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A Reverse History of Modernism

What Connects Prague to Le Corbusier?

In two parallel and interrelated stories, the following essay presents a specific view of the history of avant-garde architecture in former Czechoslovakia. This work grew out of personal experience; following what at first seemed an unlikely trail to me revealed the inherent problems of Czech modernist historiography and its meanings. Beginning with memories of the house where I grew up, it lead to questions about the relationship between existing structures and the historical narratives behind them. Unexpectedly, this simple case study of my family home relates to larger debates about the character of Czech Modernism and its relationship to Le Corbusier.

A White House That Became Yellow

For more than twenty years, my family has lived in a villa on what was once the outskirts of Prague (Figure 1). As long as I can remember, it has had a traditional exterior with a pitched roof and conventional detailing. The four-story structure, with its yellow façade, resembles many other buildings in the neighborhood. The outer cloak however was added in the 1930s and conceals some remarkable secrets.

When I was little I had not thought much about the history of the house. However, this changed during my studies of art history at

Charles University, Prague. I received a deceptively simple assignment for an architectural survey seminar: choose any building and provide a survey of its structure. Not terribly interested in architecture at the time, I was overwhelmed by the vast number of buildings I could explore in a city with an architectural history as rich as Prague's. Lost in this labyrinth of choices, I asked a friend for help. He reminded me that the easiest object of inquiry is often the one closest and most familiar to you. He also reminded me of what I had once told him: my childhood home had not always been the typical home that stood there now. I began to recall the stories I had heard from my grandfather about his parents and his family (Figure 2). As my grandfather recalled, the house was awful, impractical, and cold—impossible to heat due to the glass walls everywhere. There were



Figure 1 Attic of the villa.

whole walls constructed of glass, the roof was flat and only one family lived there. In short, it was Modern.

Listening to such descriptions in an apartment full of antique furniture next to a staircase covered with antlers and stuffed birds, I could not imagine its earlier form (Figure 3). Inspired by these memories of my grandfather, I went to Prague's District Eight archives to search for the original plans. The result was more surprising than I had expected. Not only was the house renovated, it had been entirely transformed (Figure 4). Instead of an attic under a steep roof, there was an open-air sunbath on a flat roof; instead of enclosed space, large open sheets of glass looked out onto a garden and the panorama of the city beyond. What had once been a white cube designed in 1928 had by 1938 been replaced by a yellow barn-like house (Figure 5a,b).



Figure 2 Exterior of the villa.



Figure 3 Family photo from 1970.



Figure 4 Antiques in the staircase.

My grandfather recounted how it happened: When his mother, the wife of a Prague lawyer, bought the house from a Jewish family leaving the country right before the outbreak of the Second World War, she pointed her finger at the roof and said, “attic!” She then pointed her finger to the basement and said, “cellar!” Within a few months, her wishes became reality, giving the building its current form (Figure 6a,b).

Within the context of contemporary Czechoslovak architecture, the original building was not an extraordinary design; yet its appearance was progressive, and it utilized pioneering new construction technologies for family housing at the time. The receding terraces of the original design, its use of glass, and the lightweight reinforced concrete construction were presented as a *maison particulière à Prague* in the prestigious Czech architectural magazine *Stavba* in 1929 (Figure 7a,b).¹ It was architecture that would enable affordable and comfortable living for all sectors of society. In the words of the architect Oldřich Starý, the architecture of the family home served as a most convenient laboratory for new technologies.²

Early contemporary concepts of the new architecture were brought into reality in exhibitions on housing, first in 1927 in Stuttgart and later in Brno, Wroclaw, Basel, Prague and Vienna in the early 1930s (Figure 8). They were featured as part of pre-designed urban plans that creating quadrants of slick modern homes. In contrast to these examples, my family’s home was built on the slope of a former vineyard, in the middle of houses in various architectural styles (Figure 9). Standing among traditional houses with steep roofs and attics, this white, modern house heralded a new lifestyle and demanded new technologies. As shown by the picture taken by my parent’s neighbor in 1930, the form of a white cube was a brave decision to support a new stream of architecture promoting individual taste and lifestyle.

