



# How European design was implemented in the architecture of a Soviet provincial city: the «German Quarter» of Magnitogorsk

## Cómo el diseño europeo fue implementado en la arquitectura de una ciudad provincial rusa: El caso del «Barrio alemán» de Magnitogorsk

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#### ABSTRACT:

This article aims to look at how the design of German architects was realized in a provincial Soviet city. It is for this reason that the city of Magnitogorsk was chosen for this study, which provides an excellent example of different national traditions combined within the urban environment. The article describes the main principles behind the architectural design of a Russian provincial city during the Soviet time; how the German urban design was realized in the 20th century; the style of the German architecture and its originality; the importance of the German Quarter of Magnitogorsk as an illustration of how the urban environment can be rejuvenated through the introduction of foreign features..

**Keywords** Soviet period, Russian provincial areas, architecture, urban environment, German style

#### RESUMEN:

El propósito del artículo consiste en el estudio de las características especiales del proyecto de arquitectos alemanes en el espacio de una ciudad provincial soviética. Por esta misma razón la arquitectura de Magnitogorsk se convirtió en materia prima para el estudio ya que es un ejemplo de asociación de diversas tradiciones nacionales en el contexto urbanístico. El artículo especifica el fundamento de la formación del aspecto arquitectónico de la ciudad provincial rusa en el período soviético; se detectan las características especiales de la realización de proyectos de arquitectos alemanes en el contexto de los procesos urbanísticos del siglo XX; se revela la estilística de la arquitectura alemana y su unicidad; se verifica el valor del «barrio alemán» de la ciudad de Magnitogorsk como prueba arquitectónica de la posibilidad de actualizar el medio

## 1. Introduction

The problem of protecting cultural heritage is one of the most important problems of today (Kiva-Khamzina, 2015). Time has come to not only ponder the remote past but also the recent history. We believe that the period of 1930-50s in the history of the Soviet Union is not studied enough in terms of the cultural developments of the time. This is because the totalitarian regime would keep the information secret, but also because for quite a long time the subject of the cultural advancements of the Stalin era was underestimated by the academic community. It is still common to characterize the Soviet period of the Russian history from one perspective only (or, to “paint it in one colour”), while characterizing the culture and the art of that era in terms of monumentality and romanticism (Kosenkova, 2010).

Today one can see new approaches to analyzing the Russian cultural history. The people of Magnitogorsk, which is the subject of our study, are now concerned about the potential loss of heritage. This is a recent trend as until some time ago many would still see Magnitogorsk as a new rapidly developing city with a great potential (Rubanova, 2015). Alongside the residential areas featuring dull-looking blocks of flats which were built in the 1960-90s as part of the affordable housing programme (Kurban, Maleko, 2016), this provincial city has its historic centre which features different architectural styles.

The first elements of the German architectural style were introduced in Magnitogorsk at the early stage in the history of this steelmakers’ city: the 1930-50s were the period when urbanist design was actively introduced in the Soviet construction industry (Polyakov, 1965). We can now say that that was the time when the urban development agenda served as a political tool since the Soviet architecture was seen as the key symbol of the cultural and social life of the nation (Aleksandrov, 1978). The task of inventing a new Soviet style of art was proclaimed to be of national importance. The architectural design that would satisfy the official ideology was supposed to mark the summit of this creative quest (Kurban, 2009).

The provincial city of Magnitogorsk, whose architectural style was shaped in the 1930-50s, is unique for the polyphony of its urbanistic architecture. It is for this reason that in this article we commit to investigate how it happened that in the Soviet reality with its standardized cultural and social life there emerged a city with an original architectural style. The authors of this article are also committed to describe a controversial history of the Soviet architecture, in the polyphony of which the traditional German design has a prominent voice.

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## 2. Methodological Framework

This work is an interdisciplinary research project which examines the problems of art, culture, and history.

The authors looked at the problem from the cultural aspect. Such approach allowed the authors to examine how the cultural processes taking place in the regions are related to the state of the national culture in a particular period of time (Kondakov, 2003).

