

HUYNH TAN PHAT - “THE INTELLECTUAL WHO BEAUTIFIED THE COUNTRY, BEAUTIFIED THE REVOLUTION, BEAUTIFIED LIFE”

Dr. Thach Kim Hieu

Ho Chi Minh Cadre Academy

*324 Chu Van An Street, Ward 12, Binh Thanh District, Ho Chi Minh City,
Vietnam.*

Abstract:

Huynh Tan Phat was an eminent intellectual, a talented architect, and an exceptional leader of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement. Born in 1913 in Ben Tre, he demonstrated his architectural talent early on, with several remarkable works in the South. However, he abandoned a promising career to join the revolution, dedicating all his intellect and abilities to the cause of national independence and development. As a leader, he made significant contributions to the southern revolutionary movement, particularly as the Chairman of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam. After 1975, he continued to leave a profound impact on urban planning and architecture. His life and career stand as a noble symbol of sacrifice and creativity for the nation.

Keywords: Huynh Tan Phat, Architectural Legacy, Revolutionary Leadership, Vietnamese Independence, Urban Planning

1. From Architectural Talent to Revolutionary Aspirations

Huynh Tan Phat was a prominent intellectual and renowned political activist who dedicated his entire life and career to the destiny of the nation. From his youth, he harbored great ambitions and a burning desire to use his talent and intellect to enhance the beauty of life. During the years of joining the Vietnamese people in following the Party to carry out the revolution for independence in the fall of 1945, through two resistance wars against French colonialism and American imperialism, and even in the early years of national construction, he devoted all his heart and energy to the fight for freedom, the defense of independence, and the building of a prosperous and beautiful homeland.

Huynh Tan Phat was born on February 15, 1913, in Chau Hung Commune, Binh Dai District, Ben Tre Province (formerly My Tho), into a bankrupt landlord family. As a child, he attended My Tho High School, where witnessing the terror inflicted by French forces during the 1930 movement in Cai Lay deeply instilled revolutionary consciousness within him. He later moved to Saigon to study at Petrus Ky School, driven by an ardent desire to gain knowledge and accomplish great and noble deeds.

In 1933, Huynh Tan Phat passed the entrance exam to the 8th class of the architecture department at the Indochina College of Fine Arts in Hanoi. During his studies, he supported himself by teaching at Thang Long School in Hanoi, writing for the newspapers *La Lutte* (Struggle) and *Le Travail* (Labor) in Northern Vietnam, and designing residential houses. Additionally, in mid-1936, he actively participated in the Indochina Congress movement as a member of the Indochina Student General Association and the Southern Student Friendship Association. In January 1937, he led a student delegation to meet Justin Godart, an envoy of the French government sent to investigate the situation in Indochina, presenting a “Petition” demanding democracy as per the agenda of the Popular Front.

In 1938, after five years of study, Huynh Tan Phat graduated as valedictorian and returned to Saigon later that year to work at the office of French architect Chauchaon, located at 68-70 Mayer Street (now Vo Thi Sau Street). Despite being a recent graduate and intern, his extraordinary creative talent earned him the responsibility of designing a large-scale project—the Saigon Navy Club, a five-story building with a basement. This structure was later repurposed by the Republic of Vietnam government as the Prime Minister's Office and currently serves as the Southern Office of the Government at 7 Le Duan Street, District 1. Although the Navy Club was architect Huynh Tan Phat's first project, “its spatial organization was tight, coherent, and dynamic, offering many aesthetically pleasing perspectives. The building's design, resembling a ship gliding over waves, was highly appropriate for the Navy Club's purpose and essence”. This project cemented Huynh Tan Phat's reputation as a talented architect, earning him trust and recognition from within and beyond the architectural community.

In 1940, Huynh Tan Phat opened an architectural office at 68-70 Mayer Street (now Vo Thi Sau Street), becoming the first Vietnamese architect to establish a private architectural office in Saigon. Despite facing significant challenges and oppression, his virtue and talent earned him admiration and trust from many people. In 1941, he won first prize in a design competition for the Indochina Fair and Exhibition Center, organized by Governor-General Jean Decoux, which was planned to be constructed at Ong Thuong Garden (now Tao Dan Park) in Saigon.