The Architect Who Studied Under Le Corbusier

The architect of the villa was Karel Hannauer, then a young student at Prague's Technical University and the son of a wealthy construction company owner. At the time, Hannauer was an active participant in Prague's avant-garde circles, and he contributed to a number of contemporary reviews and daily newspapers. That he served as Le Corbusier's driver during the latter's visit to Prague in October 1928 is evidenced by the extent of his network of connections and his report on the tour for a daily newspaper (Figure 10).³

Today not much is known about Hannauer. He is said to have studied under Walter Gropius in Berlin, Victor Bourgeois in Brussels, and Le Corbusier in Paris. This information was published during the architect's life in a short biographical write-up (Figure 11).⁴ Despite its brevity, this brief mention of Hannauer's educational background was enough to establish his reputation, making him one of the few Czechs who worked for internationally recognized luminaires. But how trustworthy is this short bio?

Czechs in the 35 Rue de Sèvres Studio

Searching for answers, I probed deeper into the available sources to unearth information on Hannauer's life and career. Not only did I not find any evidence of Hannauer studying under the leading authorities of European modernism, I found no proof of any close communication with any of them beyond Le Corbusier's visit.

What I did discover while conducting my research on Hannauer was a larger mythology concerning Czech architects whose work was routinely connected with Le Corbusier. Besides Hannauer, a number of important Czech architects were said to have had connections with the master. Czech modernist historiography, based mostly on Czech

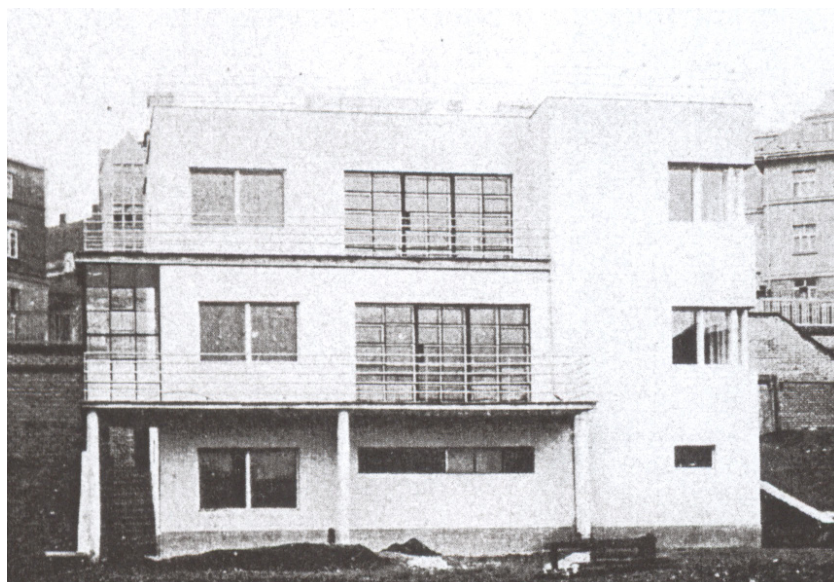


Figure 5a Former shape in 1929.



Figure 5b Current shape.

primary sources, was filled with such references. There were also related memoirs of architects themselves, which make similar claims. However, none of these contained much in the way of critical reflection. During the Communist period in the former Czechoslovakia, scholars interested in the topic could not conduct research abroad, and they were forced to rely on limited local resources and agreed upon conventions.

Looking more closely to the material at hand, I discovered the facts did not line up. When naming all the so-called apprentices of Le Corbusier, each author's list differs from the others.⁵ The supposed cooperation with Le Corbusier elevated the architect's qualifications and would elevate his status within the architectural community. To this day, the term "Corbusian" is often applied to Czech modernist buildings, bandied about without further elaboration as a sign of quality, a brand of good architecture, and an implied association with the architectural giant.

