

Protecting Tractormakers' Neighborhood: Civil Activism with Lack of Civil Rights

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In 1946 automobile and tractor workshops were situated in Minsk according to the Fifth Five-year plan of reconstruction, aiming at recovery and even overcoming the tempo of the prewar economic development. The Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, BSSR, transformed from an agrarian into an industrialized country.

Machine-production was founded from scratch and became its business card. It changed the profile of the country and of its cities that grew rapidly in size, the capital – faster than any other soviet city of a similar size.

Both workshops were situated at the outskirts boosting the territory of the city. The automobile plant was 160 hectares and employed 35 thousand, the tractor – 150 hectares and 30 thousand employees and workers. The plants were planned together with housing estates - neighborhoods with all social infrastructure included.

The Tractor Work Shops, the oldest buildings date back to 1940



The poster from 1932 called “to organize shock work brigades for development of culture- and household amenities in course of elaboration of the Second Five-Year Plan.” The road to communism was built with Library and Public Bath, Club, Cinema, Nursery and Laundromat, Theater, University and Stadium, green streets with all types of vehicles.. In the 1930s the scenery of communism was futuristic in style, functionalist in look and collectivist – in brigades.

Soviet mass housing construction evolved within the two prewar Five-Year Plans of forced industrialization. With public spaces inbuilt, *zhimassivs* were sites of new life and “soviet man” with cultural habits, values of work, education, physical self-perfection, collectivism. Architecture and all-inclusive design of the workers’ neighborhoods were socially constructivist.

In 1932 the ideal of architecture changed radically. Functionalism was denounced for its asceticism as ideologically “alien”. To match the idea of perfect living conditions another language was used – classicist. However, the rule of building blocks as complexes with social amenities remained, and the neighborhoods in socialist realist outfit still were coherent milieus of everyday life organized according to the program of building socialism. In the 1960s those became known as microdistrict, *mikrorayon*.



Minsk Master Plan 1946

The orange square shows industrial district in the South-East with an ensemble of the tractor plant delimited with a yellow square. An automobile is at the very end of the map, inbetween – the ball bearing workshops.

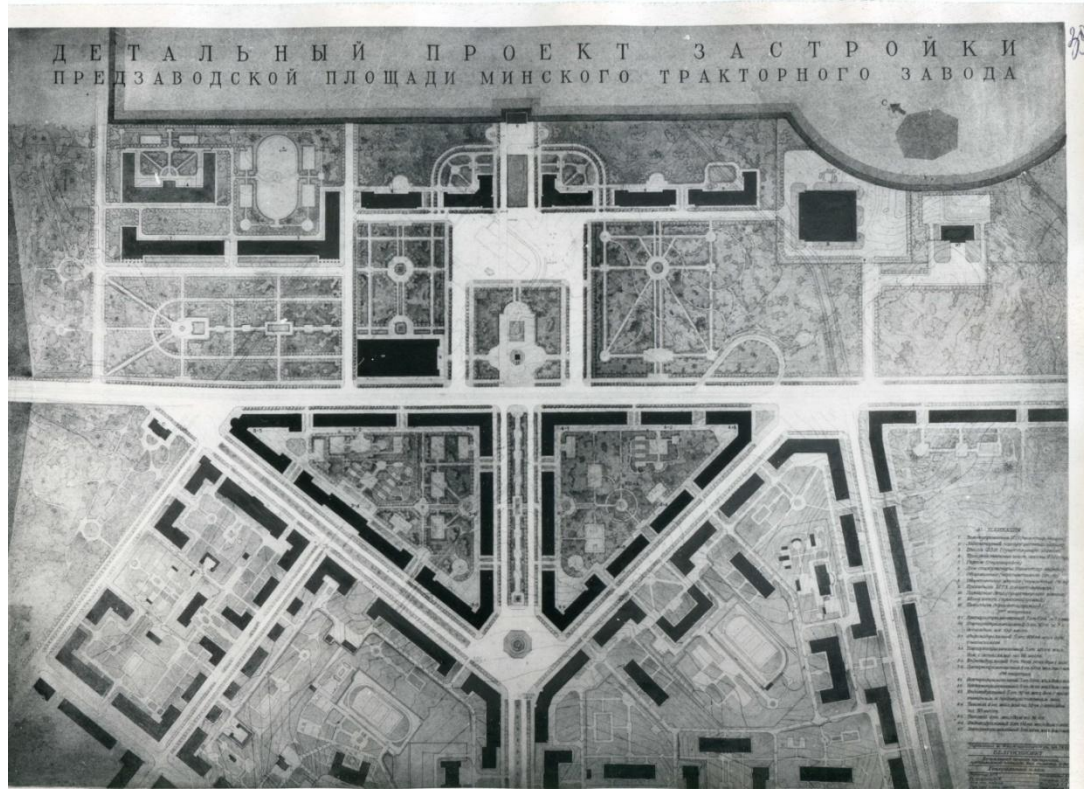
Colors at the picture show zoning: red is for the high-rise housing in the center and along the important arteries. Weaker tint is for 2-3 floors at adjacent streets, yellow – for one-storey cottages. Purple depicts industrial areas. Notice green belts.



