

# On Michal Milan Harminc – Builder and Architect of the Central European Region

Specifics of the Biographical Historiography of Architecture

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Architects and builders working in the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and its successor states in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century represent a particular phenomenon of the historiography of Central European architecture. Research on their life and work is difficult due to the large territorial scope of their „opus“. Almost the entirety of Central Europe and often other countries became sites of their activities. From this point of view, the personality of builder and architect Michal Milan Harminc (1869 – 1964), one of the doyens of Slovak architecture, is an interesting topic for research. He is known as an architect of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an excellent eclectic whose work exhibits a wide range of styles and typologies. It combines the legacy of historical styles with the impulses of modernism and functionalism. Impressively, between 1887 and 1951 he completed nearly 300 buildings in the territory of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, including what was then Czechoslovakia (now the Slovak Republic) and other successor states (Hungary, Serbia, Romania and also Ukraine).



He ranks among the most productive architects not only in Slovakia, but also in Central Europe. However, in this context his work has not yet been adequately evaluated.

Michal Milan Harminc was born on 7 October, 1869 in Kulpín, near Bački Petrovac (Serbia), and died on 5 July 1964 in Bratislava. His father was a carpenter. After graduating from elementary school in Kulpín (1875 – 1881) and German school in Bulkes, he studied at the German Business Academy in Novi Sad. At the young age of 17 he left for Budapest with a clear vision of becoming a successful builder, architect and businessman. He first worked as a carpenter for the building company „Neuschloss and sons“ (1886 – 1890). After completing his military service, he gained employment in the office of J. N. Bobula, the only Slovak builder in Budapest at the time. Between 1894 and 1896, Harminc worked for the company „Schikedanz and Herzog“, where he participated in the most important architectural projects related to the Millennial celebrations.



On April 1, 1897, he established his own independent design and construction office in Budapest. Nationality was always an issue close to his heart. Harminc tirelessly declared his Slovak nationality through his awareness-raising activities and the propagation of Slovak folk art, and he was a patron of young Slovak students in the Hungarian capital. In 1904 he married Anna Holcová, a Slovak from Žilina, and in the same year he completed his masonry and carpentry master test. He acquired his builder's title in Budapest (1908) and worked all over Austria-Hungary. He settled down in Slovakia in 1916 and opened his office there, first in Liptovský Sv. Mikuláš (1916 – 1919) and then in Nový Smokovec (1919 – 1922). From 1922 until 1951 he lived and worked in Bratislava. He died there at the age of 95.<sup>1</sup>

Only with great difficulty can we find in the history of Slovak architecture someone with as extensive a portfolio as Michal Milan Harminc. His uniqueness lies mainly in the rich typological and stylistic variety of his works, which can be understood as an inevitable reflection of his changing architectonic

view during the sixty years of his activity in architecture throughout the vast region of Central and Eastern Europe. Thanks to his many realized structures of various typological kinds, we see a parade of different styles beginning with historicism, moving through romantic reminiscences of medieval architectural styles, episodic echoes of secessional Secession-Art Nouveau and folk inspiration, and ending with the monumental forms of modernism and functionalism at the close of this masterful eclectic's career. Harminc's creative approach should be admired for the appropriateness of style choice in relation to the typological kind, for the transparency and logic of the layout contexture and for his sense of interior creation, as well as for his sensibility to the scale of the surroundings, for his contributions to urban planning, for his excellent construction knowledge, his understanding of the details of construction and, importantly, his craftsmanship.

Based on the changes in Harminc's architectonic view that took place throughout his career, his work is categorized into three periods:

Bratislava – Carlton-Savoy Hotel,  
historical postcard: M. Dulla's private collection



Bratislava – Agricultural Museum (Slovak National Museum), historical postcard: M. Dulla's private collection



Michal Milan Harminc, ALU SNK Martin, SH7\_1

- the so-called “Budapest period”, connected with historicizing themes in his work,
- the period of “modern official monumentalism,” rooted in eclecticism as well as in the emerging modernism,
- the functionalist period.<sup>2</sup>

Today, 116 years after the beginning of the independent creative „flight“ of the doyen of Slovak architecture, and looking to the more than three hundred architectural works that Harminc gave birth to in the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (predominantly in Slovakia and Budapest), we can conclude that he successfully fulfilled his dream of becoming a respected builder and architect. However, within the field of Slovak and European historiography of architecture his work is only partially mapped. A number of theorists and historians of architecture have tried to evaluate the life work of the man who was probably the most productive Slovak architect and builder to date, but his typologically and stylistically heterogeneous legacy still offers opportunities for deeper study. Until recently, special attention was focused mainly on the architect's period associated with modernity and functionalism.

