

Laszlo Hudec in Shanghai (1919-1947).
The brilliant trajectory of a hungarian architect
in the process of modernization of the greatest city of the East.

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1. Deported to a faraway future

Poland, 1916, night time: on the battlefields of the First World War, the cossack cavalry embedded in the russian army leads a sudden incursion beyond the fortified lines of the front, and attacks the camps where the austro-hungarian forces had settled down. Taken by surprise, the hungarian soldiers get overwhelmed. During the battle, a young lieutenant named László Húgyecz gets very seriously injured to his right leg and, unable to fight, is captured by the russians. Later on, he will be transferred to a detention area located in the most eastern side of the asian continent: a labor camp close to the city of Khabarovsk, in Siberia, where all prisoners are forced to work on the railway tracks of the transiberian line. Here the young hungarian officer is kept in state of detention during the whole year 1917, when the revolutionary uprisings broken out in St.Petersburg and Moscow lead to the fall of the tzarist regime and to the birth of the Soviet Union. The political events generate a drastic split among the Russian military forces: the violent clash between Reds and Whites – the revolutionaries against those still faithful to the Tzar and to the conservative parties – shakes the main cities and spread across the peripheral territories of the whole country. At the detention camp of Khabarobsk, as well, the guards are divided in two factions, and apparently their counterposition loosens the surveillance over the prisoners. In early 1918 László Húgyecz and three other companions try to take advantage of this situation, attempting a desperate escape. The four fellows take possession of a hand-powered railway trolley and push their way out of the prison camp along the transiberian railroad, dressed as normal civilian workers. After a short distance, noticing the presence of armed soldiers from far away, László Húgyecz jumps off the trolley on the run and hides himself in the wood. Apparently unseen, he pursues his solitary escape until he reaches the bank of one of the two wide rivers (the Amur and the Ussari) which mark the boundary between Russia and Northern Manchuria in the area of Khabarovsk. Most likely the river are completely frozen, due to the rigidity of Siberian winters, and when the young fugitive manages to reach the opposite shore, he reaches territories under Chinese jurisdiction: finally out of catch for the russian guards, he reaches freedom.

Following the railway line, László Húgyecz gets to Harbin, the capital city of Manchuria, and after a short permanence as a refugee at the Danish Mission he moves further down south towards the most important city of the Far East: Shanghai. Since the end of the First World War marks the disappearance of the austro-hungarian empire, the young officer is now an individual without any precise citizenship, without any precise nationality (and without money). Nevertheless, he is an architect, graduated at the Royal University of Budapest few months before the outbreak of the conflict, and the Shanghai of late 1910s is a already a flamboyant city with a booming economy,

the biggest harbour and the main financial and industrial centre of China, a rapidly-growing western-style city full of business opportunities in the field of construction. At the end of 1918, László Húgyecz finds employment as draftman and designer in the office of the american architect Rowland Curry.

These are the circumstances, from the dramatic capture to the deportation and the rocambolesque escape from the Siberian prison camp, which brought in a quite fortuitous way to the starting point of the professional trajectory of one of the most relevant figures of Shanghai's architecture of 1920s and 1930s, a very active protagonist of the international process of circulation and diffusion of languages and techniques of modern architecture from the western world – Europe and United States – towards Asian countries, a truly refined interpreter of the compelling needs of modernity expressed by one of the most restless and cosmopolitan cities of the world in the period between the two World Wars.

2. Shanghai, 1920s

Within the history of the expansion of european and american colonial interests in Asia between the 19th and 20th century, China has been a case of peculiar nature, based on the concession to western powers of rights of “extra-territoriality” in specific urban areas along the eastern coast.¹ The city of Shanghai grew upon a scheme of three adjacent municipalities under separate administration, developed from the earlier configurations (1842-1869) of the local geography of extra-territoriality: the anglo-american International Settlement, the French Concession, the native city under Chinese government. Favourably located in proximity of the estuary of the 6000 km long Yangtze River, Shanghai flourished very quickly as prosperous centre for business and trade to/from inland China. Around the early 1920s, Shanghai counted more than 2'500'000 inhabitants (most of which chinese)², and the foreign concessions of the city – where a great number of western banks had opened their branches – represented the true financial heart of Eastern Asia: here, merchants and companies could enjoy all kinds of financial and commercial services, just like in the most advanced western cities of that time. The fast development of the city allowed many western businessmen to accumulate huge fortunes, but also fostered the formation of a new social class within the chinese population: it firstly emerged as a group of highly-skilled brokers and business mediators,³ and evolved later on – along the course of events that led in 1911 to the

