

GÉZA PAPP



SECRET BUDAPEST



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

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THE STAIRCASE OF 'PISTON HOUSE'

③

Perhaps the most interesting staircases and lifts in the city

1024 Budapest, 17 Margit körút

Sometimes open during European Heritage Days – otherwise, politely ask an inhabitant for access. Please be discreet as this is private property

Tram: 4, 6 – Margit híd, budai hídfő; Bus: 91, 191, 291 – Margit híd, budai hídfő



During the 1930s it was fashionable to build high-end apartment buildings. Not only did it provide profits for the investor company, it was also a declaration of status. Such a house was built in 1937–38 at 15–17 Margit körút by the pension fund of the Weiss Manfréd Works (see also p. 266): In the core of the building, a stylish combination of staircases and lifts is hidden from the street. This construction by the architects Béla Hofstätter and Ferenc Domány is certainly worth seeing.

Upon entering the building – either through the main gate on Margit körút or through a smaller entrance from the Margit utca side – a short marble-clad corridor flows into a central elliptical block. Additional doors open onto smaller corridors and the servants' entrances to the kitchens. In addition to the staircase, cylindrical glass lifts were built. These are original and still functioning. The ceiling on the top level incorporates a circular glass panel, allowing natural light into the stairwell.

Further works by the two architects include the Dunapark coffee house near Szent István park and the old Lloyd cinema at the end of Hollán Ernő utca.



FRESCOES OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

13

The history of Hungary painted on walls

1014 Budapest, 2–4 Bécsi kapu tér

+36 1 211 2712

mnl.gov.hu/mnl/ol/epuletseta

leveltarlatogatas@mnl.gov.hu

Guided tours for groups only, reservation needed at least two weeks in advance

See also (in Hungarian): mnl.gov.hu/mnl/ol/epuletlatogatas

Bus: 16, 16A, 116 – Bécsi kapu tér

In the Castle District, few people know the spectacular National Archives building can be visited with a booking.

It has beautiful interiors, delicate glazed windows and wall paintings along the corridors, boardroom, research room and staircase.

Among them, the paintings by Andor Dudits depict scenes from Hungarian history. In several cases, figures from the early 1900s can be identified: A knight in armour bears the face of Minister of Culture Kuno Klebelsberg, while two other figures look like Dudits and architect Samu Pecz.

Paintings along the staircase also show historic scenes: the settlement of Hungarians in the Carpathian basin; the foundation of the abbey in Pannonhalma; the acceptance of the Golden Bull; and the inauguration ceremony of the Chain Bridge.



SCHIFFER VILLA

①

A splendid little gem in the city

Hungarian Museum of Customs and Taxation History

1063 Budapest, 19/B Munkácsy utca

+36 (1) 472 6342

muzeum@nav.gov.hu

Mon–Thu 8am–3:30pm, Fri 8am–1:30pm

Guided tours available, call or email for bookings

Metro: M1 – Bajza utca; Trolley Bus: 72 – Rippl-Rónai utca or Munkácsy

Mihály utca

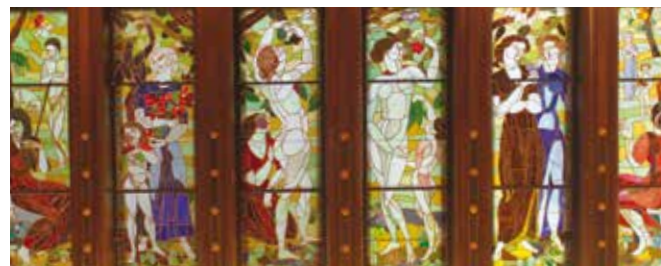


Concealed among the smaller streets of the 6th district, unknown even to most locals, the beautiful Schiffer villa is a splendid little gem in the city. Not only is the beauty of the villa to be admired (the original stained glass windows, wooden interiors and staircase), but you can also discover a museum presenting the Hungarian history of customs and taxation.

Built in 1910–12, the villa was based on designs by architect József Vágó, who was also responsible for the Gutenberg House, Gresham Palace and the Árkád Bazar building (see p. 108). It was built for Miksa Schiffer, a wealthy entrepreneur and railway engineer. The recurring theme of the decoration is the rebirth of the arts, creating a new harmony between people and nature. Most of the interiors were designed by Vágó, including furniture, majolica, textiles, and lighting. Zsolnay ceramics depict flora and fauna, while geometric patterns reflect the influence of the Wiener Werkstätte art school. Many items also feature a small SM monogram: the initials of Miksa Schiffer (in Hungary, the family name is written first).