The fact is that many of the buildings created during his period of „monumental modernism“ are remarkable. The original style of his structures from this period is characterized by the harmony between modernism and the legacy of historical styles. Variations on antique motifs transformed into simplified shapes, refined materials, and precise attention to detail in construction, were mainly responsible for the quality of his work during this time and gave it the stamp of monumentality. Respectability, solemnity and presentability became the common denominator uniting different kinds of his structures, including both residential buildings (villas, apartment buildings) and public buildings (sanatoriums, museums, administration buildings, as well as sepulchral structures). Their architectural qualities also enhanced the phenomenon of town formation and urban planning, which rank among the most distinctive features of this exceptional period of

Harminc's work. In this context, we can cite the Palace Sanatorium of Dr. Szontágh in Nový Smokovec (1917 – 1926) and three buildings in Bratislava – the Tatra Banka Palace (1923 – 1925), the Museum of Agriculture (1925 – 1928) and the Carlton-Savoy Hotel (1927 – 1928) – all of which are the work of an architect and builder of European calibre.

However, research next needs to focus primarily on M. M. Harminc's least explored but very productive Budapest period. As the latest research shows, it presents a qualitatively equal part of his diverse work. This period is also one of the key areas of focus for a research grant project at the Institute of History and Theory of Architecture and Monument Restoration of the Faculty of Architecture at the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, to be realised during the years 2011 to 2013. (*Grant VEGA No. 1/0417/11: M. M. Harminc – from historicism to the modernity and functionalism. Head of project: Jana Pohaničová. Jana Pohaničová and Peter Buday, a member of the research team, are the authors of this text.*)

The portfolio of Harminc's Budapest period (1887 – 1916) offers an architecturally first-rate and typologically extensive set of buildings, abundant in variations on historical architectural styles. These structures are located throughout the region of the former Austria-Hungary, mainly in Budapest and Slovakia. This legacy and to a large extent the bravura with which he took over the richness of forms of earlier styles, brought him to pragmatic eclecticism, which became the basic principle of his work not only in this period but also throughout his career. Typology-wise it is dominated by sacral works for various denominations, headquarters for banks and financial institutions, and residential structures (city palaces, villas, apartment buildings), as well as industrial compounds (tanneries), medical facilities, museums, schools and occasionally also sepulchral works.<sup>3</sup>

The key realizations of his work in Slovakia from this period include the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Pribylina (1901 – 1902), the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary in Černová

(1905 – 1907), the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Prietrž (1906 – 1907), Stodola's Villa in Liptovský Mikuláš (1902 – 1903), two structures in the town of Martin – the first building of the Slovak National Museum (1906 – 1908) and Tatra Banka (1910 – 1911), and bank houses with Slovak investment capital – Slovenská Banka in Ružomberok (1901 – 1902) and in Trstená (1903), Ľudová banka in Nové Mesto nad Váhom (1904 – 1906) and in Vrbové (1906), and Slovenská hospodárska banka in Trnava (1914).

In the last two years, our grant project was based on both archival and "in situ" research, as well as on the consistent study of architect's estate in the collections of Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava.<sup>4</sup> However, with few exceptions, the collections contain only documents from Slovakia. Previous research within the grant project has brought substantial findings on the following works of Harminc and themes related to his work:

- *the mapping of residential buildings (houses, palaces and villas) designed by Harminc in Budapest and Slovakia*<sup>5</sup>
- *the personal and architectural background of the establishment of the first Slovak banking institutions*<sup>6</sup>
- *research on Harminc's typologically unique sepulchral objects – singular mausoleums in Pomáz and Sládkovičovo.*<sup>7</sup>

Another important part of the project includes activities to better the understanding of Harminc's work and its wider cultural context:

- *international cooperation in the production of a documentary film*<sup>8</sup>
- *a series of exhibitions presenting architecture in Slovakia in the 19th century*<sup>9</sup>
- *the extension of knowledge about the key works of architect in the period between 1897 – 1916*<sup>10</sup>
- *the preparation of a monographic publication that will present Harminc's most important works and provide a characterization of the architect's career in Slovakia.*<sup>11</sup>

