karel teige
the minimum dwelling

translated and with an introduction by Eric Dluhosch
the minimum dwelling
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the housing crisis • housing reform • the dwelling for the subsistence minimum • single family, rental and collective houses • regulatory plans for residential quarters • new forms of houses and apartments • the popular housing movement •
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1928

From left: Karel Teige, Jan E. Koula, Madame de Mandrot, Oldřich Tyl and Le Corbusier on the roof of Tyl’s YWCA Hostel in Prague. (Courtesy of Olga Hilmerová, Prague)

1932

Adolf Hoffmeister, Karl Teige (= dreams about minimal dwelling).
From the Jízdní řád literatury a poezie, Prague, 1932

Translation:
sometimes a small shepherd’s tent will do more for one’s country than an entire army camp, such as that of our warlord Žižka before one of his campaigns (during the Hussite wars).
translator’s foreword

Translation is a genre. In order to grasp it, one has to go back to the original. It is in the original that the key to translatability is to be found. The question of translatability is perplexing in two ways: First, can a competent translator be found among the readers of the original? Second, does the original work lend itself to translation, and given its genre, does it call for translation?

—Walter Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (1923)

According to Walter Benjamin, the answer to the first question about translation is contingent, while the second can be approached apodictically. Conventional caveats of modesty forbid any discussion of the competence of the translator, a matter best left to critics and reviewers. The decision to translate Teige’s Nejmenší byt apodictically, as an example of an avant-garde genre, is easier to justify. For one thing, the work closes an important gap in the historiography of modern architecture of the first decades of the twentieth century, and—more important—it does represent one of the best treatises on housing produced at that time. Generically, the book assumes many forms. It is simultaneously a manifesto, a technical report, and an architectural critique, all contained in the same text.

The complexity and interweaving of these forms have presented the translator with certain difficulties, which may be sorted into two major categories: connotation and language. The Czech title of the book, Nejmenší byt, is a good example, posing problems of both connotation and language. The Czech word nejmenší—translated literally—means “the littlest” or “smallest” and refers primarily to broad categories of size. Another Czech word for little or small is minimální, corresponding loosely to the English “minimum” or “minimal,” but it refers primarily to more specific, measurable quantities. In the text, Teige chooses to employ nejmenší essentially in a qualitative sense, while including both technical and sociocultural phenomena of dwelling in his definition of quality. The second term in the title, byt, is equally difficult to render unambiguously in English. The dictionary defines it as “apartment,” “lodging,” “flat,” “quarter,” “room,” and, in its extended meaning, “dwelling.” Apart from the linguistic variety of these choices, the translator must also contend with a cultural difference between European and North American perceptions of “dwelling.” For Europeans—especially at the time when Teige was writing—byt meant (and to a large degree still means) a rental apartment in the city, while for a North American the same term generally stands for a detached single-family home on its own plot. In that sense, the title The Minimum Dwelling is inaccurate, though still better than a literal translation, such as The Littlest Apartment or A Dwelling for the Subsistence Level Population.

Another ambiguous term is Teige’s existenční minimum, literally “existential minimum.” The simplest translation, “poverty level,” had to be rejected, mainly because our contemporary sense of poverty cannot be equated with the deprivations suffered globally by millions before and during the Great Depression of the 1920s and ’30s, both in Europe and in the United States. Instead, the somewhat ponderous expression “subsistence level” was chosen, in order to include all those who were then living on the edge of starvation and who lacked the
means to provide for a minimally decent home for themselves or their families; among these, as Teige describes, were impoverished members of the middle class.

Other difficulties concern Teige's use of Marxist jargon. Expressions such as "antithesis between city and country" have been occasionally rendered as "contradictions between city and village" or "the rift between city and country." Apart from such minor editorial revisions, Teige's Marxist language has been translated in all its ideological purity.