The ground floor was the public area, including the hall, dining room, salons and a study, while the upper level was reserved for the family. In the cellar were the housekeeper's quarters, along with a kitchen, a boiler room and a billiard room. The hall remains the most authentic room: Its large Károly Kernstock stained glass window depicting the lost 'ideal world' was restored in the 1980s. On the wall, Kernstock's painting has Schiffer at its centre. A Carrara marble pool of flowers (by Vilmos Fémes Beck) and a white marble seated male nude (by sculptor Miklós Ligeti) can also be seen in the hall.

After the Second World War, a new wing was added to the villa in the rear yard and the upper rooms were divided up. The Hungarofrukt company had its headquarters here for decades. In 1994 the building was given to the Customs and Excise Authority and restoration work began. A year later, the Museum of Hungarian Customs and Taxation History was opened. Especially interesting are the artefacts related to the customs in the harbour of Fiume (today Rijeka): These include uniforms of excise officers, typewriters, coats of arms and old photographs.



THE KÁROLYI-CSEKONICS PALACE

29

Dracula's staircase

1088 Budapest, 17 Múzeum utca
portal.kre.hu/
Open during events only
Metro: M3, M4 – Kálvin tér



Designed by the famous architectural firm Fellner and Helmer (who also designed the Comedy Theatre and the Operetta and Musical Theatre), the Neo-Baroque palace at number 17 Múzeum utca boasts a stunning main hall featuring wooden carvings and a spectacular wooden staircase. Built in 1881 by Margit Csekonics, the wife of István Károlyi, a member of the wealthy Károlyi family, it can be visited during events.

A hub of aristocratic society, home to extravagant balls and social events, the palace was enlarged in 1890: A new floor was added, along with the staircase that is the real gem of the palace. Carved in the workshop of Endre Thék, the oak stairs lead to the first floor and the 300-capacity ballroom.

At the top is the griffin crest of the Károlyi family, while the railings are decorated with floral motifs and animal figures.

Following István Károlyi's death, the building became home to the French Embassy, then the Swedish Embassy, a trade society named the Baross Association, and the Lenin Institute. In 1955 the National Technical Library moved in, and two additional floors were built on the Reviczky utca side.

This part of the complex was later used by the Farkas Kempelen Student Information Centre, before being taken over by an institution belonging to the Ministry of Justice.

Following renovation in 2021, the Károli Gáspár Reformed University has become the newest resident.

Despite the relatively small scale, the rich decorations exude the style of a true aristocratic dwelling. Windows feature simpler adornments on the ground floor and richer ones on the first. Small balconies on the first floor have Baroque shell-shaped decorations on their parapets. The symmetrical façade is decorated with Baroque elements on the Múzeum utca side.

The Reviczky utca side is simpler: It was originally the entrance for horse-drawn carriages, and included the servants' rooms and other service areas.



The building was used as a location for the 2003 vampire film *Underground*, and the 2007 film *Eichmann*.

FORMER SILK MANUFACTURE IN ÓBUDA

⑥

A beautiful and rare oval building

1033 Budapest, 1 Miklós tér
madgardenbuda.hu
Bus: 9, 109, 118, 218 - Raktár utca



One of the lesser-known old buildings of Budapest, the historic building of the silk manufacture in Óbuda has an out of the ordinary shape: a rectangle with two semi-circles on its shorter sides. Surrounded by old trees and concealing a small inner yard on two levels, the baroque-era building has a unique atmosphere.

Entrance is from the two oval ends of the building, through a small front yard.

In the original setup there were no dividing walls so that the work could be easily surveyed from the courtyard: There were 28 work stations along the outer perimeter and 16 inside. The unique-shaped layout made it possible to have a good overview on all the work stations at the same time.

The building itself dates from the 18th century when Joseph II, Holy Roman Emperor from 1765 until his death in 1790, decided to promote the development of industry in the Habsburg monarchy, including the production of silk fibre. In 1781 he invited Italian professional Agostino Mazzocato to assist in setting up a factory in Hungary, following plans from architect József Tallherr. The factory began operating in 1786, also functioning as a training centre for workers. Following Mazzocato's death in 1814, his son inherited the business. Later, silk factory owner Károly Roscogni became director until production ended in 1830. The building survived the flood in 1838 (see p. 106), but was almost completely abandoned. It was sold by the Treasury, and the new owner converted it into apartments with a gallery on the upper level. After the Second World War, the building was restored in the 1950s, then again in the 1980s, when it was converted into a cultural centre.

