

Memories Bring in Spirits: Adaptive Reuse of a Villa in Shanghai¹

Mei Qing,
Tongji University
1239 Siping Rd, Shanghai, 200092
P.R. of China
mei@mail.tongji.edu.cn

Luo Man
Fudan University
220 Handan Rd, Shanghai, 200433
P.R. of China
07300130130@fudan.edu.cn

Abstract. This article explores the relations between spirit and existence of a place, by focusing on a villa designed by a foreign architect in modern Shanghai. The main argument is that the spirits of a place hand down to generations based on people's memories; and vice versa, the adaptive reuse of a place will refresh the memories that carry the spirits. It also examines how the spirits of the architects, the clients as well as the users have enhanced the meaning of this building, so that it has stood a good deal of wear, and has transformed through the adaptive reuse. The paper will close with a discussion on the strategic procedures regarding the sustainability of such kinds of villas under the development pressure nowadays.

Introduction

For nearly 70 years, a private residence, originally Mr. D.V. Wood's house has existed in Shanghai (Fig.1). It was designed by Hungarian architect Laszlo Edward Hudec (1893-1958). Completed in 1938, it was recognized as an excellent work of modern spirit as well as one of the large and luxurious contemporary residences in the Far East.²



Figure 1. Green House_100 Most Endangered Sites issued by WMF in 2008
Southwest view and Southeast view

However, following the opening reform of Pudong New Area since 1990s, the city is developing by leaps and bounds. Large-scale urban construction is constantly threatening the valuable modern buildings of the early 20th century. Shanghai has witnessed profound changes and met serious challenges in old city area. Modern architectural heritage, especially the small-dimension building, is now facing an embarrassing situation of either being pulled down for new high-rises, or remaining unhealthy in the process of population explosion. As one of premier study destinations, this house was one of the Shanghai Modern Architecture on the biennial Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites issued by WMF in 2008. The study below will present the changing relations between the spirit and the existence of a place, by focusing on this villa and its context.

The Villa: The House of a Family

The era between 1920s and 1940s was the heyday of Shanghai when the city was of spectacular scenery and character formed and created by the mixing of various nations and cultures. Western architecture was transported into Shanghai by foreign architects, including Hungarian architect Laszlo Edward Hudec (1893-1958) who brought innovations to the architecture of Shanghai in 1920-30's. The extraordinary constantly renewable style, as well as the transformation of the city spirits is still characteristic of today's Shanghai, and makes her different from other cities around the region.

The house-owner, Mr. D.V. Wood, was the son-by-law of a master of dyestuff in Shanghai, Pei Runsheng. Pei's family had long been well-known in Suzhou, and had adopted the famous Yuan-dynasty (1120-1401) Garden, the Lion Forest Garden (Fig.2), which survived from the end of Yuan dynasty to the present. The layout of the garden originally came from the well-known painter Ni Zan's scroll, and the idea of the layout came from Buddhism.³



Figure2. Lion Forest Garden
Small Square Hall and the Hall of Peace and Happiness

In 1920s, Pei Runsheng began the family's real estate business in Shanghai, and soon became the master of real estate. In 1930s, the family decided to select a site for one of their residences in the city. A place with a "spectacular setting", bounded by two roads, attracted the attention of the well established family. Since the two roads pronounced the same name with that of the client's as "Tong-Wen (D.V.)", the location of the villa was psychologically identified with the lot, and the designer was also identified soon.⁴

Laszlo Edward Hudec (1893-1958) was a significant architect in Shanghai in 1920-30's.⁵ His work in the city presented his individual approach, based on European architectural roots. After a decade of practice, Hudec transformed his designs from classical fashions to new styles with modern spirits. As the designer of Park Hotel and Bank of China, Hudec approved himself a mature architect in contemporary Shanghai with his graceful colonial style, and Art Deco style. His buildings attracted the attention of the Pei family who invited the architect to design a villa with modern spirit for the members who had settled in Shanghai.

The first draft of this design was proposed by Laszlo Edward Hudec in 1935. The main idea is that the house should be located near the road in the north which was open to the traffic, so as to leave more space in the south for garden. The villa was composed of two parts: served space and serving space. The complex

included a garden with surrounding wall, and was the “Green House” in neighborhood. With the curve and the flowing shape, the villa showed a unique form inspired from mechanical beauty in the international architecture of the world. Meanwhile in Shanghai, many buildings in 1930s expressed more nostalgic imitations of European architecture, while less creative symbols of time and space (Fig.3).