Architectural Ensemble of the Tractormakers' Neighborhood



- Separation of the housing and production zones
- Equipment with social facilities: hospital, shops, schools, a public bath, sport grounds, and specifically soviet – workers' club, house of culture
- Regular plan, symmetric situation of the blocks



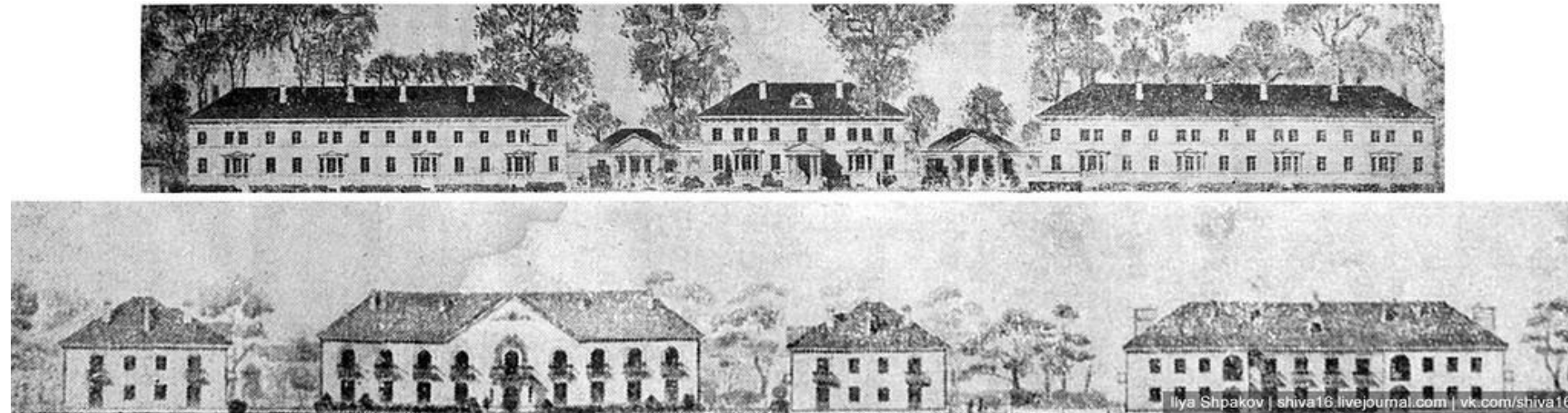
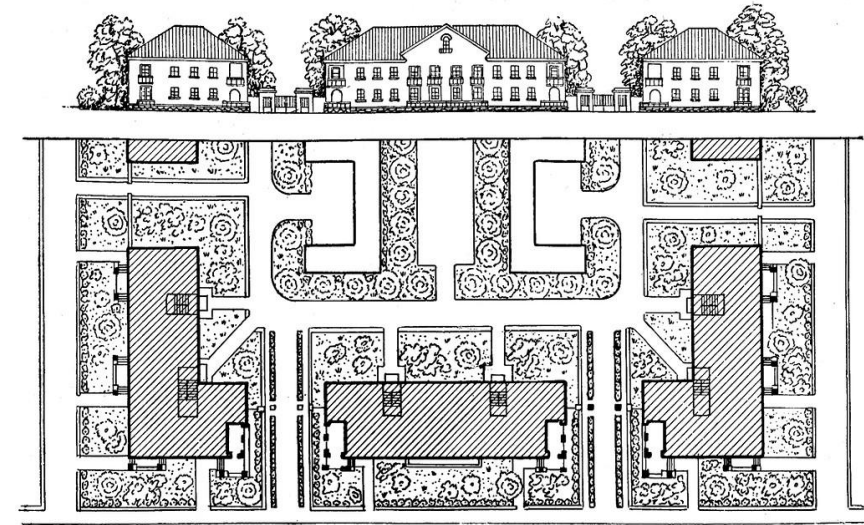
Architecture of the neighborhood was defined by the classicist principles of centrality, symmetry, rich visual representation in neoclassicist style because such was the official stalinist style.