The book's technical passages were much easier to translate. Technical language is generally less colored by political jargon and tends to be standardized across ideological and temporal as well as sociocultural divides. Thus, common American technical terms from architecture and engineering have proven fully satisfactory and have been used throughout the text and the illustrations. Only minor corrections were necessary to adjust certain European terms for an American audience; for example, while Americans treat "first floor" and "ground floor" as synonyms, Europeans designate the floor above ground level (the American second floor) the "first floor." As a consequence, the European second floor becomes the American third, and so on.

"Colony," "settlement," and "residential district" have been used interchangeably in the translation, depending on the context of the original text. The Czech terms are actually similar to the English but have a slightly different meaning because of the different administrative apparatus of European cities, which are much more centralized and which operate on a different tax and financing basis than do American cities. Similarly, the terms "apartment," "flat," "lodgings," and "quarters" resonate somewhat differently in the European context. Again, a choice had to be made between translating literally and using common American terminology, in order to make the text as clear as possible for North American readers without losing its European inflection.

The greatest difficulty was posed by Teige's use of the term obytná bunťka, which translates literally as "habitable cell." Unfortunately, obytná also can mean "livable," "inhabited," or "occupied," and thus it transcends the notion of mere habitability. With that broader meaning in mind, I decided to use "live-in cell," even though "dwelling unit" is the technical term most often used today. Another reason for maintaining the distinction was the desire to differentiate between units specifically designed for collective dwelling ("live-in cells") and single-room units in conventional housing types ("dwelling units").

Like all Europeans, Teige designates length, area, and volume in metric units. Though some American readers may have difficulty visualizing these measurements, they have been left in their original form, for reasons of both authenticity and accuracy.

Finally, a few words concerning Teige's style. As already mentioned, the text is a mélange of ideological rhetoric, radical proclamations, scientific reportage, and utopian reveries. In his manifesto mode, Teige uses short, terse sentences, punctuated by both exclamation and question marks. When he undertakes technical reportage, Teige switches to pedantic, long-winded sentences, interrupted by a plethora of colons and semicolons. Whether these stylistic devices were intentional is hard to judge in retrospect, since much of his other writing is composed of a similar mixture of exclamatory and explanatory phraseology.

Teige's ideological passages are highly didactic in tone and full of Marxist cant. Here, the text reads more like party propaganda than a technical report, especially since it includes lengthy quotations from the pantheon of Marxist writers (generally lacking full attribution). Such passages add to the commixture of genres. One reason for this hodge podge is hinted at in Teige's own postscript, where he informs us that the original text could have easily filled several volumes and that this final, abridged version was put together with some haste.
No attempt has been made to tone down or edit out duplications or locally colored detail, despite an overwhelming temptation to do so. Initially, I intended to differentiate some of these passages by using a smaller type, or by shading them gray, but I abandoned the idea, as “demoting” those passages would have introduced a personal bias. On reflection, I decided not only to leave the text unabridged but also to reproduce (in English) its original typeface, graphics, and overall format (including a replica of its original cover), all of which were also designed by Teige.

Teige originally intended the book as a contribution to the deliberations of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) as well as a theoretical treatise on the advantages of collective housing. In its translation it has metamorphosed instead into a historical document of the turbulent era of the first half of the twentieth century, as Teige’s utopian dreams were overtaken by events that ended in the almost the exact reverse of what he had hoped for: Speer’s Reichstag in Berlin, Iofan’s Palace of the Soviets in Moscow, and—instead of the poetry of life—communism without a human face in Prague.

Alice Falk has contributed significantly to the revision of the final version of this translation by her meticulous and context-sensitive interventions. Any remaining errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the translator.
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Born in the year 1900 in Prague and dead by the age of fifty-one, Teige was a true child of the twentieth century. The trajectory of his life coincides almost exactly with that of the birth and death of the modernist avant-garde in Europe. In order to understand his intellectual and ideological development, it may be useful to briefly recapitulate the major events that affected Europe during the twenties and thirties in general, and the fate of his own country—Czechoslovakia—in particular.