For a comprehensive examination of the problem in view, which has to do with the realization of the European, or German, design in the architecture of a Russian provincial city, a number of specific cultural approaches was applied. The following approaches can be distinguished:

- 1) Description. We describe the specific culture of the Socialist period in the Russian history and the historical background which led to the emergence of the new city in the Southern Urals;
- 2) Dialogue. With the help of this approach we could describe the situation – the German design in the Soviet architecture – as a dialogue between the two cultures, which led to cultural exchange and the German Quarter built in the Russian provincial city;

3) Symbolism. This approach enabled us to express a special ethnical meaning of the German design and its unique features which include accuracy, high quality and, at the same time, lightness, as well as harmony with the surrounding landscape.

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## **3. Results**

### **3.1 The history of Magnitogorsk as a reflection of the Russian social and cultural life of the 1930-50s**

Because the cultural approach was chosen for this study, the authors were to first look at the social and cultural situation which served as a background for the early architectural history of the provincial Soviet city of Magnitogorsk.

The city of Magnitogorsk was officially founded on 30 June 1929. On this day the first train arrived from Kartaly to the Magnitostroy station. And on the same day the new city was named Magnitogorsk (Aleksandrov, 1978). It became the first socialist city in the Southern Urals, which was supposed to symbolize the triumph of communism. Magnitogorsk, a provincial city in the Southern Urals, or the legendary Magnitka, became famous as the flagship of ferrous metallurgy due to Magnitogorsk Iron & Steel Works, which is still the major producer in the city. It is a well-known fact that people from all over the country came to build this city (Maleko, 2015). The pioneers of Magnitka were representatives of 36 different nationalities and included workers, peasants and the Red Army demobilizees from the Volga Region, Ukraine, the Caucasus, Belorussia, Siberia and Kazakhstan. Around 700 foreigners took part in the Magnitostroy project. The equipment for the plant was supplied by more than 150 manufacturers from across the country (Degtyarev, 1993). This immediately turned Magnitka into a unique place encouraging the dialogue of cultures (Karpova, 2015) and engaging people from different cultural backgrounds into an incredible motion of events. Many who worked there or just visited would all share the same feeling of amazement at the power and energy of the man.

At the time it was a common practice with the print media to only publish the information about workplace achievements, engineer's findings or optimization solutions. However, they were not only volunteers who built the city in the Ural steppe. The repressions of the 1930s make a special chapter in the history of Magnitogorsk. Dozens of thousands of resettlers and thousands of convicts, who had been sentenced under the notorious Article 58, were brought to the construction site. Out of 200,000 population at the time about 80 thousand people were former political prisoners. After World War II the city saw German prisoners who also took part in the construction. That's why the dialogue between cultures was a feature of the new city from its inception and defined its social and cultural environment (Volkova et al., 2017). This feature laid the basis for the diverse architectural style of the emerging urban environment (Bylinkin, Kolmykova & Ryabushkin, 1985).

### **3.2. How the German architectural projects were realized in the urban environment of a Russian provincial city: Ernst May's novel ideas**

The German page in the history of Magnitogorsk is, first and foremost, a chronicle of architectural solutions for the city space. As we remember, the construction sites of the new city saw Americans, the Dutch, the Chinese. But it is the work of the German architect Ernst May that made a special contribution. The Chief Architect of Frankfurt am Mein inspired by the perspectives of implementing the functional design of his native Bauhaus in the socialist Russia (Droste, 2000) came over and brought his fellow architects with him. 40 more specialists from all over Europe, who were the winners of the competition that included 1,500 thousand architects (Gnedovskaya, 2011), supported Ernst May when he worked in the Urals, Siberia and

the Donbas Region.

The above mentioned competition followed the birth of the concept "Housing for workers. Cities in gardens", which emerged in Germany during a disastrous housing crisis that paralyzed the country. So it is only fair that the German architects even then were working hard to find a good solution for affordable housing (Gnedovskaya, 2010). Among the pilot projects, the projects of suburban residential areas proved to be most successful as they went in line with the concept of a closed self-sufficient city in a garden.

The opposite trend characteristic of the German architecture of the time was fusion between art and engineering. There was a long-time need to improve the working conditions for the workers who were building plants and factories across the country. So architects joined in this humanitarian mission. At the time it wasn't just a new area but a completely fresh field with no established practices or patterns.

These diverse architectural trends originated by German architects can be observed in the architecture of the cities of the Urals Region.