Figure3. The northeast view of the “Green House”
The curved and flowing shape of the “Green House”

The Villa: House of Memories

Time flies. 70 years have elapsed since the completion of the villa. Writing explores history of the villa that functioned as a sweet home, and then unfortunately an empty house in the period of Cultural Revolution. The house owner as a merchant capitalist was pressured to commit suicide, the family was driven away from the villa to a loft of a house, and the villa was unauthorized occupied by Shanghai tricycle union. When the culture revolution was over, the old housewife rejected to move into her original house that was in a state of vandalism after the whole family was already driven out of the house for a decade. Soon afterwards, the house was incorporated into Shanghai Planning Institute, which owned a grand building nearby. The house was unfortunately used as a blueprint office of the institute.

The turning point emerged when the grandson’s wife of the family, a well known writer Mrs. Cheng in Shanghai, produced a novel taken the villa as a prototype. Like a myth, the figure in the novel came into being who was an amazing Taiwanese architect Mr.Gu. As a master of architecture and a merchant of building materials, he decided to rent the house. After a simple renovation, the second floor of the house was used as his home in Shanghai, and the first floor, as a café and a dining& champagne lounge in different time. People moved out and moved in.

The evolution of this house through the past 20 years may verify a scientific hypothesis, which presents a phenomenon from sociological, psychological, pioneering studies by Robin Cohen, James T. Fawcett , and Julian Wolpert.⁶ They explore the dominant factors and reasons that have influenced migration phenomena as well as the relations between migration intentions and behavior. It may raise further studies of the relationship between migration and settlement as represented by Lewis Mumford, Paul Oliver, and Philip Kuhn,⁷ who see settlement patterns from a viewpoint that examines human being’s presence, experiences to the built environment and ‘the spirit of the place’. As an existence, the villa may also approve the studies on the house forms and settlements, best represented by Amos Rapoport, who scrutinizes the contents as well as the physical aspects of houses; P. Bourdieu, the initiator of habitué; Levi-Strauss, who stresses the social, symbolic, and ‘structural’

significance of the houses as societal units; and Bernard L. Herman, David Stea and Mete Turan, who approach houses and settlements on a broad time-place ground.⁸ In the evolution of the built house and settlement, however, it is an inherently humanistic act, bridging past and present to future, embracing memory and material and celebrating the creations of our existence.⁹

The series of activities in “Year of Hudec” organized by Consulate General of the Republic of Hungary Shanghai, Ministry of Education and Culture, OKM, Shanghai Municipal Urban Planning Administration Bureau and College of Architecture and Urban Planning of Tongji University shows what a strong influence of this architect until nowadays. The memorial events held and to be held in the city raise questions which scrutinize the meaning and the spirit expressed in architect’s work in his era. Whose memories the villa carries, and what spirits the villa represents?

The green color of the house expresses the spirit it was meant to convey. Green symbolized spring, meanwhile soothing and peace for family. The color of the villa was in perfect harmony with the garden, a modern interpretation on dwelling. Was it because the family’s dyestuff business in Shanghai? As a merchant of dyestuff, the client or the designer may use color as a powerful means of expression. Was it because the family’s garden life in Suzhou? The color may be an imitation of a garden which was regarded as the general context of the whole family.

Whenever the neighborhood recalled the building, they remembered the villa as the “greenhouse”, while its owner as the offspring of a certain Suzhou garden master. Although without necessary process of public participation or community involvement, collective memories still play roles in revaluing the building. In this building, color was a strong word of expression for the architect as a representative of the dyestuff client who had something to say.

Until 1930s, Shanghai had experienced more than one hundred years transformation from colonialism to modernism. Because of a long tradition with European cultural exchange since the late seventeenth century, and situated at the mouth of Yangtze River, the city was inevitably selected as an international trading port city, and second home for Europeans in the Far East.¹⁰

Buildings in the city were mostly on grand scales, of European fashion. The old arcaded style was beginning to go out of fashion. Instead, the classic Renaissance style, German Renaissance palace, French Classical villa spread the city as the span of memories. In addition, Cathedrals, cathedral schools and church houses scattered around the city.¹¹ Locals lived in the two- and three-storey terraced “lane houses” in the Settlement,¹² while foreigners-mostly Europeans lived out of the crowded city, and built themselves houses surrounded by luxurious gardens (Fig.4).