The present research has produced a wide variety of completely new information about Harminc and



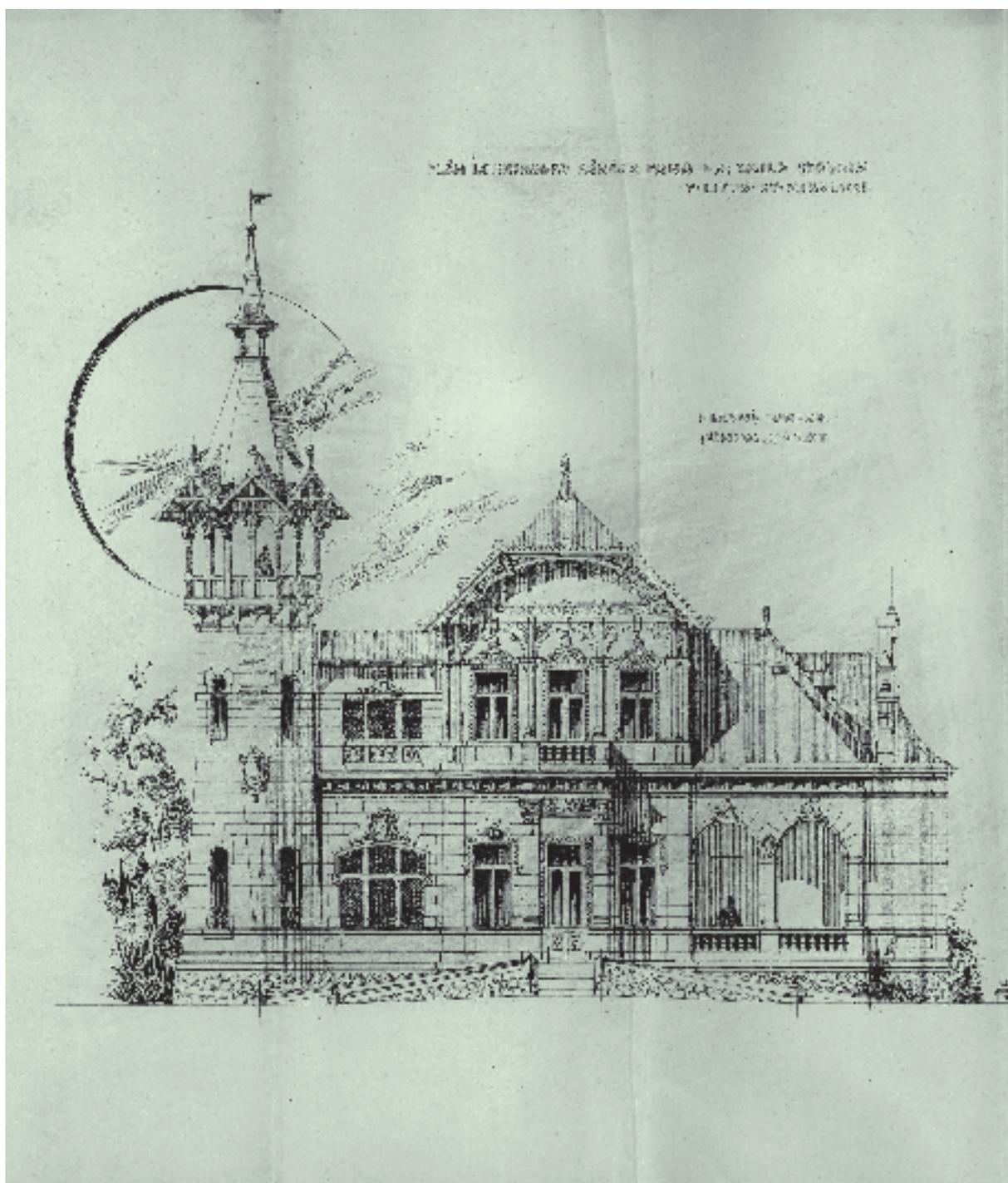
those of his works that remain as yet "undiscovered" by the professional public. It cast light on the unknown personal background of the architect's projects. On the other hand, the "Harminc issue" is still open, with numerous unsolved questions. This is especially true of his extraordinarily productive Budapest period (1887/1897 – 1916). In order to develop a more thorough treatment of the personality and work of the builder and architect Harminc – particularly in relation to the European dimension of his work – it would be optimal to establish broader cooperation within the fields of archival and terrain research, as well as between grant projects. The aim of this cooperation should be to extend our knowledge of the important personalities of the European architectural scene of past centuries. This branch of research could present interesting contributions beyond the field of the Central European architectural historiography. Finally, from perspective of the preservation of both Slovak and European cultural heritage, it can serve as a basis and an instrument of knowledge guiding the historic restoration of key works of important authorship.

