

Ernst May 1886-1970, by Claudia Quiring, Wolfgang Voigt, Peter Cachola Schmal e Eckhard Herrel (editors)

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Frankfurt, Moscow, Nairobi, Hamburg: A Modern Periplus

"Our architecture will mature and fall into disrepair if we do not elect a valid universal system of shapes and styles," said John Ruskin in his book "The Seven Lamps of Architecture" (1849). Half a century later, the Weimar Republic would allow the modern architecture in Germany resume this aspiration. German cities, right after the First World War, strived to have a new weight in European geography and architecture was understood as a vehicle for achieving this. The architecture of Ernst May possessed the ability to reinvent the city of Frankfurt, and by travelling through the Soviet Union and Kenya he did what Nazi Germany prevented him from doing.

The book "Ernst May" addresses the professional and biographical path of this German architect, a structure of several trials that clarify his journey from a family of the upper middle class in Frankfurt, through the period in which he collaborated with the architect Raymond Unwin in London, his stay in Breslau as an architect devoted to building neighborhoods inspired in garden cities, the return to the city where he was born and a new departure for the Soviet Union in 1930. The book also addresses his less known journey as an architect in the 1920's when he stayed in Kenya and his return to Germany after the Second World-War, where he built his last works.

The binomial capital-labor, a renewing power that enabled several German cities in the 1920s, allowed large housing construction associated with the industrial world and the precision and repeatability of technology. Berlin, Frankfurt and Weimar competed to centralize knowledge and productive capacity. Berlin would attract the radical avant-garde with architects like Mies van der Rohe or Bruno Taut developing urban projects, Weimar would host Bauhaus, and New Frankfurt (Das Neu Frankfurt) became a

singular case of quality and quantity of generated architecture. The architect responsible for the operation was Ernst May.

The construction of social housing is inevitably associated with the modern project, which also sought to establish the average person as the recipient of these proposals. The German case is particularly in the intensity and depth of the research in what concerns the urban form and the housing typology, trying to cross the Garden City model with the founding cities built in the eighteenth century (the Siedlungen). During the Weimar Republic thousands of homes were built with an architecture that sought to reinvent and elevate the home of the proletarian masses.

Ernst May, the "chief architect" of the city, had the tools of the municipal power to put in place a set of operations around the historic city of Frankfurt that would change the architectural topography of the Modern Movement. May's strategy was to spray several Siedlungen around the foundation of the city center, twenty were built with the various scales and the ability to express May's views of the city. The largest and most famous in the history of modern architecture are the Praunheim Siedlung and the Römerstadt Siedlung. The book devotes several chapters to this moment where we highlight "The New Frankfurt - Housing Construction and the City 1925-1930" by Christoph Mohr.

In the 1930's, Ernst May is asked to develop several urban development projects in the Soviet Union as a result of his experience in Frankfurt. He does not go alone to Moscow. He takes dozens of collaborating architects to whom had been promised the building of new cities in the vast Soviet territory. But the Soviet regime quickly lost interest of modern views on housing and land, preventing May and his collaborators from various projects.

The greatest failure is the project for the city of Magnitogorsk, the one in which May mostly invested as an architect and whose project was absolutely distant from the Frankfurt experiences. The city is partially constructed, but its sense of harmony was lost in Stalin's political regime plots. The book shows the letter May sent to Stalin seeking to enforce his vision of the urban problems. But the Soviet reality clashed with the aspiration of standardization and the resulting modern aesthetic expression of the Modern Movement. The chapter on the Soviet adventure, which describes life in scarce conditions and the train travels in the icy Soviet winter, is called "Possibly the Greatest Task an Architect Ever Faced" written by Thomas Flierl.

The ambition to organize the territory continues in Africa. Failing to move to the United States or return to Nazi Germany, May settles in Nairobi and carries out projects in Kampala, Kisumu and Mombasa, among other cities and regions of East Africa. The architect believed he could change society and culture with a new cultural program called "Das Neue Afrika". This period, after two years working as a farmer on his land on the outskirts of Nairobi, resulted in several equipment buildings and housing projects, ranging from the ambition of universal values and a first recognition of the specificity of the region. The chapter on this period is called "The New Africa" and was written by Kai Gütschow.

The book closes with a black-and-white set of residential towers with a man and a baby in the foreground. The atmosphere is heavy, especially when compared with the



photographs of the works from the African period. It is a photograph from the 1980s, of housing complex in Darmstadt that illustrates the last phase of May's work. His return to Europe in 1951 is associated with the reconstruction of Germany and the adoption of a strategy derived from the Charter of Athens, a vision that May himself had assumed not being his in the 1920s, when he organized the CIAM Frankfurt.

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