A parade entrance zone was formed by three-ray system of streets. The central boulevard of the neighborhood leads straight to the factory gate. Two towers of the factory administration dominate the space.

Architectural zoning consists in differentiated height of the buildings: while large blocks attached to the main artery are high-rise and representative, inner small blocks are formed by low-rise typified housing.

A basic unit of space was perimetric block. The method of typification of houses – in series – was elaborated to match block structure. Here: a number of projects, united by one type of constructive scheme, but of various configuration, size, number of floors were designed for building a bloc or part of a street at once. Houses were grouped so that to enclose a greened yard, social facilities were situated within or in separate blocks.



Promyshlennaya (Industrial) street



Building streets traditionally was ideologically underpinned: “socialist city” was “beautiful and comfortable” opposite to “raw and monotonous” functionalist western city. While space of the streets was public, yards were semi-private.

5 different series were used at the tractor neighborhood. Here on the left – 6-flats houses of the series 203, on the right – series 202 with two frontons , further -- 201 with verandas in both floors.

Architectural details: hip roof as opposing to modernist flat ones, balconies, profiled windows, popular loggias and verandas. The series 201 on the photo was designed for the south regions such as Ukraine, achieving openness of a house into nature. Small vegetable gardens were cultivated by the doors in the yards.

Promyshlennaya (Industrial) Street, same spot

A finished block and street were supposed to be “improved”. It meant paving, water supply, canalization, central heating and electification, radio, gas in the kitchen – since the 1960s, and much later telephone. Also, organization of impression of space, keeping in mind the laws of perception: breadth of a street was proportional to the height of housing. Small architectural forms – fences and gates, fountains and greenery as active element of space completed the impression.



Lyricism of Neoclassicism

“To create for a man a comfortable, warm and beautiful house, that gives him joy of life. Here is also poetry, however not the pathos of Victory as monument, but lyricism. Lyrical poetry that is born from love to man and people”, said in 1944 A. Mordvinov, the chairman of the Committee for the issues of Architecture of USSR.

Lyricism of architecture corresponded to happiness received from enjoying ordinary life, family, love and friendship. Architecture was in tune with the mood of society after the war deaths and deprivations. At the same time embodied the promise of soviet power to people.



The neighborhood had two schools, a worker' club and a house of culture, a hospital, a public bath and shops. Those were typified buildings.

Public bath – indispensable as baths at homes were not installed in the 1940s-1950s yet. A stand at the right with beer and liquors, snacks. Spaces of everyday life and communication without pressure of soviet ideology and hierarchy



School named after A.P. Chekhov – to stress the high cultural standard of education of the proletarian youth



Tractormakers' Boulevard. 23 m² of greenery per person within the neighborhood



- The boulevard was public space carefully designed: benches, flowerbeds, street lamps and art.
- Beyond the frame remained a stadium. Space propagated the “socialist achievements”: cultured leisure, perfection of one’s body, but also was place of real living.
- The parade space built upbeat, festive attitude, while greenery created relaxed mood.

Just finished ensemble, 1953, had main features of socialist realist architecture which adopted classicist details to the objectives of typified mass construction and had a stroke of art deco style. Notice these details: cour d'honneur developing composition of a street and adding comfort to the dwellers at the same time.

Facades elaborated with the bow-windows, decorated with balustrades of the balconies, frontons at the top of the portals and topping the parts of the building. Arched windows of the ground floors are window shops.