Today, the space is occupied by offices and the courtyard by a beer garden from spring to autumn.



KELENFÖLD POWER STATION

25

Art Deco meets early 20th-century technology

1116 Budapest, 60 Hengermalom út

Open for guided tours only (see Introduction) and on the Day of Power Plants in October

Bus: 103, 133E – Hengermalom út



Designed in the 1920s and built mostly in the 1930s, the fantastic Kelenföld power station complex in southern Buda was a marvellous playground for urban exploration fans for years. It is now one of the very few major abandoned industrial sites which can officially be visited in Europe, along with the Óbuda Gas Works (see p. 154). Not all the factory is abandoned, though: Some buildings are empty and decaying, while other parts, which were restored between 2004 and 2008, are still operational.

Electricity came to Budapest in 1893 courtesy of two companies who ended up being bought in 1918 by the city municipality. The companies also initiated a project to build their own power station, the first beneficiaries of which were the ‘Palatinus houses’ near Margit Bridge, built at the same time.

The first buildings were designed by Kálmán Reichl, architect of the Óbuda Gas Works (1912–14), and built by the Ganz Electric Works and the Nicholson Machine Factory. Over the following decades, apart from during the First World War when development ceased, the site was extended. Following the death of Reichl in 1926, Virgil Borbíró (Bierbauer) took over his work. The first boiler room was built in 1913, the second in 1925, both designed by Reichl. The clock tower, dated 1926, was designed by Bierbauer – its size clearly illustrates how technology had advanced in the intervening years.

The brick-clad 30,000V switch house has a reinforced concrete structure and features a spectacular staircase on the façade. The bricks create harmony between the newer building and the older Reichl-designed ones.

The most spectacular area of the upper level is the control room. Reminiscent of early sci-fi films, it combines elements of modern and Art Deco styles. It is topped by a glass roof and has an abundance of switches and meters spanning the walls. Behind the switches, a corridor provides access to thousands of cables. The so-called ‘relay hall’ was situated on the lower level, with removable floor elements – again, providing easy access to the cables beneath. Glass flooring in the corridors permits natural light.

By 1934, the third boiler room was built. In parallel with the large housing projects being developed in the latter half of the 1960s, Kelenföld power station also began providing district heating (piped hot water).

The new power station introduced a new type of electricity, conforming to international standards: 3-phase, AC, 50Hz electricity with a system of transformers. The birth of the power station on 18 June 1914 was also the birthday of this modern electricity.

THE ZSOLNAY ROOM

27

A wonderful example of Jugendstil

Törley factory

1221 Budapest, 7 Anna utca

torleymuzeum.hu/en, muzeum@torley.hu

See website for opening hours and guided tours

Tram: 47 – Savoyai Jenő tér

Bus 241 – Savoyai Jenő tér (Törley tér)

In addition to the mausoleum (see p. 204), there is another relic of the Törley family in Budafok: The Törley factory offers guided tours of its cellars, ending in the Zsolnay room, one side of which features a large

and beautiful wall of colourful tiles. The entire scene is a wonderful example of the Jugendstil style (German Art Nouveau). Created by Henrik Dařilek in the Zsolnay factory in 1904, the tile wall was restored in 1989. Glazed earthenware tiles in both gloss and matte finishes cover an area of 27 square metres.

Depicted on the tiles is the robed figure of József Törley: Seated at a stone table on the left, he welcomes a parade of brightly dressed guests entering from the right – one young boy carries a bowl of fruit, another carries a standard inscribed 'Törley sec'. The column on the right, wrapped in grape vines, bears the Törley family coat of arms, and beside it is the logo of the Zsolnay factory, the signature of Henrik Dařilek, and the year 1904.



THE STAIRCASE OF THE KOZMO HOTEL

20

The largest staircase in the city

Former József Telephone Exchange, 1082 Budapest, Horváth Mihály tér
Bus: 9 – Horváth Mihály tér; Trolley Bus: 72, 83 – Horváth Mihály tér

Housed in the former József Telephone Exchange, the Kozmo luxury hotel boasts two beautiful features: a stunning staircase that some hotel guests don't even notice if they only take the lift, and beautiful outside reliefs on the façade that reflect its past. Designed by architect

Rezső Vilmos Ray, with a reinforced concrete structure by Szilárd Zielinszky, the József Telephone Exchange was built in 1915.