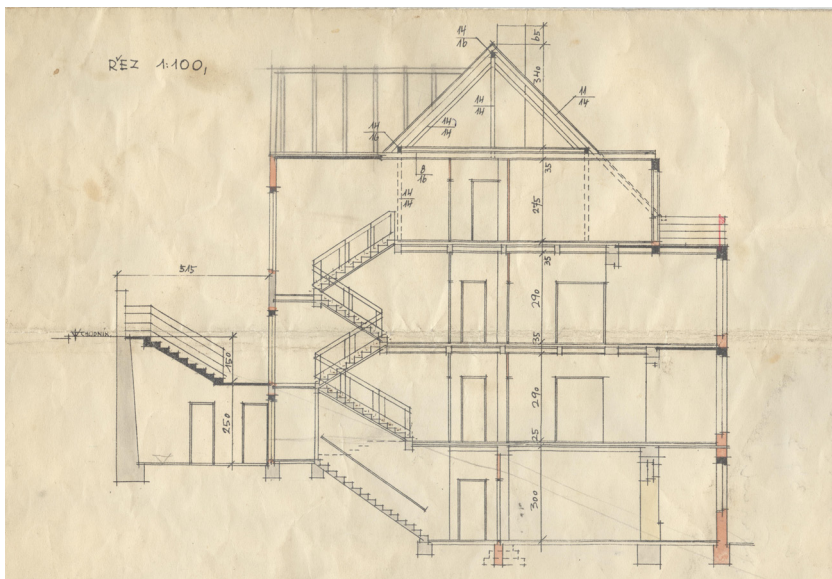


Figure 6a Section of the current design

The records of the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris shows there were at least thirteen Czech architects working in the studio at 35 Rue de Sèvres in Paris. The well known architects Vladimír Karfík, Karel Stráník, Eugen Rosenberg, Jan Sokol, František Sammer, Josef Danda, Jan Reiner, Vladimír Beneš, Václav Rajniš and Jaroslav Vaculík assisted in the studio alongside the lesser known surnames “Vanec“, “Marsalek“ and “Safranek.”⁶ Some spent a few months in the studio, others more than a year helping in the design process, usually at their own expense.⁷ Each of the architects came to Le Corbusier to learn more about architectural practice, to meet the icon of the progressive stream in contemporary architecture, and to build their biographies.⁸ Some publicized their experiences through writings, others by word of mouth, and some of them haven’t spread the information at all. Aware of the value of such experience, some Czech architects who had never

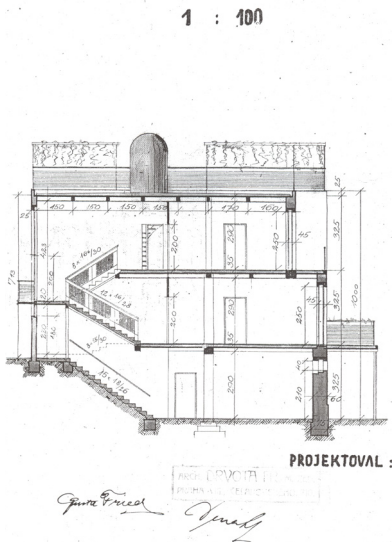


Figure 6b Section of the former design.



Figure 7a Terraces.

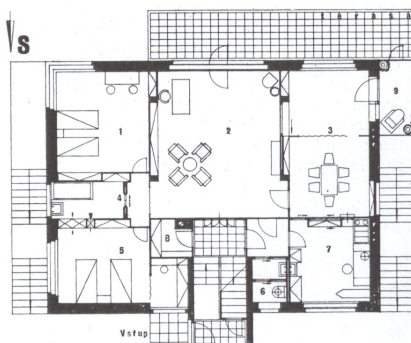
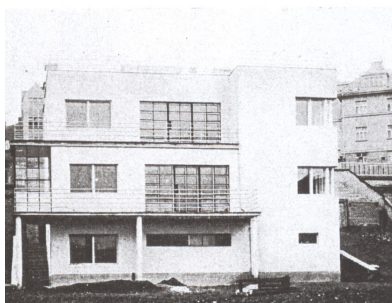
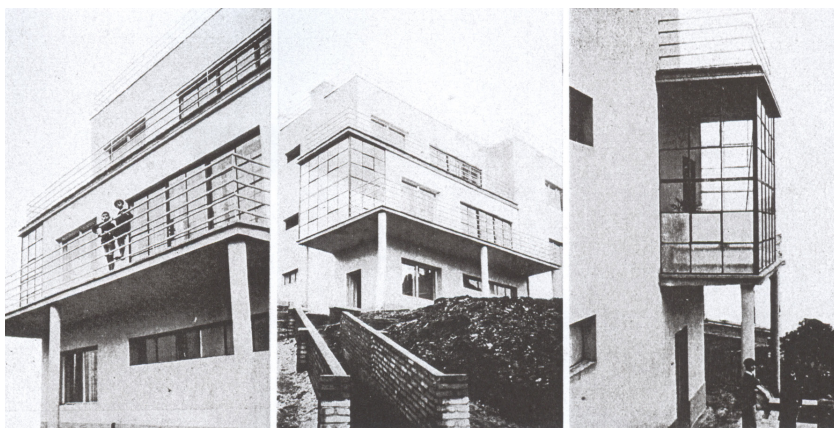