1 The term “extra-territoriality” indicates the right for a foreign country to assert his own jurisdiction (in the fields of civil and criminal right, and in the administration of the territory) on specific areas of Chinese land. The Chinese Empire was forced to sign several treaties which would guarantee rights of extra-territoriality to Western powers after the conclusion of the so-called Opium Wars, around the half of 19th century. Most often located in close proximity of existing harbour towns, extra-territorial zones were initially conceived as commercial outposts for Western merchants, businessmen and bankers, but very quickly became fast-developing autonomous colonial cities. In the early 1920s, more than twelve nationalities had rights of extra-territoriality recognized in Shanghai: Great Britain, France, United States, Japan, Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Brasil. A citizen belonging to one of these countries who lived in the International Settlement of Shanghai would enjoy the same civil rights as if he was living in his own country. All concessions of extra-territoriality to Germany and to the Austro-Hungarian Empire were abrogated after the conclusion of the First World War.

2 Upon official demographical figures, it was the sixth city in the world ranked for population

3 The so-called “compradores”, from the term previously used by the portuguese merchants in Macao and Canton to name the chinese servants who had the task to purchase chinese goods on

collapse of the pluri-millenary Chinese Empire and to the institution of the republican system – into a modern urban bourgeoisie of entrepreneurs and businessmen, imbued of western culture and western values (modernity, liberalism, christianity) intertwined with the traditional Confucian ethical code, most often grown within the educational system of the western style schools managed by the several western religious organizations settled in China.

Born on January 8th, 1893, in the town of Besztercebánya (today Banská Bystrica), in the Slovak region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, László Ede Húgyecz is the first son of a family of hungarian origin. His professional education came from the several years of apprenticeship spent working with his father Györgyi, *baumeister*, and from the studies at the Royal University of Budapest in a period (1910-1914) when the architecture of the hungarian capital city was characterized – widely speaking – by a large eclecticism of styles, by the overlapping of different cultural and artistic directions, by the strong influences coming from the movement of the Viennese Secession. The new job at Rowland Curry's office in Shanghai immediately engages László Húgyecz – now Laszlo Hudec, according to the anglosaxon transcription of his original hungarian name – to work simultaneously on several architectural projects in various styles, challenging the eclectic design ability that he had learned in Budapest. The economical and political depression of the central-european region after the First World War, combined with a number of events occurred in the early 1920s – the death of his father Györgyi (1920), the promotion to the level of Associate at Curry's office, the encounter with the young and lovely Gisela Meyer, daughter of a wealthy businessman of german origin – persuade Laszlo Hudec to settle down permanently in Shanghai. Laszlo and Gisela get married on June 1st, 1922. During few years of activity on behalf of Curry's office and after several projects brilliantly completed,⁴ the young hungarian architect acquires a full knowledge of the field of construction works in the complicated international context of the cosmopolitan city. He feels now ready to start his own independent professional practice, and on december 1st, 1924, he gives to the press the communication of the opening of his architectural design office in Shanghai.

At this time, he has already contracted his first professional commission, a big job which would turn to be a decisive factor for his career. In 1923, Mr. Charles Reyner, a very wealthy american businessman who had accumulated an enormous fortune in Shanghai during his life, has decided to express with an act of anonymous patronage his gratitude to the city that made him rich (very rich) by donating to the Municipality of the International Settlement a brand new, modern, hospital. He purchases a wide plot of land in a suburban environment and appoints Laszlo Hudec as chief architect of the operation, on condition to keep absolutely secret the name of the donor. The deal is: should the anonymity be violated, the architect would be dismissed... But works are carried on smoothly, and the building is completed by the end of January 1926. Contrary to most of the previous works at Curry's office, the Country Hospital seems to pursue a certain stylistic sobriety, or neutrality,⁵ and the absence of decoration and ornament remarks the strict functionalistic principles followed for the definition of the general layout of the building and for the composition of the facades (for example, the number and the size of windows and balconies

their behalf.

4 Among the most relevant ones: Houses on Rue Ratard (1919-20), Chinese-American Bank of Commerce (1920), McTyeire School (1922-26), Shanghai Bankers Association (1922), International Savings Bank Building (1919-26), American Club (1922-24), Normandie Apartments (1924-26).