The utopian idea in Ernst May's urban designs was to have residential areas alternate with industrial zones (Morozov, 1995). With such layout the workers were supposed to live in the residential quarter next to their workplace. This would have brought equality among the population of the Soviet cities, which would have gone in line with the ideology of the new Soviet state. However, living in the industrial area would affect people's health as they would spend their lives close to hazardous sites such as blast furnaces, open-hearth furnaces and sintering plants. This layout proposed by Ernst May could have led to an environmental disaster. The proposal was rejected.

The work of the German architects – Ernst May, his associate Walter Schwagenscheidt and others – resulted in the erection of the first blocks of flats in the area of Magnitogorsk situated on the left bank of the river. It was a vast residential area with 3- and 4-storey buildings and parks. The main street was given a symbolic name – Pioneer's Street. Due to such layout the architect avoided designing dark 'well courtyards', the symbols of the capitalist 19th century. The fronts of the buildings were facing the east or the west and their blind ends were looking on busy roads or the plant. The originality of this urban design can also be seen in the microzoning approach: a zone would have a large park in the centre with flat blocks going around the perimeter of the zone alternated with playgrounds for children. Through-block driveways and boulevards and avenues integrated nicely in the areas where the major architectural zones met. The original project also included sports grounds and recreational places. Even though Ernst May wasn't meant to fully realize his cutting-edge city design agenda, thanks to him the city saw a school building designed for 640 pupils and a department store which the local people nicknamed 'German'. The first residential quarter became a symbol of the socialist city driven by the following motto: "Equal living conditions for everybody is the fundamental principle of the Soviet nation" (Kurbatov, 1988).

This quarter of Magnitogorsk still exists and is a landmark of the socialist architecture in need of renovation. How good is that design for living? It is difficult to judge it in our time as one can hardly imagine how it felt to live in two-storey barrack-type buildings in extremely low temperatures of the harsh winter typical of the continental climate of the Urals. However, for the pioneers of Magnitogorsk, who stayed in tarpaulin tents, the buildings designed by Ernst May came as an extremely inspiring development. What really mattered is that the buildings in Pioneer's Street all had the same design, which went in line with the socialist ideology (Ryabushin, 1979). In fact, it was a practice of distinguishing the industrial design from the residential architecture and creating a building typology based on the socialist requirements and German traditions (Yaralov, 1971). For the first time the architecture of Magnitogorsk was interpreted as a dialogue between cultures which defined the new principles of the urban design of the 1930-1950s.

### **3.3 The German Quarter of Magnitogorsk as an implementation of European style in the Soviet architecture**

It is to be noted that the architectural history of Magnitogorsk includes a few chapters devoted to the Western style. The 1940s witnessed new residential areas being built on the right bank of the Ural river, which had different layouts and housed different buildings in terms of size and type (Lagutin, 1953). The quarter 14A would be of special interest. The buildings of this quarter are still referred to as "German" buildings. The first reason for that is that they were built by German war prisoners. Every building of this quarter has a unique design. At the same time they all blend together forming an ensemble the architectural beauty of which is highlighted with the high quality of the construction work.

From the perspective of the post-war ideology, the construction of the German quarter may seem a bit odd. How could the enemies of the nation create anything that would be good for that nation? The German mentality, which rests on punctuality and scrupulousness, also played its role and led to the appearance of the little Europe in the Russian provincial city. The German quarter of Magnitogorsk became the next step, after Ernst May's project of the socialist city, in pushing the boundaries of the totalitarian culture. It clearly brought in some architectural diversity. It was one of the few attempts at the time to avoid the cultural totalitarianism and to think differently, not nation-wide but from the perspective of an individual. This liberty, unthinkable for that time, finds its way to architecture creating a design which stands out against the overall design of the city. They are dynamic and, at the same time, self-contained architectural sites, the designers of which resorted to bold metaphors.

For Magnitogorsk the German Quarter is like a city within a city. The designers were supposed to offer a low-cost housing solution which would include low-rise blocks of one-room flats. It should be noted that "the very fact of the German influence on the accepting culture was taken negatively by many researchers who thought the culture was lacking originality" (Zhuravlev & Khan-Magomedov, 1967). The way people viewed strangers played its role too. People took the new European-style quarter with a frown. It was labelled as alien. It wasn't before years had passed that the German Quarter found its way to the locals' hearts and was actually highly appreciated by the city dwellers. At first artists would come here for inspiration, then the quarter was frequented by newly-weds who would come here for photos. The German style seemed to have blended in the provincial environment.