Figure 7b Publication in *Stavba* 1929

worked in the 35 Rue de Sèvres studio claimed they had been there—both to increase their reputation and to showcase their connections with Corbusian Modernism. That was the case of Karel Hannauer.⁹

Czech assistants of Le Corbusier never formed a cohesive group, and they brought diverse impulses back to their home country. When comparing Le Corbusier's work of the time with the constructions of his Czech modernist contemporaries, we find structures inspired by the master and designed by a wide range of architects with no direct connection to the practice in the 35 Rue de Sèvres studio.



Figure 8 Baba Housing Exhibition in Prague 1932.

Le Corbusier and Czechoslovakia

When studying the Central European Modern Movement and the development of progressive Czech architecture, Le Corbusier's name is encountered everywhere. By counting his visits to Czechoslovakia, his publications in the local press, and the Czech architects whom Le Corbusier worked with in Paris, scholars have sought to measure his impact on the character of Czech Modernism.¹⁰ This examination proves problematic because such things are not precisely quantifiable—certainly not in this way. And yet there are strong links between Le Corbusier and the Czechs.

Czechoslovakia was one of the countries Le Corbusier connected with from the very beginning of his career. In terms of theoretical dialogue, he found an equal partner in the key figure of the Czechoslovak avant-garde thinker Karel Teige.¹¹ Czech political representatives in Paris and Prague also played an important role in supporting the exchange of ideas and the work of Le Corbusier himself. Stefan Osuský, the ambassador of Czechoslovakia to Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, negotiated with Paul Otlet for the realization of Le Corbusier's project

for Mundaneum in Geneva, and he played an important role in mediating contacts with Czechoslovak industrialists.

There is no doubt that the master himself had reason to keep in touch with the Czech milieu. His public lectures in 1925 and 1928 were certainly of high importance to the young generation of architects in Czechoslovakia, and the large publications on Le Corbusier raised a general awareness of his work and theories. On the other side, Czechoslovakia also played a significant role in the story.

The country was then experiencing its first years as an autonomous republic, and, as it absorbed inspirations from abroad, was in a unique position to meld them and create a strong, individual culture of its own. When visiting Prague in 1928, Le Corbusier was impressed by the large-scale modernist buildings he saw, especially the Trade Fair Palace (Figure 12), which was then under construction. Having built only small-scale houses up till then, he admired the ability of Czech engineers to use new technologies in such a large structure. Le



Figure 9 Slope of the former vineyards.

Corbusier's admiration for the quality of Czechoslovak industry and the *intellectual openness* of the country resulted in his effort to produce furniture for the l'Esprit Nouveau pavilion with the Czech firm Brno UP Enterprises in 1925.¹² Ten years later, he tried his luck again when he submitted his designs for a small car—the *voiture minimum*—to Czechoslovakia's company Tatra Works. In his letter from December 1936, addressed to the Tatra company, Le Corbusier wrote: "French manufacturers maintain the traditional spirit that persist among their customers, and in this moment would not consider the manufacturing of such a car. For this reason, we have thought that a country as intellectually open as Czechoslovakia, where we are in fact well known, would by contrast have an interest in the production of a car of such a new type."¹³ The car, however, never saw production. In fact, all of Le Corbusier's attempts to cooperate with Czech enterprises failed.

Without a doubt, Le Corbusier's biggest disappointment came when he was unable to secure cooperation with the Baťa Company. The



Figure 10 Le Corbusier's driver.

letí ve Vel. Losinách v sev. M
Vystavěl v l. 1618—1619 měst.
v Morav. Starém Městě.