Teige was eighteen years old when the Czechs and Slovaks gained their independence from Austria-Hungary. He was thirty-nine when the Germans marched into Prague and declared Bohemia and Moravia their “protectorate.” At forty-five he welcomed the Soviet army as liberators, and at forty-eight he thought that his dream of a new socialist order might have come true with the assumption of power by the communists in Czechoslovakia (even though Stalin’s show trials of 1936 had severely shaken his belief that the “realm of freedom” would be easy to realize under Bolshevik conditions). When he was fifty, “the dictatorship of the proletariat” in his own country declared him to be a “Trotskyite degenerate,” excluded him from all public functions, terminated his publishing career, and finally mounted a vicious press campaign against him in the leading Communist daily newspaper *Rudé Právo (Red Justice!)*. Exhausted, lonely, and disappointed, Teige collapsed with a heart seizure on the street, as he was waiting for a streetcar. Within days, the secret police had raided his apartment, confiscating all his books and manuscripts and removing them to be “stored” in their archives, never to be recovered—even after the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the “Velvet Revolution” in 1989. The only documents found when the archives were opened were lengthy protocols of Teige’s alleged anti-communist activities and transcripts of interviews with informers and other so-called Trotskyites.

Brief excerpts from these files of the secret Communist State Security, recovered only recently by the Teige Society in Prague, provide the flavor of “proletarian justice”; in the “Protocol of police testimonies and the Gestapo on Trotskyites, dated 13 January 1950, Document no. 305-738-1/Trotskyite Surrealists” we find Teige’s alleged comments on the failure of the Soviet system:
he [Teige] told me that an era of bourgeois society is evolving [in the USSR], where in place of a financial oligarchy, the ruling class is represented by the state bureaucracy... and that the first revolutionary period has passed without results... and, do you know how [Sergei] Eisenstein ended up in the last years of his life?... as a Buddhist! (Secret police note: Teige knew Eisenstein and Mayakovsky personally)... and Mayakovsky in his old age became a Trotskyite and as a consequence of his decision had to commit suicide. When asked what to do, he [Teige] said: The only thing worth pursuing today is to dedicate oneself, as much as possible, to artistic activities... and solve one’s problems in an individual fashion.¹

One may well ask: why bother with Teige now, and particularly this text written by a Czech Marxist some seventy years ago? The reasons are many, but some of the more important ones, outlined below, should suffice to justify the publication of this translation.

It was Teige’s early radical left-wing orientation that has resulted in his absence from both Western and eastern European historiographies, not to mention his persecution by the Soviet-inspired campaign to discredit him as a counterrevolutionary with “cosmopolitan” leanings (in Stalinist terms, this meant opposition to the slogan “socialism in one country,” after the dismantling of the Third International; so-called cosmopolitans were accused of collusion with international capitalism, and thus of being enemies of the Soviet state). Silenced by the Stalinists, and published only in Czech, Teige simply escaped the attention of Western scholars. Even during the “Prague Spring” of 1967–1968, and despite some efforts were made by Teige’s friends to revive his legacy, the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet and East Block armies in 1968 put an end to any attempt to rehabilitate Teige’s contribution to Czechoslovak avant-garde activities during the twenties and thirties.

Neither did the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989 immediately lead to renewal of interest in Teige’s work, mainly as a natural reaction against dealing with anything and anybody associated with the communist past. It took almost five years, before a group of dedicated intellectuals decided to review Teige’s legacy by publishing articles and mounting a major exhibition, solely dedicated to his work. Other exhibitions and numerous articles in western European journals of art and architecture followed soon after.²

¹) Jarmark Umění, Bulletin společnosti Karla Teiga, Zpráva o materiálech týkajících se Karla Teiga z archivu Ministerstva vnitra (Bulletin of the Teige Society, Report on materials concerning Karel Teige from the archives of the Ministry of the Interior) Prague, nos. 11–12 (1996): 3–7. This document contains the lengthy testimony, excerpted here, of a student of UMPRUM (the Institute of Industrial Arts), who was prosecuted by State Security for anti-state activities (as an agent of the “CIC”) and sentenced to years of incarceration in the Leopoldov jail. In order to receive a lighter sentence, he offered his services to the StB (Communist secret police) and agreed to testify against Teige.