5 It is clear intention of the architect and his client that the building should not have a precise stylistic identity that could be associated with a specific national style, because the hospital is intended to serve the Shanghai western community regardless of the national provenience of the single individuals.

are defined upon the program of sanitary assistance). Moreover, the hospital is equipped with the most advanced medical instruments and technological systems. It is the first building of the eastern world where the environmental control of the rooms is provided by an air-conditioning plant, installed by the swiss company of Sulzer Brothers: its realization actually anticipates the first case of fully conditioned construction ever built in the United States, the Milam Building in San Antonio, Texas, completed in 1928. Widely celebrated on the pages of the main magazines and newspapers of Shanghai,⁶ the project of the Country Hospital gives great notoriety and visibility to Laszlo Hudec, and launches him towards a brilliant and intense career. The several works designed by the Hungarian architect in the second half of 1920s⁷ are commissioned mainly by private real estate companies incorporated in the United States or by Western religious organizations engaged in the construction of hospitals and structures for medical or educational purposes. But very soon Laszlo Hudec begins to work also for clients that belong to the new chinese bourgeoisie, the cultural and financial élite of the chinese society. In 1926, his entry wins a design competition for the project of the new headquarters of the Joint Savings Society, a modern bank⁸ founded and directed by Chinese managers. The members of the administration board of J.S.S. belong to the highest circles of the chinese élite, to the top level of the structures of financial and political power during the period (1927-1937) when the country is governed by General Chiang Kai-Shek's and his Nationalist Party. Between 1926 and 1932, for different chinese clients, Laszlo Hudec designs and construct a huge number of buildings: offices, christian churches and funerary chapels, luxury urban residences for rich businessmen and Ministers of the national cabinet, industrial plants, an electric power station on the banks of the Whangpoo River, and the new campus della Chiao-Tung University.⁹

3. Pursuing Chinese modernity.

The immediate success of Laszlo Hudec within the chinese high society is mainly based on two reasons: the first one is, implicitly, his national provenience (he does not belong to any of the western powers towards which the chinese bourgeoisie – behind the friendly facade of the business world – still bears a feeling of resentment and anger because of the historical heritage of the Opium Wars and the attempts of colonial domination on chinese land); the second reason, more factual and explicit, is that the hungarian architect does not enjoy any rights of extra-territoriality

6 On june 19th, 1926, the *The China Press* publishes a sepcial issue (*Special Country Hospital Supplement*) in order to celebrate the opening of the hospital and its authors. The caption of the image which portraits him on the front page says that “Mr.L.E.Hudec, the architect of the Country Hospital, is already well know as an architect with a future. His design of the new hospital has brought him to the front ranks of the architects of the Far East”.

7 Margaret Williamson Hospital (1924-25), Estrella Apartments (1924-26), Paulun Hospital (1925-27), Burlington Apartments (1928), Asia Realty Houses (1930), Houses in Columbia Circle (1930), German Church (1932)

8 The traditional chinese bank system used to operate on regional basis and to supply small amount of credit for trade and exchange of goods. From the early 20th centurty, the growth of the industrial sector and the opening of the chinese world to western capital led to the formation of several new chinese “modern” banks, created upon the model of western financial institutions but in most cases tied to the chinese central national government, which could fulfill the new requirements of chinese economy: to deliver a much higher amount of credit to the industrial sector, to sustain currency exchange based on international standards, to guarantee a fast-growing State debt.

9 Moore Memorial Church (1926-31), Chapei Waterworks Power Station (1928-29), Chiao-Tung University Masterplan and Engineering Laboratory Building (1928-31), Chapei Funerary Chapel (1929), “True Light” Twin Buildings (1930-1932), Ambassador Apartments (1931)

in Shanghai, nor any kind of juridical protection. Hiring Laszlo Hudec would be a safe option for a chinese client: in case of troubles, the architect could be sued in front a *chinese* court (with predictable results...), not in an international mixed-court as it would be for a citizen of the other western countries. The encounter between the professional trajectory of Laszlo Hudec and the modern Chinese social élite is initially triggered by this unfavourable personal condition of the young hungarian architect, but leads to the most interesting evolution of his career.