Jul. Leisching: Kunstgesch. Mährens.

Hannauer, Karel. * 11./6. 1904
architekt v Praze-Smíchově. Studi-
um uč. technické v Praze (1924–
Paříž: arch. Le Corbusier. Berlín:
Gropius. Brusel: V. Bourgeois.
vystavoval v U. B., Topičově saloně v
Praze a v gal. Vignon v Paříži. Obesla
„Za novou architekturu“ v Praze
Přispěl odb. články do domácích
hraničních časopisů. Provedené
projekty v počtu 38.

Hanel (Hanel, Hanndl), Karel
* asi 1735, † 8./2. 1780 v Praze
matr. Týnská). Sochař v Praze
měl oddávky 5./7. 1770 u sv. Jaš-
ky.

Figure 11 Hannauer's biographical note in 1947

shoe tycoon Jan Baťa, who was attempting to construct a functional utopia in the city of Zlín, embodied Le Corbusier's dream of a new society realized in partnership with the ideal client. After his first visit to Zlín, Le Corbusier wrote to his mother: "Dear mother, I have made a fruitful journey. I assisted on an extraordinary social enterprise for the new world, one of human happiness in the form of the most brilliant reality, the most complete, with no gaps, conflicts, faults or comedy. Baťa, the Ford of Europe. But the Ford who has created harmony and roused joy through love."¹⁴ Hoping to unite their efforts, Le Corbusier worked for Baťa for more than a year, yet almost all of his proposed projects met with refusal. In the end, he even had a difficult time getting paid for his work.¹⁵

What is the place of Nostalgia?

And so, we come to the real crux of the story, one that is very much about the failures and missteps of historiography. Due to the Iron Curtain that for decades separated the Eastern and Western Bloc, it took a long time to situate interwar Czechoslovak avant-gardes within the context of the international history of architecture. Since the 1980s, distinguished scholars have pointed to the importance of this chapter in the history of modernism,¹⁶ and the extraordinary character of the period has been strongly highlighted after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989.¹⁷ Writers looking back at the interwar period of the First Czechoslovak Republic have celebrated this era as the last period of cultivated democracy in the development of the country, and a number of scholars have started to explore and rebuild its history in order to create a relevant place for the period in the general history of architecture. Naturally, in fighting for recognition of what happened in Czech Modernism—long-neglected by the dictate of an ideological regime—it is hard to avoid a sense of nostalgia for these times.¹⁸



Figure 12 Trade Fair Palace visited by Le Corbusier.

It is challenging to reconsider the history of interwar Czechoslovakia from the family house, from a room full of heavy carpets, antique furniture, and mounted animals created and collected over a course of decades. Although it seems to have always looked this way, just as the history of my family home makes clear, it is important to listen to the hidden sounds of the past and not to overlook what surrounds us. With every step, an ancestor could have pointed his finger at the roof and said, “attic,” then at the basement and said, “cellar,” and within a few months hid the testimony of the past under a seemingly banal facade.

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[Endnotes]