²) The publications on Karel Teige between the years 1966 and 1994 include Jiří Brabec, Vrastislav Effenberger, Kvetoslav Chvatík, and Robert Kalivoda, eds., Karel Teige—Výbor z díla (Selected works), 3 vols. (Prague, 1966–1990): vol. 1, Svět stavby a básně—Studie z 20. let (The world of building and poetry: Studies of the twenties) (1966); vol. 2, Zápasy o smysl moderní kultury—Studie z 30. let (Struggles for the meaning of modern culture: Studies of the thirties) (1986); vol. 3, Osvobození života a poezie—Studie z 40. let (The liberation of life and poetry: Studies of the forties) (1990, published only after the Velvet Revolution); Umění 43, nos. 1–2 (1995), a double issue entirely dedicated to Teige; and Rassegna 15, no. 53/1 (March 1993), an issue entirely dedicated to Teige. Exhibitions include Devětsil—Czech Avant-Garde Art, Architecture, and Design of the 1920s and 30s (Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, and the Design Museum of London, 1990; also exhibition catalog of same title); Karel Teige: 1900–1951 (Gallery of the City of Prague, 15 February–1 May 1994; catalog in Czech with the same title); and Teige animator (1900–1951) en de Tsjechische avantgarde (Teige the animator and the Czech avant-garde) (Stedeljik Museum, Amsterdam, 4 February–3 April 1994).
The belated introduction to Teige’s oeuvre to an English-speaking readership may be attributed to two main reasons: geography and language.

On page 311, Teige provides a sun angle diagram, which places Prague at the longitude 14°26′—that is, just one degree east of Berlin. Why, then, is Prague seen as located in eastern Europe, while Berlin is always referred to as a western European city? And indeed, how does one define the term “central Europe”? Is it a cultural, political, religious, or linguistic entity, or a clearly defined geographical region? Or is it a territory located somewhere between the “zones of influence” of the “great” powers of both East and West, who have over the centuries arbitrarily decided to dismember, annex, carve up, and reconstitute it; have given independence to it and taken independence away; have supported or opposed this or that government; and have generally wrought only confusion, war, and endless displacements of borders and populations? And yet, despite all, that unfortunate region of Europe is and always has been a place of remarkable achievements in all spheres of human endeavor, the Czech lands being no exception.

Moreover, while most Western scholars are proficient in the major languages of historical discourse—usually French, English, and German, and occasionally even Russian—few are even faintly familiar with Czech, Hungarian, or Polish, not to mention other “exotic” languages such as Romanian, Bulgarian, and Slovak. And the captivity of the speakers of these languages as vassals of the Soviet eastern empire for almost half a century has further impeded any meaningful contact between their true cultural representatives and Westerners. Instead, for decades all information to Western scholars had to be filtered through Communist-controlled officially sanctioned cultural exchange mechanisms, academic or not. Such rigid control led not only to distortions caused by politically motivated “translations” but also a certain bias in Western scholarship on eastern and central European matters, since during their ascendancy the Russians as a general rule carefully censored anything and anybody hostile to their interests. Fortunately, the collapse of the iron curtain in the 1990s has brought great changes, in part because access to original sources has suddenly revealed new and often surprising information and in part because scholars from eastern and central Europe are rapidly gaining acceptance as the equals of their Western counterparts.

These Western scholars now face two challenges. First, the received view that the historiography of modernism had been completed, save for filling in a few minor gaps, but is now threatened by the discovery of new texts, which have yet to be fully digested in their original form; their authors and contexts have hardly begun to be absorbed and integrated into the corpus of Western historiography. Second, and more subtly, much of this new material is in languages that by and large are incomprehensible to Western scholars; given that translating tends not to enhance one’s academic career, the longer original texts have been slow to appear in translation. Fortunately, as scholars from central and eastern Europe rapidly become proficient in English, they are increasingly issuing their own original material from Western publishing houses. The willingness of the MIT Press to open the door to these authors and to translations of hitherto inaccessible material must be recognized as an important first step in overcoming the language barrier and in providing a permanent basis for advancing serious intercultural scholarship.

