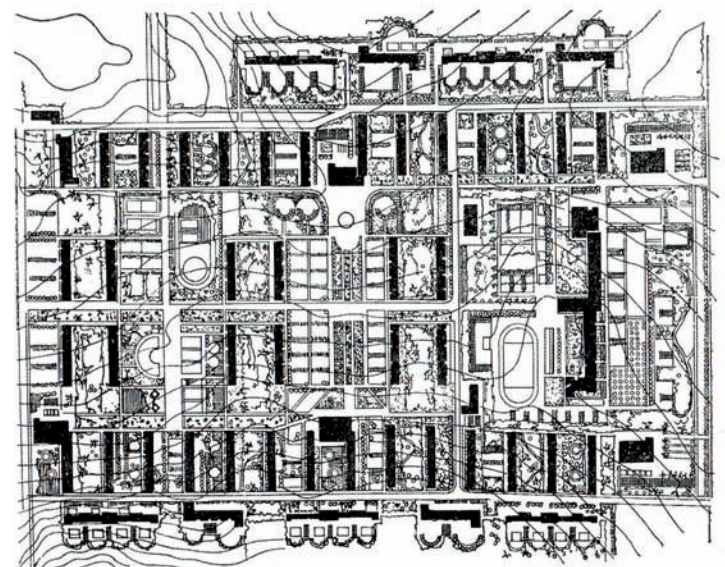
1. Harald Bodenschatz, Christiane Post (eds.): *Städtebau im Schatten Stalins. Die internationale Suche nach der sozialistischen Stadt*. Berlin: Braun, 2003.

2. Ibid., p. 280.

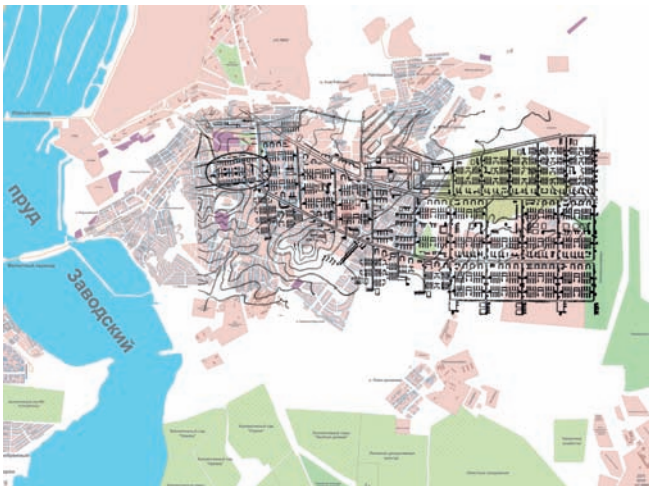
1. Magnitogorsk master plan from November 1930 by Ernst May



2. Plan of Magnitogorsk’s first development stage from 1932 with details of open public spaces







3. Plan of Magnitogorsk by Ernst May from 1932 superimposed on the current city plan. Drawings by the author

urban structures as they existed in the former Soviet Union – neither in the catalogue for the 1977 exhibition in West-Berlin *Who Owns the World – Art and Society in the Weimar Republic*,<sup>3</sup> in which Christian Borngänger intensely discussed the activities of foreign architects in the USSR, including the May Brigade, nor in the articles published in the GDR.<sup>4</sup> Also, the already-mentioned profound seminal work *Städtebau im Schatten Stalins* from 2003 recapitulates only from plans and archives and argues without any real encounter with the objects on-site whatsoever.

Extremely creditable, however, is issue number 48 of the journal *Bauwelt* from 1995, which is dedicated to the history and present of Magnitogorsk, although the first construction section of Magnitogorsk is discussed only briefly.<sup>5</sup> The other positive exception is the article “The Legacy of the Bauhaus in Magnitogorsk” by the Magnitogorsk-based architectural historian professor W. S. Fedosichin<sup>6</sup>, in which he not only presents the Soviet preliminary work undertaken between the competition evaluation in March 1930 and the arrival of the Brigade Ernst May in the fall of 1930 as well as the to date mostly underrated activities of the Moscow architect Sergej E. Černyšev for the master planning and the project development of the first construction section,

3. Christian Borngänger: “Ausländische Architekten in der UdSSR: Bruno Taut, die Brigaden Ernst May, Hannes Meyer und Hans Schmidt”, [in:] *Wem gehört die Welt – Kunst und Gesellschaft in der Weimarer Republik*, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin 1977, pp. 109–142.