The buildings of the quarter 14A are looking on Uralskaya Street, Stroiteley Street, Mendeleev Street and Gorky Street. The buildings are shaped per the traditional design of the German wood-frame houses. (In this context, under the German style we mean the entire scope of the continuously evolving art, certain structures being the result of the efforts taken by the German people or personal achievements of individual architects). The corner buildings are designed to carry additional elements of the German style. That's the reason why they don't have upper cornices. The flagstones used for decoration of the basements and the fencing produce an intricate surface pattern and remind of the Romance style of the remote past. Instead of making a continuous line along the street, the buildings are "holding each other's hands" with the help of arches and bridges. The design of the arches is similar to that of corbel arches typical of the medieval architecture (Summerson, 1961). The stones, which are of almost perfectly triangular shape, are tightly squeezed against each other holding the arch structure. The stone bench, which makes a part of the fencing around the building; a cascade of rectangular passages; pylons, which are standing like guards; wrought window grates – all these elements create a balanced and adequate environment for humans, being at the same time integral elements of the German architecture. To this day they paint the buildings with yellow paint of different tones, which colour is conventional for the German architecture. Many building walls of the German Quarter have a smooth finish, the others are covered with stucco plaster with a rough texture.

At first one may mistake the buildings for standard housing. In fact, they include townhouses, detached houses, and hybrids (the latter are complexes when two-storey buildings are attached to three-story buildings and every staircase runs to the entrance door leading to an apartment). None of the houses looks like a five-story building.

The way the German Quarter is laid out fails to harmonize with the surrounding buildings. The Quarter was built on a mountain slope. A pedestrian street designed by Ernst May marks the center of the Quarter. The street starts at the top with a solemn arch of a barren courtyard and runs into a cascade of spectacular arches at the school backyard. A big park and numerous playgrounds complement this unique architectural ensemble. Having said it, we can confirm that one won't find exact counterparts in the German architecture. That's why this article is about the elements of the German style that professionals managed to successfully integrate in the polyphony of the Russian architecture. In fact, the German Quarter includes a combination of experimental design techniques and the elements of the traditional German style.

Influenced by a wide-spread rumor, people still believe that the architects G. Simonov, E. Levinson and L. Ol' were awarded Stalin prizes for implementing this project. Some people claim that not only ordinary German builders contributed to the creation of the Quarter but it is also due to the efforts by one talented German architect whose name we are yet to find out. Today many of the buildings of the Quarter are owned by one owner either completely or by floor. When renovating the buildings the new owners try to save and even emphasize the unique style of this neighborhood.

The German Quarter fascinates with its beauty. The new PVC windows that replaced the old wooden ones didn't affect the looks of the buildings, which look like they came out of an old canvas. They can be said to be true architectural masterpieces. These buildings are timeless (Ikonnikov, 2001). The unique architectural ensemble of the quarter 14A is an example of the German architectural style and must undoubtedly be considered an architectural landmark of the 1940s.

### **3.4 Ways to expand the architectural environment of the provincial cities. Stalin's Empire style and a new architectural environment of Magnitogorsk as a symbol of the Soviet ideology.**

The Stalin era saw another European style getting ground in Russian cities – the Empire style. It seemed the architects of the time took literally Vitruvius' axiom stating that architecture is supposed to symbolize the power of the state. The country saw high-risers with spires decorated with mouldings shaped as hammers and sickles, spikes, stars, ribbons, wealth baskets, all of which symbolized the grandeur of life (Ikonnikov, 2001).

The history of Magnitogorsk also includes the Stalin page, which would have its both geographical and chronological borders matching almost perfectly the contour of the Leninsky district of Magnitogorsk. Here one finds buildings that have pretensions to being considered high risers, but also the above mentioned spires and mouldings and cast iron gratings. The district is laid out the way that the flat buildings are organized around squares with sculptures or monuments marking the center. This new style didn't have standard forms. Instead, it brought in diversity and fancy. However, it wasn't clear of ideology imposed by special Stalin's aesthetics reflecting the personality of the leader. This architecture has a unique mentality. It represents an attempt to capture in stone the happy life of Soviet people who lived in the period of incredible achievements. And it may well be that the people who lived in Magnitogorsk in the Stalin's Empire period were really happy. In the post-war period of the 1940-50s Russian people felt that that was the time of revival, freedom and peace and they expected to live happily.