Bratislava – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, photo: J. Hofer, archiv MMB



Nový Smokovec – Palace Sanatorium of  
Dr. Szontágh, Archív PÚ SR v Bratislave, č. 9427

Liptovský Mikuláš – Dr. E. Stodola's villa,  
MV SR ŠA Bytča, 2591/1902, K218





Černová – Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, photo: J. Pohaničová



Prietrž – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, photo: E. Lukáčová



Martin – the first building of the Slovak National Museum, photo: I. Štrbík



Martin – Tatra banka building, historical postcard: private collection of J. Pohaničová

**Michal Milan Harminc – selection of works****Works from the Budapest office (1887 – 1916)**

- 1887 Budapest (Hungary) – roofing of the livestock market hall
- 1895 Budapest (Hungary) – cooperation on the Millennial Exhibition
- 1897 Budapest (Hungary) – the apartment building of I. Krell  
Budapest (Hungary) – the apartment building of A. Vajdics
- 1899 Budapest (Hungary) – the apartment building of A. Bulyovszky
- 1901 Budapest (Hungary) – the apartment building of P. Joanovics  
Pribylina – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession  
Ružomberok – Slovenská banka (Slovak Bank)
- 1902 Budapest (Hungary) – L. Toldy's villa  
Budapest (Hungary) – adaptation of a Serbian Orthodox church  
Hybe – elementary school  
Liptovský Mikuláš – Dr. E. Stodola's villa  
Mohács (Hungary) – adaptation of a Serbian Orthodox church  
Szentendre (Hungary) – adaptation of the bishop's palace
- 1903 Trstená – Slovenská banka (Slovak Bank)  
Vršac (Serbia) – bishop's palace
- 1904 Myjava – Evangelical vicarage  
Myjava – county court  
Nové Mesto nad Váhom – Ľudová banka (People's Bank)  
Novi Sad (Serbia) – adaptation of a Serbian Orthodox church  
Púchov – adaptation of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession  
Černová – Church of Our Lady of the Rosary
- 1905 Hybe – adaptation of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession
- 1906 Martin – first building of the Slovak National Museum  
Vrbové – Ľudová banka (People's Bank)
- 1907 Nadlac (Romania) – community center  
Prietrž – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession
- 1908 Aradac (Serbia) – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession  
Martin – Dr. J. Kohút's villa
- 1910 Martin – Tatra banka building  
Subotica (Serbia) – adaptation of a Serbian Orthodox church
- 1912 Pomáz (Hungary) – mausoleum of the Luppa and Mandics families
- 1914 Báhoň – Church of St Francis of Assisi  
Kovačica (Serbia) – Evangelical Church

- of the Augsburg Confession Liptovská Porúbka – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession and vicarage  
Trnava – Slovenská hospodárska banka (Slovak Agricultural Bank)
- 1915 Liptovský Mikuláš – the Lacko-Pálka tannery
- 1916 Liptovský Mikuláš – J. Lacko's family house

**In the style of modern official monumentalism (1917 – 1927)**

- 1917 Nový Smokovec – the Palace  
Sanatorium of Dr. Szontágh
- 1919 Bytča – Tatra banka's apartment building  
Martin – Tatra banka's apartment buildings
- 1921 Martin – Sporiteľňa's apartment building
- 1922 Bratislava – Chamber of Commerce building
- 1922 České Brezovo – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession
- 1923 Bratislava – the Tatra banka palace
- 1924 Bratislava – Dr. E. Stodola's villa  
Lučenec – the YMCA administration building
- 1925 Bratislava – Dr. P. Fábry's villa  
Bratislava – Agricultural Museum (Slovak National Museum)
- 1926 Teplička nad Váhom – St Martin's Church  
Nitra – Mission House of Our Lady on the Calvary  
Nový Smokovec – Mr. Végh's villa  
Pliešovce – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession  
Sládkovičovo – the Kuffner family mausoleum  
Vráble – county court
- 1927 Bratislava – the Carlton-Savoy Hotel