4. Christian Borngänger: “Ausländische Architekten in der UdSSR: Bruno Taut, die Brigaden Ernst May, Hannes Meyer und Hans Schmidt”, [in:] *Wem gehört die Welt – Kunst und Gesellschaft in der Weimarer Republik*, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin 1977, pp. 109–142.

5. Thomas Kuder, Uwe Altröck: *Die Stahlstadt: Das erste Jahrzehnt*, [in:] *Bauwelt* 48 (1995), pp. 2780–2783.

6. See V. С. Федосихин: “Наследие школы Баухауз в Магнитогорске”, [in:] *Vauhaus на Урале от Соликамска до Орска*, Вебстер, Екатеринбург 2008, pp. 144–161.

4. The earliest residential buildings by Sergej Černyšev in Pionerskaja Street from 1930, the internal core of the First District. Photo by the author



but also identifies the current problems of the settlement. Fedosichin not only acknowledges Ernst May’s conceptual-artistic approach (and defends it against the attacks, common since the 1930s, that his urban development is monotonous and faceless), he also describes in all urgency the uncertain future of the settlement in light of impending demolition and wild modernization: “For all the world to see, Magnitogorsk in the near future will thus lose a link to its own history.”<sup>7</sup>

An excursion to Magnitogorsk in the summer of 2008 provided me not only with empirical evidence on-site, but most importantly, it allowed me to confront the insights of the planning history with findings at the objects themselves and the exploration of the position of the first construction section within the urban developmental structure of the city.

First, let us take a look at the master building plans for Magnitogorsk from 1929 until 1933. Already in November 1929, just before the announcement of the competition, Černyšev had presented the first master building plan. The first design of the May group was developed shortly after their first trip to Magnitogorsk and is dated to November 1930. Regarding his planning concept, the research literature refers time and again to May’s previous planning for the garden city Goldstein in Frankfurt/Main, developed shortly before but not realized. Its planning scheme obviously served as a model. The extant plan for the first construction section of Magnitogorsk, which must be very close to the executed project and which exhibits a detailed planning for the public open spaces, originated in 1932 here overlaying the current city plan. Ernst May’s last master plan for Magnitogorsk was developed in 1933, at a time when the decision to move the further urban development to the other bank of the Ural River already was on the horizon and when the political paradigm change in urban development and architecture pulled the rug from under the activities of the May group in the Soviet Union.

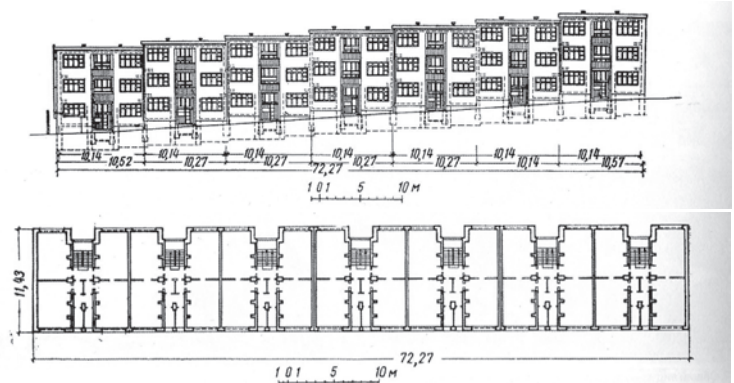
The later master plan from 1934 for the further development on the west banks was worked out by the Lengorstroir project (Leningrad Communal Project Development).