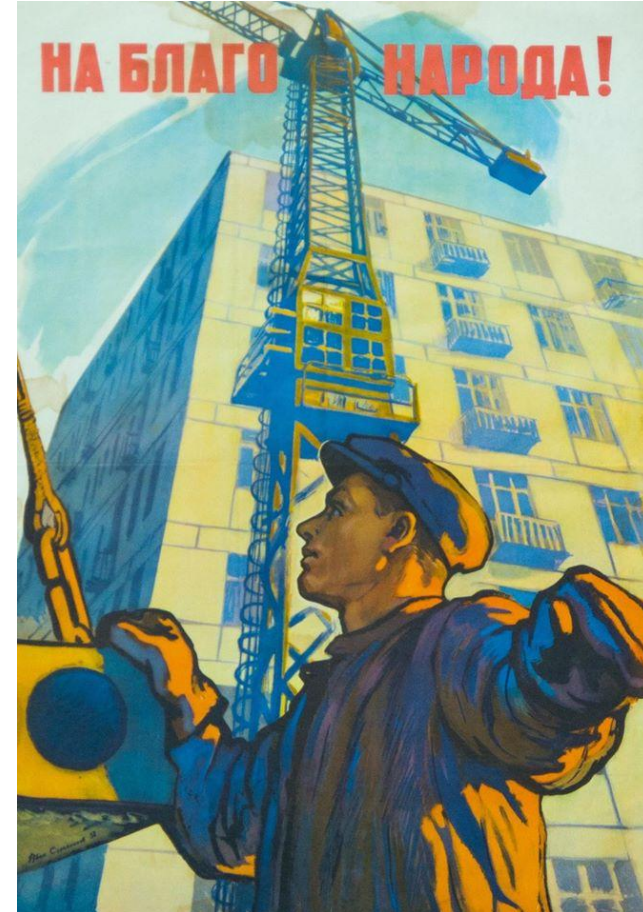
Street is greened and made as boulevard – with a greened dividing strike in the middle.



“For the good of people!” Socialist realist part of the neighborhood was finished in late 1950s. With its typical traits, it was one of many soviet urban spots propagating socialism, typical in organization of space and architecture.



By that time, new standard of architecture and construction was introduced by N.Khrushchev. The slogan of the housing campaign was “to provide each family with a flat”, that was to be achieved with cheap panel construction and became known as *khrushchevki*. Panel housing became symbol of democratization of Khrushchev’s rule and visualization/materialization of technical progress. Such houses were added to the workers’ neighborhood, earlier ones went in well, but later ones disturbed the ensemble quality of space.



Post-socialist heritage

After the collapse of the Soviet Union spaces of everyday life degraded. As the enterprise had to struggle for survival, it released the neighborhood from its budget.

At the same time, the neighborhood lost the symbolic status of a window shop of life under socialism. Banalization of socialist urban sites occurred all over the former countries of Eastern bloc, it led to either rejection of architectural value or reconsideration, reusing, redeeming it.

In Minsk and other cities of Belarus soviet architecture remained normal tissue of the cities. It did not acquire reflection and analysis on the official level. At the same time, buildings bearing historical and cultural weight did not acquire actual protection either. Commercial interests were more important, and any of a 19th century, stalinist or 60' modernist building could be demolished and still can be.