- 1 Karel Hannauer, Maison particulière à Prague, *Stavba VIII*, 1929 – 1930, 95.
- 2 Oldřich Starý, Kolonie, Nový dům“, *Stavba VII*, 1928 – 1929, pp. 97 – 105.
- 3 Karel Hannauer, Architekt Jeanneret – Le Corbusier v Praze, *České slovo*, 9. 10. 1928, 5.
- 4 Prokop Toman (ed.), *Nový slovník československých výtvarných umělců*, vol. I, Praha 1947, 294.
- 5 Otakar Nový, *Česká architektonická avantgarda*, Praha 1998, 170; Felix Haas, *Architektura 20. století*, Praha 1978, 362 et al. Rostislav Švácha, Le Corbusier, Praha 1989, p. 78 et al
- 6 *Repertoire des collaborateurs de Le Corbusier ayant travaillé à l'Atelier 35 rue de Sèvres ainsi qu'aux travaux exécutés à l'étranger*, FLC Paris.
- 7 To learn more about the regime of Le Corbusier's studio see recently published Maristella Casciato, 35 Rue de Sèvres: At Work in the Atelier, in: Jean-Louis Cohen (ed.), *Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes*, New York 2013, pp. 240 – 245.
- 8 On the importance of meeting masters in an architect's career see Roxanne Williamson, *American Architects and the Mechanics of Fame*, Austin 1991. For the recommendation I am grateful to Anthony Alofsin.
- 9 Among other architects who are claimed to have worked in Le Corbusier's studio are Václav Stach, Čestmír Ryppl or Magda Jansová. Due to the confusion of the origins of Le Corbusier's assistants, sometimes we'll find Yugoslav architects Saša Sedlak and Milan Sever or German architect Oswald among Czech participants in the studio. For more on the case of Karel Hannauer see Martina Hrabová, Student or Visitor? Karel Hannauer: A Bridge between Foreign and Czech Avant-Garde Architecture, *Umění – Art LX*, 2012, pp. 304 – 311.
- 10 Vladimír Šlapeta, Die Wirkung in der Ferne: Le Corbusier und die Tschechische Architektur, in: *Arch Plus*, No 8, 1987, pp. 87 – 92 et al.
- 11 More on Teige see Eric Dluhosh – Rostislav Švácha (eds.), *Karel Teige 1900 – 1951: L'Enfant Terrible of Czech Modernist Avant-Garde of the 1920s and 30s*, Oxford – London 1990; Jean-Louis Cohen, Introduction in: Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia and Other Writings*, Los Angeles 2000, p. 1 – 55; More on polemique with Le Corbusier see George Baird, „Karel Teige's 'Mundaneum,' and Le Corbusier's 'In Defense of Architecture,' 1933,“ *Oppositions*, no. 4 (Fall 1974), pp. 79 – 82.
- 12 Arthur Rüegg, Le Pavillon L'Esprit Nouveau en tant que musée imaginaire, in: Stanislaus von Moos (ed.), *Le Corbusier et l'Industrie 1920 – 1925*, Berlin, W. Ernst 1987, pp. 135 – 151; Idem in collaboration with Claus Spechtenhauser, *Le Corbusier : Meubles et Intérieurs 1905 – 1965*, Paris – Zürich 2012, pp. 81 – 85, 94 and 255 ; Jindřich Chatrný (ed.), *Jan Vaněk 1891 – 1962: Civilizované bydlení pro*

každého, Brno, Muzeum města Brna 2008, pp. 21-23, 67 – 69.

13 From the accompanying report sent to Czechoslovakia with the mini-automobile project, FLC, F1-5-92. For details of the story see Antonio Amado, *Voiture Minimum. Le Corbusier and the Automobile*, Cambridge 2011 and Martina Hrabová, Le Corbusier in the services of the Tatra Works in Czechoslovakia, *Zlatý řez / Golden Section*, 35, Winter 2012, pp. 50 – 57.

14 Letter from May the 2nd 1935, FLC R2-1-213.

15 For more details see Jean-Louis Cohen, Unser Kunde ist Unser Herr: Le Corbusier trifft Baťa, in: Ladislava Hornáková – Radomíra Sedláková (ed.), *Zlín – Modellstadt der Moderne*, München 2012, 112.

16 Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 2nd edition, London 1985, 251.

17 Eric Dluhosh – Rostislav Švácha (eds.), *Karel Teige 1900 – 1951: L'Enfant Terrible of Czech Modernist Avant-Garde of the 1920s and 30s*, Oxford – London 1990; Kenneth Frampton, “A Modernity Worthy of the name: Notes of the Czech architectural Avant-garde,” in: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzáles (ed.), *El Arte de la Vanguardia en Checoslovaquia 1918 – 38*, Valencia 1993, pp. 213 – 231; *Prague 1918 – 1938: Capitale Secrète des avant-gardes* (cat. exh.), Dijon 1997; Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910 – 1930*, Los Angeles – Cambridge 2002; Jaroslav Anděl, *The New Vision for the New Architecture: Czechoslovakia, 1918 – 1938*, Prague 2005 and many others.

18 For an overview of the historiography and the problems of the idealisation of the First Republic in Czechoslovakia see Kimberly Elman Zarecor, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity. Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945 – 1960*, Pittsburgh 2011, pp. 1 – 11.

[Chapter figure part of “Souvenir Nostalgia Photo Series.” Photograph by Andrew Manuel. 2014.]