#### The current situation of the first construction section in Magnitogorsk

The dominating inner backbone of the First District is still formed by Sergej Černyšev’s earliest residential buildings on the Pionerskaja Street, whose foundation stone was laid on 5 July 1930. Different than expected in May’s later plan for the First District from 1932, the street was designed as a space for demonstrations and gatherings. The spacious green areas, which provide the district with its own microclimate, are in an extremely neglected state and are further impaired by overground district heating pipelines. While the view west on Pionerskaja Street still allows a glimpse of the steppe, the other line of sight onto the

7. Ibid., p. 161, transl. Th. F.

5. Row residential buildings in the south, designed by Ernst May and colleagues







6. View of row houses in the north-west district, designed by Černyšev and corrected by the May's group. Photo by the author

school building with its white gable unfortunately is blocked by a later addition to the school complex.

The rows in the northwest stem from Černyšev's original project, still with balconies and recessed staircases, today sometimes overbuilt on the ground floor. Here a front view of the row of residential buildings in the northeast, projected by Černyšev and revised by the May group. The north-eastern and southern rows were redesigned by May, they are somewhat longer and do not have the recessed staircases and balconies. The characteristic row spacing, clearly visible in the plan from 1932, was mediated by a food store which, unfortunately, was dismantled. The area is still sealed, on the gable one can see traces of the former building, the ground floor of the row serves as storage space up until today.

The building of the former canteen in the southern area, however, still exists and today serves as a workers hostel.

There are indications that this principle of the buildings connecting the rows of houses was intended to add further communal facilities. However, there was less need for communal facilities, since with the move away from the model of a collectivist life already built single residential



7. The food store building was in harmony with the rows of houses as seen on a 1932 plan – the building was torn down. Archive photo

rooms were combined to apartments.

Especially the residential rows on the southern slope demonstrate the outstanding qualities of the housing construction of the Ernst May Brigade. The residential buildings, built strictly on the east-west axis, made optimal use of the sloping gradient and form characteristic communal spaces between the houses – although executed as open rows they achieve the quality of yards.

The problems in conserving residential buildings of the modernist era, virulent everywhere in Russia, were caused in part by the form of privatization of living space chosen after the end of the Soviet Union. In the course of the city's emancipation from the Metallurgical Combine during the Nineties, the apartments, including the windows, became the private property of their inhabitants, while all communal areas became property of the city. Since then the inhabitants by and by renew their windows according to their abilities and ideas - without any preservation regime and without any financial support. At the same time the communal administration in most cases has no money to maintain or renew the roofs, the façades, or the communal areas.

Two rows, one in the north and one in the south, are in a ruinous state today. In one case, a private investor succeeded in buying all apartments and redeveloping the

8. The building was bought by a private investor and subsequently redecorated; balconies were added and the façades had natural stone cladding and were painted. Photo by the author







9, 10. One of buildings bought by the residents and subsequently improved. Photo by the author

row. Balconies were added and the façade was faced with natural stone, which, in addition, was coated with paint. Drastically speaking, one could say that here are two forms of ruination in immediate vicinity.

Up to now, the school and the kindergarten, located on the eastern edge, could not be ascribed to an architect as their creator. For the prominent public building of the First District, the well-preserved school, one finds differing allegations regarding its authorship. While German scholars (Elke Pistorius, Christian Schädlich, and Christian Borngräber)

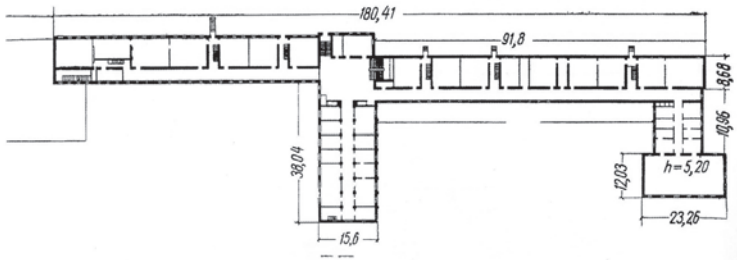
ascribe the school to Walter (Wilhelm) Schütte, the May Group's specialist for school buildings, professor Fedosichin from the Technical University of Magnitogorsk explicitly identifies Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky as the author. In my opinion, Fedosichin is mistaken here.