As a matter of fact, in Laszlo Hudec's works there is a rather precise correspondence between the cultural identity of his clients and the architectural language of the buildings. When commissions come from members of the western community, the stylistic orientation appears to be dictated by the clients: a facade of spanish or moorish taste, houses designed according to european or american models, a Tudor building, or American Colonial building, and so on. It is true that the stylistic recognizability of a building – very often orientated towards exoticism – seems to be the key aspect of the real estate market in the cosmopolitan Shanghai of the early 20th century, a kaleidoscopic mixture of various national identities which need to find themselves mirrored on the architectural image of the city. On the contrary, Laszlo Hudec's chinese clients do not have specific requests in terms of style. It is not through the issue of decoration or ornament that the financial and social bourgeoisie seeks its definitive celebration in architectural forms. Chinese clients ask for modern buildings, for building which may look undoubtedly modern (whatever the stylistic orientation should be), in order to represent the sense of their belonging to the process of modernization of chinese economy and chinese cultural structures, of which this new social class perceives itself as the main actor. Untied by any kind of stylistic requirements, Laszlo Hudec finds enough space in the several projects designed for his chinese clients to develop his own taste, his own line of research for a personal architectural language. The set of esthetics and languages to which Laszlo Hudec drains inspiration to design the new chinese modernity is the central-european architecture of the 1920s, specifically that peculiar declination of german expressionism diffused in the area of Hamburg around the work of the masters Fritz Schumacher e Fritz Höger. It is a design approach based to the reinterpretation in modern taste of the gothic tradition, based on the use of dark bricks for the facades and on the exploration of the expressionist power of details, much far away from the reductionistic and abstract tendencies of the avantgarde movements of that time (LeCorbusier and the Esprit Nouveau, the Bauhaus, etc.)

Within chinese cities, the language of expressionistic architecture of Northern Germany is modern, and is yet completely unknown. Different from the many other stylistical approaches of historical provenience already widely in use, it provides a tasteful sense of modernity and originality. The chinese clients of these project would be allowed to distinguish themselves from the neo-classical or over-decorated or exotically-ornated mainstream of Shanghai's architecture of that time. Moreover, from a very pragmatcal point of view, to the eyes of Laszlo Hudec northern german expressionism represents the most modern and convincing interpretation of the adoption of dark bricks, one the most appropriate materials for facade cladding in the climatical context of Shanghai: dark bricks do not suffer from humidity, do not get damaged by rain or by frozen water in cold winters, do not undergo excessive effects of expansion and shrinkage during termical excursions in hot summers, and allow an infinite number of possible variations on the design of the facades.

Thanks to frequent trips towards Europe (every year, moreorless, on summertime, he would go back to Germany and travel through the european countries with his family) Laszlo Hudec is able to keep himself constantly updated on the most recent evolutions in the architectural and technological field which come out in the western world. Most of the suppliers of construction materials and plants for Laszlo Hudec's projects in Shanghai are european companies. With

his work, the hungarian architect transfers almost immediately the most advanced technologies design solutions from Europe to Asia and China. The building for a mechanical workshop for car assistance that Laszlo Hudec completes in 1928 in Shanghai, characterized by long stripes of horizontal uninterrupted windows along a curved facade, seems to anticipate on chinese soil the evolution of the esthetical languages that the german architect Erich Mendelsohn was undergoing in the very same years with the project for the Schocken Department Stores in Chemnitz: a building which would have deeply influenced the whole history of architecture in the following decades all around the world.

4. The Park Hotel.

The architectural paradigm which Laszlo Hudec develops in the second half of 1920s in order to hybridate the needs of modernity of his chinese clients with a western cultural, esthetical, technological background, gets to the point of full maturity in the realization of the Park Hotel, the first skyscraper ever built in Asia. It is a 90 metres tall building of 22 floors, erected beside the wide plain of the Race Course, the heart of Shanghai's mundanity. It is a high-class hotel. Laszlo Hudec begins the project in 1929 on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Joint Savings Society bank¹⁰ and the adventurous construction works are completed in late 1934, after having overtaken enormous technical difficulties to which – in Shanghai – a proper solution did not exist beforehand. The most serious problem is due to the nature of the soil on which the city is built: it is so soft that *all* constructions are subjected to subsidence and progressive sinking in the ground.¹¹ Under these conditons, the idea of a skyscraper simply sounds insane.

