Paying tribute to the genius of Laszlo Hudec

Michelle Qiao

When Hungarian architect Laszlo Hudec escaped to Shanghai in 1918 while being transported to a Siberian prison camp, he surely never expected to lead an indelible mark on the city’s landscape.

But he did, designing many of Shanghai’s signature buildings in the 1920s-30s, including the Park Hotel, Grand Theater and the Memorial Church.

When he began writing the Shanghai Daily’s “History Revisited” column in 2004 looking at the city’s old architecture, I did not expect to delve too deeply into the architecture themselves. Houses with architecturally curious and historical legends were definitely the focus but whenever I was exploring the century-old architectural jewels, there was always traces of Hudec.

Most of his works, in an amazing variety of styles, still grace the city’s best blocks and corners and his legendary design genes still talked about by local architectural experts.

The life of the fascinating and mysterious architect unfolded bit by bit in the columns, but even more than details, he was revealing the upcoming exhibition “Architectural Excellence — Hudec in Shanghai.”

It will be held as one of his creations, the former American Club on Fushan Road, in the context of the “Year of Hudec.”

This year marks the 115th anniversary of Hudec’s birth and the 80th anniversary of his death.

He was a happy man and also quite rich, so he often sent money to Shanghai. This year marks the 115th anniversary of Hudec’s birth and the 80th anniversary of his death.

On the other hand, Hudec was quite busy in Shanghai. Even though he had joined the Austro-Hungarian army to fight in World War I but later, he completed his architectural degree, softened them to be more relevant for his legacy.

Hudec made fortune out of his architectural talent and enjoyed a wealthy life in Shanghai.

He lived in a villa with a garden, his family’s its own Euro-Asian food such as bread from a German bakery, and he had up to 14 servants, with five of them taking care of the garden alone.

Hudec eventually left Shanghai in 1947 heading for Italy where he participated in the restoration of Saint Peter’s Church in the Vatican at the invitation of Pope Pius XII.

In 1950 Hudec and his family moved to California where he died eight years after falling from a ladder during an earthquake. He was hugging a picture on the wall of his new home and suffered a heart attack as a result of shock from the fall.

While he was responsible for many works, the majority saw in Shanghai where he made his fortune and spent the prime of his career as an architect.

The legacy of his work lives on today. It was lucky enough to visit many examples of that legacy which eliminated much about Hudec’s personality.

As for the architect, it was probably his good fortune to escape to Shanghai when he did. He was the right place at the right time for someone like him, a place where both ideas and architecture were mushrooming just like they are today.

And Shanghai in turn was lucky to have such a hard-working, romantic talent like Hudec who spent his best years here doing his best work.

“Architectural Excellence — Hudec in Shanghai”

Date: June 14, 2-6pm, June 15-19, 9am-6pm

Address: 5F, 200 Fuxing Rd

For more information, check www.hudec.sh.

An architect ahead of his time

Zhang Qian

Laszlo Hudec spent his best years in Shanghai and is responsible for many of the city’s most remarkable buildings. — Courtesy of Hudec Heritage Project

Hudec in Shanghai Daily

November 4, 2004

Villa at 675 Julu Road (above)

The house deserves its name “Garden of Psyche.” The Greek-style house faces an astonishing centerpiece in the garden — a 1.5-metre high marble statue of Psyche with five angels and springs of water filling a butterfly-shaped fountain beneath her feet.

Today it houses the office of the Shanghai Writers Association. In former years it was a villa, a tiny house in the 1920s.

May 28, 2005

Villa at 63 Fangyqiao Road (below)

The former residence of Sun Ke, the only son of Dr Sun Yat-sen, is a three-story, cream-painted building perched at the corner of the last generation of the state-owned Shanghai Biochemical Research Institute which now has its offices as since the 1950s.

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