To this day, many of his works, especially villas and townhouses, not only in Saigon-Gia Dinh but also in provinces such as My Tho, Can Tho, Long Xuyen, and Da Lat, retain their original charm, which is well-suited to the hot and humid climate of the South. Notable examples include Villa 7 Le Duan (now the Southern Office of the Government), Villa 150 Nguyen Dinh Chieu (the Japanese Consulate), and Villa 6

¹ “Talent and Intelligence of Huynh Tan Phat”, *Tin Tuc* newspaper, issue dated September 30, 2014.

Nguyen Huy Luong. He was also a co-designer of Dinh 3, King Bao Dai's summer palace in Da Lat, which stands as a prominent architectural heritage site. Reflecting on Huynh Tan Phat's designs from this period, architect Nguyen Huu Thai remarked: "The designs of the young architect Huynh Tan Phat at that time deviated from the antiquated styles of his Indochinese contemporaries of the 1930s-1940s, boldly embracing modern aesthetics suited to the South's tropical climate, characterized by intense sunlight and heavy rains"².

During this period, Huynh Tan Phat had the opportunity to achieve substantial wealth through legitimate means. However, he chose to set aside such prospects, and in the early 1940s, he made the resolute decision to follow the call of the nation's destiny, embracing a life of hardship and danger for the greater cause.

2. Outstanding Leader of the Southern Revolutionary Movement

As one of the prominent revolutionary intellectuals, architect Huynh Tan Phat quickly became a source of inspiration for intellectuals and youth in Saigon. In 1944, he founded and served as Editor-in-Chief of the *Thanh Nien* newspaper, which promoted anti-French and anti-Japanese sentiments while fostering and developing the Vanguard Youth movement. He also participated in the National Language Propagation Association and worked on famine relief efforts in the South. On March 5, 1945, he was secretly admitted into the Indochinese Communist Party.

When the August Revolution broke out, Huynh Tan Phat, alongside Southern intellectuals such as Huynh Van Tieng, Mai Van Bo, and Luu Huu Phuoc, took part in the seizure of power in Saigon-Cho Lon. He personally designed the 15-meter-high Flag Tower to support the revolution, listing the names of 11 members of the Provisional Administrative Committee of Southern Vietnam. The tower, located at the intersection of Charner (Nguyen Hue) and Bonard (Le Loi) streets, was completed overnight from August 24 to the morning of August 25, 1945. It left a strong impression on the people during the pivotal day of the power seizure in Saigon. Professor Tran Van Giau, a leader of the August 1945 Revolution in Saigon, recounted: "At exactly 10 p.m., Huynh Van Tieng and I walked out to check whether Huynh Tan Phat had finished the tower. By then, a majestic, brightly illuminated square pillar stood tall at the Bonard-Charner (now Le Loi-Nguyen Hue) intersection, announcing to the people that the revolutionary government would be declared at 10 a.m. on August 25 during an armed rally of a million compatriots from the city and

² Nguyen Huu Thai, "Remembering You, Forever Remembering the Way of Being a Human", *Hồn Việt Magazine*.

surrounding areas, filling today's Nguyen Hue, Le Loi, Ham Nghi avenues, and Cuniac Square (now Quach Thi Trang Square)"³.

Following the revolution's success, on October 9, 1945, Huynh Tan Phat led a delegation of Southern youth to meet Uncle Ho and attend the National Youth Congress in Hanoi. This marked a significant milestone in his life. In 1946, he was elected as a delegate to the First National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

When the Vietnam-France War broke out, Huynh Tan Phat operated covertly in Saigon but was eventually arrested by the French. In 1949, he escaped to the war zone, where he held the positions of Member of the Southern Resistance Administrative Committee, Director of the Southern Information Department, and was directly responsible for the Free Saigon-Cho Lon Radio Station.

After the Geneva Conference in 1954, Huynh Tan Phat was assigned by the Party to remain in Saigon and work in the inner city. To maintain a legal and public position, he worked at the office of architect Nguyen Huu Thien. From that time, he actively participated in movements advocating for peace, freedom, democracy, national unification, and the implementation of the Geneva Agreement, while also composing and designing various architectural works. In 1954, his design project for the Cultural House, intended to be built at the Big Prison in Saigon, won Second Prize (as no First Prize was awarded), as well as for the Saigon National Library, now the Ho Chi Minh City General Science Library (co-designed with architects Nguyen Huu Thien and Pham Quang Hanh).

In 1960, Huynh Tan Phat escaped to the war zone and joined the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, holding the positions of Vice President and General Secretary of the Central Committee, as well as Chairman of the National Liberation Front Committee of Saigon-Gia Dinh. In June 1969, he was elected Chairman of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, a position he held until Vietnam's reunification.