But the hungarian architect and his team of engineers and collaborators¹² are able to define a convincing project based on a set of very innovative solutions, including the introduction of technologically advanced products imported from Germany: the excavation for the basement of the building is much deeper than usual, in order to extract a volume of soil equal to the weight of 10'000 tons¹³ and thus avoiding this load to be transfered to the foundation plate; the excavation area is isolated with special steel sheet-pilings mechanically driven down in the ground, in order to prevent the horizontal migration of the masses of water contained in the ground itself (which would cause the variation of the water saturation of the soil, the main reason of the effects of

10 The J.S.S. bank builds and manages the Park Hotel through a company named International Hotel Society Ltd. For the main financial institutions in Shanghai it is common strategy to divert very significative shares of their own resources towards the real estate market, which would allow much safer profits than the national financial market, strictly tied to the dynamics of the chinese State debt (which is mainly managed by western banks and thus depending on the international geo-political events, like the Wall Street crack of 1929).

11 The term "subsidence" indicates the slow process of settlement or motion or inclination of a construction, caused mainly by the vertical or horizontal shift of the soil subjected the load of the building. Shanghai lays on the alluvional soil of the Yangtze River, highly imbued of water, mainly composed by sand, silt, and mud. Some of the buildings realized in Shanghai during 1920s and 1930s were sinking down at a pace of 2-3cm per year...

12 B.J.Lindskog, structural engineer; A.Corrirt, fondation engineer; E.Drenkahn, structural engineer on service of Siemens China Co.; Fritz Genter, construction supervisor on service of Vereinigte Stahlwerke AG; B.I.Matrai, field assistant of Laszlo Hudec; J.L.Slaschov, chief draftman of Hudec office; K.L.Egikoff, construction supervisor; L.C.Sun, interior designer on service of J.S.S.

13 The world-famous architect I.M.Pei said once that when he was a child he was used to ride his bicycle around the site of the Park Hotel and look at the construction works; he was so impressed to see the amount of material digged out from the excavations and the size of the building that in those very moments he decided to become architect.

subsidence); the structural frame of the building is made of a special chrome steel¹⁴ produced in the furnaces of Vereinigte Stahlwerke AG in Dortmund, a very innovative material characterized by great lightness, high level of resistance to corrosion and excellent performance in terms of mechanical resistance. The use of these solutions for the Park Hotel project is no doubt a courageous decision, because these technologies have been introduced in Germany only few months before, and proves the great confidence of the Hungarian architect with industrial products and technologies from the European world, preferred to those from the American competitors for a higher degree of innovation and performance. As in the use of dark bricks for the facades, it is a choice purely based on pragmatism (in terms of good design and economy), not on reasons of national belonging: which a lighter and more resistant kind of steel it is possible to reduce the size of the load-bearing elements, then a smaller quantity of material would be necessary, so the client can save money. With safe foundations, which do not sink underground, it is possible to increase the weight of the construction, then to increase its height, and the client can enjoy a larger profit. Despite the 90 meters tall Park Hotel weighs more than 20'000 tons, it is the first building in Shanghai history of architecture which does not sink down in the ground nor it show any sign of subsidence! It marks a milestone for the city, the first of the several thousands of skyscrapers that would be built here in the future.

Beyond being a successful technological and professional challenge, the Park Hotel represents the intersection of the multiple trajectories of diffusion around the world of the most advanced imageries and paradigms of modern architecture: it is the American idea of the high-rise building crossed with innovative European technologies and realized according to the construction methods and supply processes peculiar of the Chinese cities of that time.¹⁵ The 22 floors of the buildings materialize the interaction between the strategies of the financial system of Shanghai and the interests of the real estate market, between a new imagery of cosmopolitan modernity and the necessity of legitimization and self-celebration of the Chinese urban bourgeoisie: the Park Hotel is the real monument to the success of the political and financial élite of the republican, capitalist, nationalist China of the early 1930s.

5. Shanghai, 1930s

The Park Hotel project enjoys wide visibility on the pages of several international architectural publications, and marks the definitive professional success of Laszlo Hudec. Nevertheless, in the same years the Hungarian architect realizes another fundamental achievement of his career: the construction of the Grand Theatre. It is the most modern movie theatre of the city, a building characterized by a strongly expressionistic architectural language, by an original composition of volumes and gently curved surfaces without any kind of decoration, and by a fully glazed tower which turns into a big signboard when lighted up at night. This project marks the turning point of the design orientation of Laszlo Hudec, who seems to quit the esthetics of dark bricks and moves towards the architectural vocabulary (and its implicit orthodoxy) of the Modern Movement now definitively affirmed in Europe, and towards the evolution of the Art Déco tastes occurred in the United States in the early 1930s.