**Under the influence of functionalism (1929 – 1951)**

- 1929 Martin – Slovak National Museum  
Rabča – The Church of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary
- 1930 Trenčianske Teplice – House of the Slovak Teachers' Choir  
Babín – The Church of the Holy Ghost
- 1931 Bratislava – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession  
Liptovský Mikuláš – the Lacko family villa  
Nový Smokovec – P. Hupka's villa  
Nový Smokovec – villa Lengyel  
Poprad – county council  
Šaľa nad Váhom – county council
- 1932 Nitra – Všeobecná banka (General Bank)  
Urmince – The Church of St Michael the Archangel
- 1933 Zuberec – The Church of St Wendelin  
Vlčkovce – The Church of St Thérèse of Lisieux
- 1934 Bátovce – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession

- Bratislava – House of the Slovak League  
Martin – hospital, obstetrics pavillion  
Nový Smokovec – Palace Spa House  
Liptovský Mikuláš – the Bethánia home
- 1935 Žilina – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession  
Krásna nad Hornádom – The Church of St Cyril and Methodius
- 1936 Veľký Grob – Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession
- 1938 Bytča – Farmers' Mutual Treasury building  
Levice – county court  
Spišská Nová Ves – State Farmers' School  
Spišská Nová Ves – County Council  
Terchová – The Church of St Cyril and Methodius
- 1940 Spišská Nová Ves – financial offices
- 1941 Novotý – The Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
Banská Štiavnica – county court  
Skalica – The Merciful Brothers' Hospital  
Trnava – "Oravská dedina" housing project
- 1942 Lúčky – hotel and spa house with a colonnade
- 1944 Holíč – orphanage
- 1945 Ústie nad Oravou – water reservoir construction – central building, apartment buildings for clerks and construction workers, tourist house
- 1946 Skalica – „Slovenská búda“ wine house
- 1947 Bratislava-Lamač – The Church of St Margita  
Nová Polianka – army sanatorium

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<sup>1</sup> See the following texts about the life and work of M. M. Harminc: Toran, Eduard: *Architekt Milan Michal Harminc*. In: Saučín, L. /Ed./: *Z novších výtvarných dejín Slovenska*. Bratislava: SAV 1962, p. 327 – 402; Šlachta, Š.: *Milan Michal Harminc*. Študijná úloha. Bratislava: ZSA 1986, no pag.; Kubičková, K. – Zajková, A. /Ed./: *Milan Michal Harminc 1869 – 1964*. Exhibition catalogue. Bratislava: SNG 1991, 41 p.; Dulla, M. – Moravčíková, H. /Ed./: *Architektúra Slovenska v 20. storočí*. Bratislava: Slovart 2002; Lukáčová, E. – Pohaničová, J.: *Rozmanité 19. storočie*. Bratislava: Perfekt 2008. 243 p.; Pohaničová, J.: *Výnimočné stavby dlhého storočia*. Bratislava: TRIO Publishing 2011, 185 p.; Dlháňová, Viera: *Michal Milan Harminc a jeho sakrálna architektúra*. 2007. Diploma thesis. FF UK Bratislava.

<sup>2</sup> Significant phases of Harminc's work were characterized in the studies of E. Toran (see Toran 1962, ref. 1, p. 327 – 402), resp. K. Kubičková and A. Zajková (Kubičková – Zajková 1991, ref. 1), in exhibition catalogue *Michal Milan Harminc – stavitel' a architekt* compiled by Jana Pohaničová (Bratislava: TRIO Publishing 2013, 27 p.)

<sup>3</sup> The latest work on the „Budapest-period“ is a study by Pohaničová, J. – Buday, P.: *Adalékok egy alapító életművének ismeretéhez. Adatok Harminc M. Mihály budapesti építészeti irodájának tevékenységéről (1897 – 1916)* [Additions to the knowledge of the work of one founder. Activities of the architectural office of Michal Milan Harminc in Budapest, (1897 – 1916)] In: *Építés – Építészettudomány*, vol. 45, N. 1, 2013; p. 115 – 144.