Figure.4 The “Lane Houses” in French settlement
Laszlo Edward Hudec’s own residence surrounded by luxurious gardens

The spirits of Shanghai, in its wide ethnographic and historical sense, were the complex whole, including belief, art, custom and habits of various people as members of the society, which handed down to generations based on memories.

The Villa: House of Consuming Memories

Architectural heritage seems to raise public consciousness nowadays in Shanghai. Development pressure makes the urban fabric of the city in a serious situation of loss. Although Shanghai Municipal Government issues Heritage Architecture list every period of time, the related preservation actions for the small-dimensioned domestic buildings still need time. And the nomination process is not open to citizens, the concerned individuals or groups have no authorities to support their solutions for the related heritage.

After inappropriate re-use as a public service and poor maintenance as public property for years, the spontaneously adaptive re-use of the villa began in 2000 by a Taiwanese who rent the house and developed it like a stakeholder. After interior renovation, the villa was re-used as a Salon at the first floor, and as living place at the second floor. However, lacks sufficient authority and funding, the user failed to carry out the considerable conservation works at the site, the building still retains much of its need-to-be repaired façade and furnishings. Until Spring Festival of 2007, the villa has been renovated in an ad hoc fashion and re-used as a café/salon by a Singaporean. The renovation of the villa embodies the concern of the renovator for color and light in the house. The bright open hall is full of white color, and the café full of skylight. Color and light is of decisive importance for people to experience space that can be made to give very different spatial impressions. White symbolizes pure and clean, and makes the room bright with a skylight entering from top and side. It becomes a comfortable place for people to gather in the hall, which helps to strengthen the feeling as staying at home (Fig.5).



Figure.5 Interior of the villa after renovation

The Villa: House of Values

Central to this research’s contribution was to explore the relations between spirit and existence of a place, so as to revalue the significance of this existing building and its spirit which transformed through the adaptive reuse nowadays.

The villa was already on the List of Heritage Architecture issued by Shanghai Municipal Government in 1994. By now, the basic methodology is that

there is no actual intervention on the façade of the building but renovation inside by certain developers or stakeholders. Just very recently, some renovation practices are granted by district-level government until buildings are understood not just in physical but also historical and cultural sense. It seems to re-root the urban fabric of this global tendency city which continues to be transformed by the mobility of its present. Explore Shanghai Heritage has become one of the media organization which functions to alarm the consciousness of the society. That is one of the strategies for appropriate regeneration and sustainable development of valuable houses. Is it the purpose of the action undertaken to simply make it look new in a style of “formula restoration” or make it look old for some other aim (Fig.6)?



*Figure.6 In a style of look “new” restoration
In a style of look “old” restoration*

It is very clear that the people as well as their culture constitute the spirits of a building and a place, which is such a social and interpretive act centered around the material creations of culture. In conservation sense, cultural significance of a valuable building is constituted of aesthetic, historic, scientific, memorial, social and urban values that reflect lifestyles, identity, memory and the relationships that people have to places.¹³

The aesthetic value of this villa lies its specific form as a sign of modern design with reinforced concrete structure in the contemporary context; as an expression of desire for modern functional life with convenient communications; and as an artifact of pleasing the neighborhood. The historic value presents through its association with early modern architecture in Shanghai with materials and construction techniques, and with famous family, well known foreign architect Laszlo Edward Hudec. The remaining of this villa embodies the scientific value as a prototype and its evolutionary study as well as the related materials and techniques used. The past 20 years’ reuse fulfills the needs of many people who have nostalgic memories through activities and recreations of social values and urban values.

Conclusion

Memory is the evolution of man that god grants which bridge the past to the future. The malady of modern city and society is the loss of spirit. The dangerous tendency of contemporary Shanghai is using high-rise skyscrapers to take place of low-rise buildings. It is fundamental that cities as organisms will be in a dilemma along with the loss of city memories and city spirits. A city without yesterday’s buildings is like a human being without a memory. Modern architectural fabric of Shanghai constitutes the city’s spirits and energies for new city developers to capture and to use.

Collective memories as a kind of social value which express people’s feeling, understanding and experience of a place are intangible to identify. However, they have been paid more attention in determining the cultural significance of places which will

influence the evaluation of strategic procedures. Among all, memories that bring spirits to a place play a very important role in the process.