In every role assigned by the Party, Huynh Tan Phat made significant and positive contributions. As the leader of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, he played a pivotal role in enhancing the prestige and influence of the Front. During his international trips, he and other members of the Front denounced the crimes of American imperialism, conveyed the just cause of the Southern people, generated widespread international support, and called on countries to sympathize with and back Vietnam's struggle for independence.

³ "Talent and Intelligence of Huynh Tan Phat", *Tin Tuc* newspaper, issue dated September 30, 2014.

Within a short period, the Front established representatives in the executive committees of 11 international organizations, maintained diplomatic relations with 18 countries, and was recognized by 26 international organizations, political parties, and mass organizations worldwide.

As Chairman of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, Huynh Tan Phat actively continued to demonstrate his capabilities, contributing alongside other members of the government to carry out the functions of a legitimate state government for the people of the South. At its first meeting, he and the Provisional Revolutionary Government announced a 12-point Action Program to mobilize the entire military and populace of South Vietnam. The program focused on fighting against the U.S., achieving national salvation, fostering national reconciliation, ensuring freedom and democracy for the people, and restoring economic and cultural development.

Four representative committees of the Government were established in the Central Central, South Central, Southeast, and Southwest regions, addressing the requirements for managing the liberated areas. Revolutionary People's Committees were established and strengthened in 44 provinces, 6 cities, 182 districts, and over 1,500 communes. From June 1969 to the end of 1975, more than 50 countries worldwide (including many capitalist countries) recognized and established diplomatic relations with the Provisional Revolutionary Government⁴. These achievements were partly due to the considerable contributions of Chairman Huynh Tan Phat.

3. Architectural Heritage and Vision for the Country

One remarkable aspect of Huynh Tan Phat is that, despite being busy day and night, he never abandoned his brush to beautify life. His friends, who worked with him during the two resistance wars, recalled how he used simple materials such as forest wood, bamboo, and thatch to build meeting rooms, halls, and accommodations for delegates attending conferences in revolutionary base areas. Notably, the hall for the National Liberation Front Congress in the Saigon - Cho Lon Special Zone. The first National Liberation Front Congress hall in Lo Go (R) was constructed from bamboo, wood, and thatch. Despite its simplicity, he skillfully worked with the dense forest foliage to create a spacious and beautiful hall. Today, the town of Loc Ninh still maintains the housing area of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, which was designed by him.

⁴ Professor, Major General Bui Phan Ky, "The Historical Mission of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam in the Resistance War Against the US to Save the Country", *National Defense Magazine*, issue dated August 9, 2011.

Mr. Mai Hoang Le, assistant to architect Huynh Tan Phat in the war zone, wrote: “In the deep forests and under wartime conditions, the base for the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, like other agencies, was simply constructed using forest materials. But if you look closely, the Government's base had its own distinct features. What was even more important was that Mr. Tam Chi (Huynh Tan Phat's alias) directed us to plan the layout to avoid carpet bombing by American B-52s. If it was hit, the bombs would only pass over the side, not destroy the entire facility... In selecting the location for the base, Mr. Tam Chi personally chose the site and reviewed the layout. In his bag, he always carried a compass and a military map to help plan the construction”.

Engineer Huynh Kim Truong, former Chairman of the Ho Chi Minh City Association of Science and Technology for Construction, also wrote: “When he was still in War Zone B2, Mr. Bay Hong, also known as Comrade Pham Hung, Secretary of the Central Office for Southern Vietnam, often visited Mr. Tam Chi to discuss work. Despite his many duties as the President of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, Mr. Tam still found time to sketch a guest house the government planned to build in the ‘capital of Loc Ninh’. As an old classmate of Mr. Tam at My Tho High School, seeing Mr. Phat working diligently on his sketches, Comrade Pham Hung jokingly patted his shoulder and said, 'Mr. Tam, remember you're the President of the Government, not the architect from 68 Mayer office in Saigon!' Then they both laughed and turned back to their work”⁵.