14 Known as "Union Baustahl 52". The production of this high performance steel would be stopped (and never resumed again) during WW2 because of very low availability of the raw material.

15 To be entrusted of the realization of the building are two of the main Chinese construction companies: Yah Sing Co. for the foundation works and Voh Kee Construction Co. for the main structure and the elevations. As well, a lot of suppliers of equipments, furnishings, fittings, etc. are Chinese.

*In the thirties, Hudec's style underwent a fundamental change and he became the sensational driving force behind Shanghai's new architecture.*¹⁶

As a matter of fact, with his personal and very refined interpretation of the modern language in various typologies, Laszlo Hudec builds during the 1930s several masterpieces of Shanghai's history of architecture: private residences (the fascinating house for the wealthy tycoon Wu Tongwen is now an icon of the city) and tall apartment buildings (Hubertus Court), small-sized movie theatres for Chinese audience (Lafayette Cinema, Chekiang Cinema) and huge industrial factories for the production of beer (UB Brewery), a new church for the German evangelical community and the big school buildings for the Jesuits of the Aurora University. In other projects, never realized, Laszlo Hudec designed gigantic high-rise buildings that should have been erected along the Bund,¹⁷ in the very heart of the business district of the city. (That proves the fact that after the successful construction of the Park Hotel, Shanghai's real estate investors finally feel free to unleash their dreams of constructions stretched towards the sky, finally free from geological or technological obstacles, finally free to compete with the vertical extension of the great American cities).

From the half of 1930s, the most significant works of Laszlo Hudec are published on some of the most diffused architectural (and not only architectural) magazines diffused in the Western world, like: *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui* in France; *Obras e Viviendas* in Spain; *Der Baumeister* in Germany; *The American Exporter*, *The Commercial Engineer* e *The Far Eastern Review*, in the United States; *Kokusai Kentiku* in Japan; *Tér és Forma*, main voice of the rationalist movement in Hungary. It is the well-deserved celebration of a figure of great importance for the international process of cultural exchange and transfer of modern esthetics and modern technologies from West to East. Based on a deep knowledge and mastery of architectural paradigms – achieved during his years of education in Hungary, and later on with a constant and careful attention towards the evolution of techniques and languages – Laszlo Hudec's career combines a talented versatility in architectural styles (just like a tailor for his customers) with a continuous search for the expression of modernity. Above all, Laszlo Hudec's work is based on the scrupulous compliance with a very personal ethics of the project, which tends to respect the interests and the requirements of his clients rather than the personal expression of the designer, and that reserves a great attention to *all* the functional and technical aspects, beyond the esthetical ones, that the practice of architecture must achieve. He takes care of his projects until the very last detail, most often drawing with his own hands, in a very accurate way, the smallest details and the furnishings, as a guarantee for a proper realization. The Hungarian architect does not leave anything undefined. In a way, every project apparently tends towards a kind of architectural *gesamtkunstwerk*, towards the work completed in every detail, technically perfect. For Laszlo Hudec, a piece of architecture must be designed with a 360-degree wide point of view: "it has to be functional, and good looking from any side" he uses to say. It is an attitude which goes beyond pure professionalism or the compulsion for well-done jobs, as typical of the ethical behaviour of the European cultural area where he comes from: it is the search for architectural and spiritual completeness of a piece of art, characteristic of the Gothic period; it is the aim for the complete control of all aspects of a project, which is one of the features of the movement of Viennese Secession; it is the pursuit of integration

16 WU JIANG, "Bauhaus principles in the architecture of Shanghai", in: VOCKLER, LUCKOW (eds.), *Beijing Shanghai Shenzhen*, 2000.

17 The "Bund" is the name of the river bank where the Anglo-American and French sectors of Shanghai plunge their piers to the water; it has been the main harbour area of the city, the center of trade and commercial activities of the city since the first concessions of extra-territoriality around the middle of 19th century.

among architecture, craftsmanship and serial production, that already German and Austrian Werkbunds were attempting in the early years of 20th century. Through the works of the Hungarian architect, many of the issues raised up by the culture of European early modern architecture finds realization in Shanghai, on the opposite side of the world. Moreover – “I feel myself much more as an engineer rather than an architect” – he always delivers to his clients buildings which are perfectly constructed, perfectly manufactured, excellent under every technical point of view. Even today, most of them are in perfect condition of preservation, proving the great accuracy of their design and their construction, and represent the most appreciated and valued icons of Shanghai’s shining architectural past.