The school with its impressive gable, windowless on the upper floors, stood monumentally on Pionerskaja Street. The floor plan reveals the artful shifting of the two wings with the class rooms and the central function of the staircase. The stretching of the two wings, 180 meters long altogether,

11. Complex of a school and kindergarten, in Pionerskaja Street in the east part of the First District. Photo by the author







12. Horizontal plan of the school and kindergarten complex – a skilful combination of two wings housing classrooms and a central staircase



13. Photo of the school and kindergarten complex published by Borngräber and Pistorius/ Schädlich as a 1934 photo

made a large number of additional stairs necessary. The inner view of the auditorium reveals that the ceiling was heightened at the expense of the second floor, which is why the windows of the second floor were walled up.

Counting out the window axes at the building and comparing them to the floor plan and the accordant elevation, one can prove that the image published as a photograph from 1934 by Borngräber and Pistorius / Schädlich in all cases was laterally reversed in the reproduction! Also, it probably is a drawing and not a photograph. But without a photograph from the construction on-site the few remaining documents cannot be interpreted.

#### The first construction section and the further urban development of Magnitogorsk

After the completion of the first construction section of the May Brigade, only a second construction section for an additional residential district bordering eastwards was realized, this time again under the sole authority of Soviet architects and in a recognizable turn away from May's strict row design. Early on, the main direction of the wind in Magnitogorsk was estimated wrongly: contrary to the predictions, all environmental pollution of the Metallurgical Combine was driven by the wind onto the residential areas under construction. Thus, the further development of the city was finally moved to the west banks of the Ural River. However, the Pushkin Prospekt, transverse to the residential linear city and leading north towards the factory entrance was built, with its culture center close to the residential quarters in the south and the factory management and party leadership plus the bank located directly at the entrance of the Combine to the north. The drama of the 1930s, the beginning of Soviet industrialization subsequent to international modernism and its adaption and transformation into the Stalinist urban development, can be perceived in exemplary fashion here at only one main thoroughfare.

With the decision to further develop Magnitogorsk on the west side, a plan initially abolished due to the costly bridge constructions over the broad, because dammed-up Ural River, the idea of the linear city was nevertheless continued in a different way. Now, the city did not develop as a residential settlement from west to east and transverse to the axis of the factory, but from north to south alongside the west banks of the Ural River and parallel to the factory on the east banks. In accordance with the waves of the city's development, significant lateral axes between the city and the factory emerged across the river.