At the heart of the building, the single flight stairs are 11 metres wide and 50 metres in length, making it larger than the main staircase of the Parliament. The reason for this size is that for the distribution of calls, network plugs had to be connected manually on switchboards. The two large exchange halls (where connections were handled semi-automatically, mostly by female staff) were surrounded by an enormous number of wires and cables, making it a hazardous workplace for fire safety. The wide staircase therefore formed a quick escape route for the employees in case of fire.



THE MEMORIAL OF PRIME MINISTER JÓZSEF ANTALL

26

An astonishing work of art

Fiumei út cemetery

16-18 Fiumei út - 1086 Budapest,

en.nori.gov.hu

From 7:30am until sunset (5pm in winter, 8pm in early summer)

Tram: 24 - Dologház utca



Inaugurated in 1999, the memorial for József Antall (prime minister of Hungary between 1990 and 1993) is an astonishing work of art by sculptor Miklós Melocco that doesn't look like anything you have seen before: a kind of huge stone tent with four corners where we can see riding horsemen and monks praying.

The underlying idea of the memorial is to depict power instead of a portrayal of the deceased prime minister.

The memorial is built upon two axes: an East-West axis with two horsemen that symbolise secular power and a North-South axis with two monks holding a cross that symbolises ecclestial power.

At the center of everything lies the modest grave, symbol of the centre of the power.

'The monument in honour of József Antall is not a mere relic, but a reflection on the intellectual legacy of Antall as well as on the ruling power', said Melocco in an interview in 1997.

One monk, holding the cross like a weapon, looks like the actor Ádám Rajhona, while the other monk's face resembles architect Károly Kós. One of the horsemen is rather faceless (it is just falling off the horse, failing in its power). The other horseman is more glorious: Its face was modelled on that of writer Endre Gerelyes, a friend of the sculptor.

The stone used for the grave was brought from Somló Hill, where the Antall family used to own land, while the ivy was brought from the inner yard of the Semmelweis Museum, where József Antall worked as a director in the 1980s.



THE GLASS WINDOW OF SEMMELWEIS UNIVERSITY

50

Hungary's largest glass window

1089 Budapest,

Nagyvárad tér

Open during university hours only, closed for summer

Metro: M3 – Nagyvárad tér

Inside Semmelweis University, a huge glass window with bright colours and non-figurative patterns resembling cells under a microscope is familiar to students of the medical university, but remains unknown to most inhabitants of Budapest. With an area of 150 square metres, it is Hungary's largest glass window.

To see it, one has to enter one of the tallest buildings in the city, namely the tower of Semmelweis University in Nagyvárad tér, close to the metro station. The window is just opposite the main entrance.

The window is the result of a competition that was held to design a colourful artwork for the hall.

It was won by Gyula Hincz (1904–1986), who understood the hall's *genius loci* (spirit of place) and designed a non-figurative work inspired by the world of microbiology.

Designed in 1973, it was installed here in early 1982.

The 21 x 7-metre window is made up of large and small circles, contrasting intricacies, and abstract shapes, inspired by the world of cells and their composition, appearing almost psychedelic. Hincz called this style 'amoebism'.

The peace inscriptions

Returning to the square from the tower, a large statue dominates the corner. On top of a mound clad in grey granite bricks is a large abstract bird with outstretched wings.

Sculpted in 1983 by Péter Székely, the bird symbolises peace. Among the grey bricks is a pink marble plaque bearing the words *béke* ('peace' in Hungarian), with the signature of János Kádár, communist leader of Hungary between 1956 and 1988, and *paix* ('peace' in French), with the signature of former French president Francois Mitterrand.

Both leaders were patrons of the creation of this work, a monument to the peace process between the communist and capitalist worlds. The word 'peace' can be spotted in many other languages on other grey stone bricks. The grey granite came from Western Hungary, while the marble came from France.



GÉZA PAPP



SECRET BUDAPEST

A church that looks like a spaceship from a retro sci-fi film; Dracula's staircase; two sections of the Berlin Wall; Portuguese poems on the wall of a metro station; a semi-abandoned airport terminal; a cellar full of pinball machines; ancient Roman dogs' paws in a reception desk; a church that was elevated by a metre; one of the world's largest wine barrels; statues that are only a few centimeters high; a cemetery for railway relics; and wall art hiding a criticism of communist Hungary. These are just a few of the secrets revealed in Secret Budapest.

Far from the crowds and the usual clichés, Budapest offers countless curious experiences and is home to any number of well-hidden treasures, revealed only to residents and travellers who find their way off the beaten track.

An indispensable guide for those who thought they knew Budapest well or would like to discover another side of the city.

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