The basic contribution of this study is to emphasize the importance of memory as a carrier of spirits to obtain and to utilize energy, just as what we know that in reality, heritage of a place is a continuing process in society. To sustain the lively development of a place, we need to investigate, document, manage and continually develop responsively to the changing social contexts. The most recent piece of work in China, Suzhou Museum, has shown such a process. I.M.Pei and his sons, designed inspired by a long lasting memory on the family's hometown, transferred the spirits of city to new generations by ways of interpretation and abstraction (Fig.7).



Figure.7 Views through Suzhou garden and new interpretation in Suzhou Museum

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² Tess Johnston and Deke Erh. 1993. *A Last Look-Western Architecture in Old Shanghai*. Hong Kong: Old China Hand Press, p.87.

³ In 2000, the garden was inscribed on the World Heritage List by UNESCO.

⁴ Hua Xiahong 2000, Wu Dake Zai Shanghai Zhuopin Pingxi, Master Thesis, Tongji University, Shanghai.

⁵ He was born in Besztercebanya, Slovak. In 1914, he graduated from the Royal Technical University of Budapest, and as a member of the Royal Institute of Hungarian Architect in 1916, he joined the army of Austro-Hungary (1867-1918). Captured in Knabarovsk, Russia, he was exiled to Siberia, where he escaped to Harbin and then arrived in Shanghai in 1918. Lenore Hietkamp, 1998. *The Park Hotel, Shanghai (1931-1934) and its Architect, Laszlo Hudec(1893-1958): 'Tallest Building in the Far East' as Metaphor For Pre-communist Shanghai*. M.Phil Thesis., University of Victoria, Canada.

⁶ Robin Cohen, ed. 1996. *Theories of Migration*. UK: Cheltenham; US: E. Elgar, Brookfield; James T. Fawcett, ed. 1986. *Migration Intentions and Behavior: Third World Perspectives*. New York: Human Sciences Press.; Julian Wolpert, Behavioral Aspects of the Decision to Migrate. *Papers and Proceedings of the Regional Science Association* 15: 159-169, p.162.

⁷ Lewis Mumford. 1968. *The Urban Prospect*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., pp.ix-xx; Paul Oliver. 1987. *Dwellings: The House Across the World*. Austin: University of Texas Press.; Philip A. Kuhn. 1997. *The Homeland: Thinking About the History of Chinese Overseas*. Canberra: Australian National University.

⁸ Amos Rapoport. 1969. *House Form and Culture*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall; Lewis Mumford. 1961. *The City in History: its origins, its transformations, and its prospects*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World; P. Bourdieu. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Claude Levi-Strauss. 1983. *The Way of the Masks*. London: Jonathan Cape; Bernard L. Herman. 1992. *The Stolen House*. Charlottesville and London: The University Press of Virginia; David Stea, and Mete Turan. 1993. *Placemaking: Production of built environment in two cultures*. Aldershot: Avebury; Avebury: Hong Kong.

⁹ Jeff Cody and Kecia Fong. 2007. Built Heritage Conservation Education. Peter Hall and David Banister ed. *Built Environment* Vol.33, No.3. Alexandrine Press.

¹⁰ The earliest treaty ports, opened in 1843 after Nanjing Treaty, were places along the southeast coastal China, including Shanghai which was one of the biggest in the five treaty ports. By 1924, 'concession' or areas of land were marked out and 'rented' by foreign governments, who 'sub-let' to their nationals. In others, there were 'settlements' where foreign residents rented land and property directly from Chinese landlords. Since 1924, situation changes with the social and contextual changes. Frances

Wood, 1998. *No Dogs & Not Many Chinese: Treaty Port Life in China, 1843-1943*. London: John Murray (Publishers) Ltd.

¹¹ Frances Wood, 1998. *No Dogs & Not Many Chinese: Treaty Port Life in China, 1843-1943*. London: John Murray (Publishers) Ltd.

¹² Mei Qing, and Chen Huiqian, 2008. Investigation of the Current Situation and Sustainable Development of Shanghai Shikumen. *Architectural Journal*, 2008(April): .

¹³ Jeff Cody, and Kecia Fong. 2007. Built Heritage Conservation Education. Peter Hall and David Banister ed. *Built Environment* Vol.33, No.3. Alexandrine Press.