It should be noted that in the same period of time the German architects were working on creating an image of the new national architecture, when the style of the Roman Empire

became the fundamental concept in the German architecture (Turchin, 2003). All this is to open the next page in the history of the German and Soviet architectures.

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## 4. Discussions

Inspired by the same desire to look into the history of the Soviet architecture of the 1930-50s the authors of this article studied the sources available and came to the conclusion that the majority of the articles had been influenced by the Soviet ideology. The articles by N.P. Bylinkin (1985), V.N. Kolmykova (1985), A.V. Ryabushkin (1985), V.V. Kurbatov (1988) examine the best works of the Soviet architects of the 20th century, which include public buildings, industrial facilities, and blocks of flats. However, the articles by the above authors describe the Soviet architecture taken out of the global cultural context, separate from the global art processes.

Having conducted an active search for literature describing how the regional architectural styles evolved, the authors can state that this information is lacking consistency (Yaralov, 1971). There has been no basic research carried out as of yet that would look at how the European styles changed the architecture of the Southern Urals cities.

It should be noted that the above problem is touched upon by such Russian experts in German culture as M.I. Turovskaya (1985), V.S. Turchin (2003), as well as by such researchers of the Russian architecture of the 20th century as A.M. Zhuravlev (1967), S.O. Khan-Magomedov (1967), A.V. Ikonnikov (2001), Yu.L. Kosenkova (2010). The art historian T.Yu. Gnedovskaya (2011) devoted some of her articles to the general processes and trends in the German architecture, as well as to some individual German architects and their works.

Even if one doesn't find articles examining this problem, there are works that touch upon the above mentioned problems. The art historian A.I. Morozov (1995) has expressed his personal original view. One can characterize his works as a general view on the whole range of problems and issues of tradition, legacy, polyphony combined with his admiration for the history of the Soviet art.

The authors of this article were the first to look at the Soviet architecture of the provincial cities as a dialogue between the two opponent systems of Germany and Russia. In the context of the global cultural history, the period of the 1930-50s appears to be a period of an intense confrontation between the two political systems – capitalism and socialism. It is for this reason that the authors of this work point out the fact of cultural exchange in the art of architecture capable of rising beyond official ideology and challenging the deep-rooted tradition.

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## 5. Conclusions

As a conclusion, we would like to stress that architecture can tell a lot about the cultural evolution of the past. Considering this, it is essential to remember to protect one's architectural legacy.

In Magnitogorsk – a provincial city that emerged in the Southern Urals during the USSR era – it is the architecture that reflected the complex processes of the pre- and post-war period of the 1930-50s, when the powerful ideology and censorship defined the evolution of the Soviet state. Architecture, which was created for the greater good of the people, was capable of rising beyond the ideology and adopting some breakthrough ideas generated by German architects.

It is the German urban design that defined the architecture of Magnitogorsk in the 1930-50s, which was implemented as a system of low-rise blocks of flats and residential areas designed by the German architect Ernst May, as well as the stylistic elements of the German Quarter. It is these trends that attest to the polyphony characterizing the architecture of that period and give a signature to the urban design of the provincial city.

A variety of trends found their implementation in the architecture of Magnitogorsk of the 1930-50s: barracks of the Soviet style, the influence of the German architecture; Stalin's Empire style, the provincial implementation of which is yet to be explored by cultural and art experts at

the turn of the 21st century.

The polyphony of styles became possible amidst the tough totalitarian regime because the architects of the time were looking to perfect the reality with the help of art while they believed that creating a new artistic style was the most critical task of the time.

We would like to point out again that the unique phenomenon of Stalin's Empire style needs to be given thorough thought. In this article we mentioned only briefly that the above style can be found among the stylistic diversity of the provincial city. Analysis of the literature shows that Stalin's Empire style has been studied quite thoroughly in the context of the key design trends found in the capital cities (the afore mentioned style is broadly present in Moscow and Saint Petersburg). At the same time, one does not find any detailed studies about how this style was realized in the regions. It should also be mentioned that Stalin's Empire style is quite broadly present in the architecture of Magnitogorsk.

This article can be of practical relevance for researchers in cultural history who are engaged in studying the Russian provincial areas and how they were formed and evolved in the Soviet period. Such researchers could use the actual information presented in this article to take a deep and comprehensive look at how the Socialist culture evolved in remote areas. The information provided can help develop regional programmes aimed at protecting the architectural legacy of the 20th century.

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