<sup>4</sup> *Archív výtvarného umenia a zbierka architektúry Slovenskej národnej galérie [Fine Art Archive and Collection of Architecture of the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava]*, pozostalosť M. M. Harminca [Legacy of M. M. Harminc].

<sup>5</sup> Selection from published texts: Pohaničová, J.: *Rodinné domy a vily v diele M. M. Harminca, alebo: Oscilovanie medzi historizmom a modernou [Family houses and mansions by M. M. Harminc, or: Oscillating between historicism and modernity]* In: *Michal Milan Harminc, významný európsky architekt*. Zborník príspevkov vedeckej konferencie. [Michal Milan Harminc, important European architect] Compiled by P. Mikloš. Bratislava: In Form Slovakia 2009, p. 9 – 12.; Pohaničová, J.: *Michal Milan Harminc a jeho mecenáši alebo Rodinné domy a vily v diele nestora slovenskej architektúry. [Michal Milan Harminc and his patrons, or Family houses and villas in the work of the nestor of Slovak architecture]*. In: *Umenie na Slovensku v historických a kultúrnych súvislostiach 2009*. Zborník z vedeckej konferencie, Trnava: 21.-22. X. 2009. [Art in Slovakia in historical and cultural context 2009. Collection of texts from conference, Trnava October 21 – 22, 2009] Compiled by I. Gojdič. Trnava: FF TU 2009, p. 59 – 68.; Buday, P.: *Poznámky k výskumu budapeštianskych prác Milana Michala Harminca*. [Notes on research of Harminc's work in Budapest] In: *Informátor Archívu Pamiatkového úradu SR*, N. 45, 2011, p. 16 – 18.

<sup>6</sup> Pohaničová – Buday 2013, ref. 3; Pohaničová, J.: *Menej známe odtiene tvorby Milana Michala Harminca – bankové budovy. [Less known shades of work of Milan Michal Harminc – bank buildings]* Study prepared for: *Umenie na Slovensku v historických a kultúrnych súvislostiach 2011*. Zborník príspevkov z vedeckej konferencie, Trnava 26.-27. X. 2011. [Art in Slovakia in historical and cultural context 2011. Collection of texts from conference, Trnava October 26 – 27, 2011] Compiled by Z. Ježeková and I. Gojdič. Towarzystwo Slowakow w Polsce, FF TU Trnava, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Buday, P.: *Mauzóleum*. [Mausoleum] In: *Sudová, E. /Ed./: Kuffnerovský hospodársky komplex*. Mesto Sládkovičovo 2012, p. 141 – 143; Prepared for print: Pohaničová, J.: *Návrhy hrobiek z pozostalosti M. M. Harminca*. In: *LONGIUS AUT PROPIUS MORS SUA QUEQUE MANET*. 11. zasadání k problematice sepulkralních památek. 31. X. – 2. XI. 2012. Praha. [LONGIUS AUT PROPIUS MORS SUA QUEQUE MANET. 11<sup>th</sup> session on the problem of sepulchral monuments, Prague, October 31 – November 2, 2012]

<sup>8</sup> „Stavitel' Harminc“ [The builder Harminc] Scenario:

M. Babiak. Coproduction: the Slovak redaction of Radio and Television of Vojvodina, Serbia. Cooperation from the Slovak part: J. Pohaničová, D. Buran, V. Dlháňová, M. Semančík, P. Buday, Š. Šlachta. Premiere: October 7, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> *Architektúra 19. storočia na Slovensku [Architecture of the 19th century in Slovakia]* Prague, Gallery of the Slovak Institute, January 26 – February 27, 2012; *Od klasicizmu k moderne v architektúre na Slovensku [From Classicism to Modernity in the Architecture of Slovakia]* Dušan Jurkovič Hall. Association of Slovak Architects. Bratislava, Balaša House, March 21 – April 16, 2012. Curator and author of exhibition libretto and texts: J. Pohaničová. Graphic design: V. Kvardová, P. Buday. Editors: J. Pohaničová, M. Dulla, 2013 – 2014.

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Pomáz (Hungary) – the mausoleum of the Lupa and Mandics families, photo: P. Buday



Bratislava – House of the Slovak League, photo: J. Hofer, archív MMB



Budapest (Hungary) – the apartment building of A. Buljovszky, photo: P. Buday