In 1972, architect Huynh Tan Phat also sketched out the town of Loc Ninh, the capital of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam. His work included 60 urban planning designs and dozens of public works and housing projects for the new town, including the administrative building, Martyrs' Monument, Uncle Ho's Temple, communication areas, children's palace, cultural and information center, outdoor theater, hall, hotel, department store, market, school, hospital, and sports facilities. This further demonstrates Huynh Tan Phat's profound understanding of urban planning and construction, and his mature, sophisticated design approach. In addition to his architectural work, he was also a talented portrait artist. To this day, we still have a portrait that Huynh Tan Phat drew of the famous Australian journalist, Wilfred Burchett, when he visited the war zone to interview him in 1964. Another vivid sketch records the scene of a buffalo stabbing ceremony performed by the Central Highlands people. Resistance artist Le Thanh Tru recalled: “He still maintained his strong, sharp, spirited strokes. In 1964, when hosting Australian

⁵Nguyen Huu Thai, “Remembering You, Forever Remembering the Way of Being a Human”, *Hồn Việt Magazine*.

journalist Burchett in the war zone, architect Huynh Tan Phat, having paper and pencils on hand, immediately drew a portrait of this outstanding international journalist to send to *Van Nghe Giai Phong* magazine. Or when he visited the art room in the war zone in 1963, he and fellow artists drew a few portraits for fun. His model was artist Huynh Phuong Dong. He not only painted portraits but also landscapes. The *Buffalo Stabbing Festival* painting he created was inspired by his visit to the old battlefield in the Central Highlands”⁶.

After the reunification of the country in 1976, Huynh Tan Phat was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, Chairman of the State Capital Construction Committee, and Vice President of the Vietnam Association of Architects. He also served as Head of the Steering Committee for Capital Planning and the Chief of the Hanoi Construction Design Project. He directly supervised and contributed many architectural sketches for projects in the capital, such as Noi Bai International Airport, the Central Children’s Palace, Hanoi Pedagogical University, and the Ho Chi Minh Museum, among others.

Additionally, Huynh Tan Phat provided leadership and valuable input for urban planning projects across the country, including in Ho Chi Minh City, Phan Thiet, Nha Trang, Vung Tau, Con Dao, Tay Ninh, and Lang Son. He directly sketched initial concepts for the Hoa Binh Theater in District 10, Ho Chi Minh City, co-authoring the project with architect Nguyen Thanh The.

As Chairman of the Vietnam Association of Architects (1983-1989), he served as Chairman of the Judging Council for International Architectural Competitions, providing numerous insights and selecting high-quality projects for international competitions, including “Hanoi Flower Village House”, “Alibaba Space”, and “To Exist or Not to Exist”. As a result, by the late 1980s, many young architects in Vietnam had won First Prizes in international architectural competitions. In April 1989, despite his advanced age and poor health, he was elected Honorary Chairman at the Fourth Congress of the Vietnam Association of Architects.

In 1996, the late architect Huynh Tan Phat was honored with the Ho Chi Minh Prize for Literature and Arts (Phase I), presented by the President of Vietnam. The award recognized his contributions to the following works: the Hanoi Capital Planning project, designed in 1981, and his direct involvement in the design of Noi Bai International Airport, Hanoi Pedagogical University, Central Children’s Palace (designed in 1978), and the Ho Chi Minh Museum (designed between 1979-1985).

Following his years of dedication, Huynh Tan Phat was bestowed many prestigious honors by the State, including the Gold Star Medal, the Ho Chi Minh

⁶ Nguyen Huu Thai, “Remembering You, Forever Remembering the Way of Being a Human”, *Hồn Việt* Magazine.

Medal, the First Class Resistance Medal, the First Class Resistance Medal for National Salvation, the National Great Unity Medal, and the 40-year Party Membership Badge. Due to complications from high blood pressure, he passed away at 0:30 on September 30, 1989, in Ho Chi Minh City.

Conclusion

Huynh Tan Phat's life and career were rich and diverse. He was both a talented architect and an exceptional leader of the revolutionary movement in the South. In any context, period, or position, his architectural talent was always harmoniously combined with his leadership qualities, mobilizing revolutionary forces, particularly among intellectuals—a “battleground not easily replaced” (as noted by comrade Tran Bach Dang). This combination of skills made him both an outstanding revolutionary leader and a masterful architectural artist. His legacy was summed up in his eulogy: “The people and comrades across the country were deeply moved, mourning him—the intellectual who beautified the Fatherland, beautified the revolution, and beautified life”.

References

1. Tin Tuc Newspaper, “The Talent and Wisdom of Huynh Tan Phat”, September 30, 2014.
2. Nguyen Huu Thai, “Remembering You, Always Remembering How to Be Human”, Hon Viet Magazine.
3. Professor and Major General Bui Phan Ky, “The Historical Mission of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam During the Resistance War Against the US for National Salvation”, National Defense Magazine, August 9, 2011.