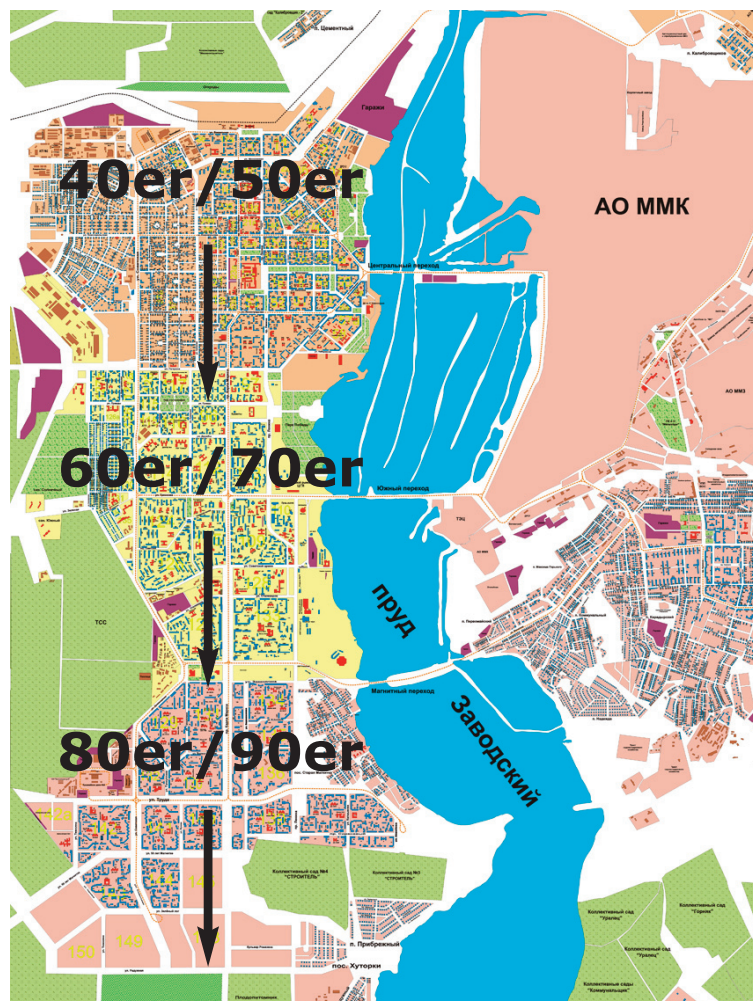
During the period of high Stalinism, from 1930s to the 1950s, delayed in its implementation by World War II, this pertains especially to the now compact city with the central Prospekt of the Metallurgs, which creates a connection between the main building of the Magnitogorsk Technical University and the northwestern factory entrance. The 1960s and 1970s are represented by the culture center Ordzhonikidze, built again in modern spirit and close to the compact city at the waterfront, and especially by the lateral axis, running between the Park of Victory with its monumental sculpture commemorating Magnitogorsk as arms and steel supplier during World War II and the former party headquarters. The large parade ground at the feet of

the party headquarters conveys the myth of the MMK, the Magnitogorsk Metallurgical Combine, the Great Patriotic War, and the leading role of the Communist state-party through a grandiose backdrop.

During the 1980s and 1990s additional living quarters were built in the fashion of the industrial residential construction of the previous decades. To the formerly significant places at the river (culture center, monumental memorial) new ones were added in post-Soviet times. Religion superseded culture and ideology: today, a mosque and an orthodox church mark the west bank in the south of Magnitogorsk.

It is remarkable that against all western conceptions the post-Soviet, radically free-market society does not develop within the compact "European" city of high Stalinism, but in the residential areas of the industrial housing construction of

14. Magnitogorsk – subsequent axes of development on western river bank from north to south





**15.** Monument commemorating Magnitogorsk as arms and steel supplier during World War II. Photo by the author

the 1980s and 1990s. Today, these residential areas not only expand further south, one can also visibly discern here an ambitious development of residential high rises suitable for apartment ownership. On the main thoroughfare, the space between the high-rises is filled up with shopping centers. Shops and service companies move into the ground floors of

the tall, slender apartment blocks on the major streets.

Magnitogorsk finally developed as a linear city, but in a different way than Leonidov, Miljutin, and the May Brigade expected, namely west of the Ural River and from North to south. Now the city has arrived again at the geographical longitude of the first construction section. As Fedosichin reports (see f.n. 6), in recent times the question of the future of the city's eastern districts arises again. Against this background, too, Fedosichin urges us, not to sever the links to the city's own past.

In my view, the first construction section of Magnitogorsk is a suitable area for German-Russian cooperation, with regard to both the joint investigation and the preservation of this common heritage in the international search for the modern city and the examination of the causes of its success as well as its failure. To this end the first construction section of Magnitogorsk, as inconspicuous as it seems, should be preserved! Preserved as an artifact of the architectural and urbanistic history and as a still quite valuable and, if restored cautiously, suitable residential quarter for a long time to come. Let me express the utopian idea that the city of Frankfurt/Main, where Ernst May, Walter (Wilhelm) Schütte, and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky are held in high esteem, would sponsor the restoration of the school in the first construction section of Magnitogorsk and that the German housing associations closely connected to Ernst May and his activities after the war would restore in an exemplary fashion several row buildings by Ernst May in Magnitogorsk according to conservation guidelines and in close coordination with the residents of the city!

*Translated by Philipp Albers*