Nevertheless, this city has been completely ignored by the great narrations of history of architecture written and published in the 20th century, centered on European and American protagonists. Although for this reason the figure of Laszlo Hudec has never found a place among the masters of modern architecture, his career would have well deserved a much better historiographic fortune, which only recent studies are trying to re-evaluate. The famous U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger always required to stay at Park Hotel during his diplomatic trips to China. He asserted to love Laszlo Hudec’s skyscraper. Unfortunately, the building underwent a couple of questionable interventions of restoration and expansion in 1997 and 2001, led respectively by the American architects George Grigorian and Christopher Choa, who decided to pursue a late exercise of Art Déco skills in the renewed interior spaces and to reproduce the pattern of the original facades also in the very massive volume of the building extension. In such a way, it is now impossible to distinguish the original Laszlo Hudec’s building from the following postmodernist modifications. It is warmly hoped that the many other delicate Laszlo Hudec’s masterpieces which would need today a delicate touch of refurbishment could receive a more competent and respectful attention.

6. Epilogue.

In the late 1930s, the pace of Laszlo Hudec’s professional activity slows down quickly because of the state of uncertainty and immobility of the financial system of Shanghai due to the military occupation by the Japanese army of the city (1937) and of the whole Eastern Chinese territories. After the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1942, Laszlo Hudec (who only in 1928 had officially received the Hungarian citizenship) is appointed Honorary Consul of Hungary in Shanghai.

*This was not a political appointment, his only duties being to protect the lives and interests of the Hungarian citizens in Shanghai [...] his aim in so doing was to keep the Hungarian interests there neutral.*¹⁸

In 1945, the defeat of Japan and the end of Japanese domination over China trigger the start of the civil war between the nationalist Chiang Kai-Shek’s army and the communist forces led by Mao Tze-tung. In the early days of 1947, some military groups belonging to the revolutionary Liberation Army gain control over some parts of the city of Shanghai: Laszlo Hudec is captured and locked in jail, and his offices closed under requisition. Thirty years after his deportation to Siberia, the Hungarian architect is trapped again in the tragic developments of History, and he is forced again to face a dramatic condition for his own person. In fact, to the eyes of revolutionary authorities, the figure of Laszlo Hudec belongs to the enemy’s ranks: firstly, as architect, his

18 U.S. DEPT. OF JUSTICE – IMMIGRATION AND NATURALISATION OFFICE. *Adjustment of Immigration Status. A-6159672*. San Francisco, Nov 29, 1951.

professional career has been deeply involved with the highest level of the previous nationalistic regime; secondarily, as consul of Hungary, he has been the representant in Shanghai of the interests of a country which was allied with Germany which was allied with Japan: the worst enemy of China after the military invasion and the horrible slaughters committed in Nanjing and in other chinese cities. Despite his desperate situation, Laszlo Hudec manages to escape from the prison bribing the guards, and this misadventure convinces him to leave China immediately and definitively. In January 1948, the Hudec family gets on board on the steamliner S.S.President Polk and sails towards Europe, via the Suez Canal. They settle down temporarily in a small town of Switzerland, the most neutral country of these times. Few months later, the hungarian architect reaches Rome in order to join the group of archeologists and historians who are leading escavations under St.Peter's Church, in search of the exact location of the burial grave of the Saint. It is not clear how he gets involved in the operations, but his engagement is rewarded by the Pope with the release of a document of full indulgence – forgiveness of all sins, in past, present and future – for his person. Laszlo Hudec comes back to his family in Switzerland, blessed.

In the same year, definitively retired from the practice of architecture and fearful to go back to Hungary (now under a communist-oriented regime) after their escape from China, Laszlo Hudec and his wife apply for american citizenship on account of the U.S. Displaced Persons Act.¹⁹ The report compiled on this occasion by the Immigration Service with the collaboration of the C.I.A. pays to the hungarian architect a definitive homage to his career in Shanghai: "From the record, it appears that Mr.Hudec was one of, if not *the* outstanding architect of the far east". The Hudec family takes residence in San Francisco, and here Laszlo Hudec will die for a heart attack on october 26th, 1958, at the age of 65.

19 This law passed in 1948 granted the possibility for a not-american citizen belonging to a country fallen under a communist regime, in case of "fear of persecution" in his own country because of adverse political ideas or past personal activities, to ask for protection and citizenship in the USA.