Photo by I.Korzun

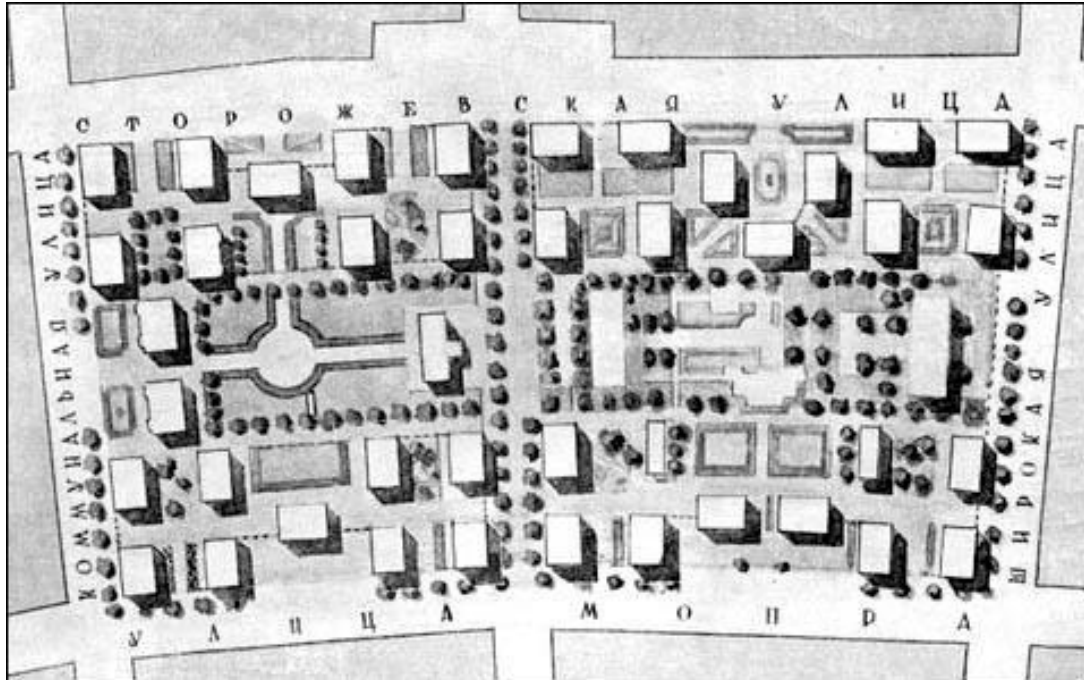


The story of one of such threatened sites is about Osmolovka, a neighborhood dating back to the postwar time and built with the same housing as the Tractor workshops' houses.

Two blocks of Osmolovka are highlighted with green on this map of Minsk master plan of 1946. The situation in the city was central, in the vicinity of the army headquarters and the Opera and Ballet Theater. Yellow outline shows the tractor plant and neighborhood. One case represents an optimistic and another - a pessimistic story of the soviet-period architectural heritage today.

The blocks of Osmolovka were built with three various projects of the series 205 that were grouped so that to create inner yards and the streets without monotony. The yards had common space and small greened partitions between houses. Space was continuous and impression of it coherent.

Flats were given to the officers and artists, also builders of these very houses (finished in 1949). The blocks were fenced around, creating a sort of a gated community. Throughout decades, this ensemble with lots of greenery and of human-size created a neighborhood community of several generations of dwellers. They appreciated this quality of life and desired to save it.



View from a street and inside a block

Commercially lucrative territory in the center of the city, plans to demolish old housing. But depositors were difficult to find, while the neighbors developed protest in terms of Jane Jacobs' activism.



Active inhabitants appealed to the unique quality of architecture as a witness of the founding for Minsk and modern Belarussians time and an example of ensemble method in urban-planning. They stressed liveability and attractivity of it to both, Minsk and tourists, - an island of greenery and old-fashioned structures in the middle of the city.





They used tactics of popularization, promoting space under brand “Osmolovka”, slogan “Osmolovka, live!”, organized the revival of the neighborhood life – street festivities, common actions as cleaning the territory. This example demonstrated the birth of civil society in Belarus. The activists were owners of the flats who also cared about common semi-public space of city. The protection campaign represented new social groups in Belarus.

The picture shows that in the heart of panel structured Minsk, there is green housing that needs to be protected. New values of new social groups who become aware of their civil rights

On the opposite, ignorance or rejection represent post-soviet mentality. It is typical for the managers of the city who are not elected, but appointed from above. They approach the city as merely territory, and fail to see the locally created meaning of the old housing in Minsk, seeing it as “barracks, of which there is enough all over the former Soviet Union”. The expert community has only advisory word at best.

It is also the consequence of rapid urbanization process, - newcomers mentality of “the broad masses of Minsk population”. Fresh urbanites turned passive consumers and see city as providing comfort and modern standards only, but not common space of memory and action. Minsk is not space of one's own, as dwellers close in the castles of their flats in the multiplying panel microdistricts and ghettos of which Minsk consists. Public space is nobody's land.



The Tractormakers' neighborhood underwent serious troubles. The state of the building of a kindergarten represents degradation of welfare system.



Only a small fracture of the Tractor workshops neighborhood community survived the collapse of the country. Many emigrated yet in the 1980s, others moved elsewhere. The working class dwellers' dependence on the state played major role in poor condition of the neighborhood. The Tractormakers' families credited the workshops administration till the last moment and felt resentful from the lost of credit.

The inhabitants were tired of neglect of the communal services and wanted to acquire any normal accommodation, even if in the new panel ghettos on the edge of Minsk. Therefore, they developed less activity for protection of their dilapidating houses. The efforts of a small number of activists were not enough.



The human-sized architecture creates space for everyday activities. The feeling of knowing each other, free usage of space are those benefits of this kind of architecture.



Photos by I.Korzun

Civilization Lost

With dissimilation of socialist architecture, traces of the soviet past of the Belarusian nation will be lost. Representation of the past will be incomplete. It is sad, that material objects created with great difficulty after the Second World War will disappear and stop remind of the soviet generation and this world as it used to be. It will be easier to misrepresent it, to manipulate with it..



The tower, meeting those who enter the neighborhood from the city,
on the previous picture it is on the far right. Thank You for attention!!



Photo from the article on
<https://realt.onliner.by/2012/02/04/mtz>