Even though Teige is finally receiving the attention he deserves as a major figure in the history of avant-garde modernism of the 1920s and 1930s, little is known in the west concerning the development of modern architecture in the Czech lands in general. Visitors to Prague may occasionally notice the Trade Fair Palace by Josef Fuchs and Oldřich Tyl (1925)—if they happen to be architects—primarily because Le Corbusier praised it during his lecture tour to Prague in 1925. In fact, before the publication of Rostislav Švácha’s Architecture of New
Prague, no comprehensive overview of modern architecture in that city had been published in the English language. In Brno, only Mies van der Rohe’s Tugendhat House is considered an obligatory stop for architectural tourists, and few visitors will make the short detours necessary to visit some of the most remarkable masterpieces of Czech modernism, located in the provincial cities outside of Prague or Brno. Only by becoming aware of the richness of this heritage can one go beyond recognizing his stature as a critic and theoretician in the international arena and begin to appreciate the influence of Karel Teige on the development of modern architecture in his own country.

Until 1918, Bohemia and Moravia were royal provinces in the multinational empire of Austria-Hungary (established in 1867). The center of its cultural activities in the nineteenth century was Vienna. Not only did Czech architecture closely follow the stylistic examples of the Viennese masters, but most architects received their training in that city as well. Only Munich exerted a comparable influence. Until the turn of the century, the dominance of Germanic cultural influences on Prague remained largely unchallenged, even though the emergence of the Romantic movement in Germany and the revolutionary years after 1848 ushered in a new spirit of national revival. As the first “modern” style—the Jugendstil—appeared, various national stylistic themes began to find their way into official architectural production and became part of the movement opposing the prewar unity of the classicist canon. The intellectual father of these changes were Otto Wagner, Josef Maria Olbrich, and (later) Adolf Loos. The founding of the Czech Academy of Science in 1890 and the Prague Exhibition of Architecture and Engineering in 1898 signaled the arrival of the Czechs as an independent national force in the German-dominated cultural and intellectual environment of Prague. Soon after, the first Czech-language architectural journal, Zprávy spolku inženýrů a architektů v Čechách (News of the Association of Engineers and Architects in Bohemia), was published in Prague, followed by Architektonicky Obzor (Architectural Horizons). One of the most important events during this period of cultural self-assertion was the founding of the Spolek výtvarných umělců Mánes (Association of Creative Artists Mánes), which drew together Czech artists, architects, poets, and intellectuals and which has survived as a locus of cultural activities to this day. The first exhibition mounted by the Mánes group, which took place in the Topičův salon in Prague in 1889, was clearly intended to position Czech art and architecture in the mainstream of contemporary European avant-garde production. Members declared in the journal Volné Směry (Free Directions): “Modernity does not mean the mere negation of all that exists as of now; it is not a chase after superannuated ephemeral slogans, nor does it manifest itself by a transposition of every foreign impulse to our soil, but represents a logical and historically deter-

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6) One may assume that the Mánes group also served as the model for Devětsil, an association of artists and intellectuals founded in 1919 that became Teige’s main forum for propagating his avant-garde views on art, architecture, poetry, photography, film, and typography.
mined step forward in the natural evolution of our art.” That evolution entailed reorienting Czech art and architecture from Vienna and Munich to Paris and Berlin. Still, the real question of what the essence of a national art and architecture should be in the context of national pride and eventual independence remained unanswered.

World War I not only destroyed the political ties that bound central Europe under the Hapsburgs but effectively cut the umbilical cord between Vienna and Prague in matters of cultural influence. Czechoslovakia became an independent republic on 28 October 1918, with a political system that resembled that of the United States or France more than the constitutional monarchy of Austria-Hungary. In the wake of the newly won independence of Czechoslovakia came two countervailing tendencies in cultural development, reflecting two opposite desires: to establish a distinct national identity by reaching back into the historical past of the Czech lands, resuscitating the emblematic elements of a more or less folklorically colored Slavic tradition of native origin, and to become an equal member of an international, more cosmopolitan circle of cultural influences, taking Paris, Berlin, and later Moscow as the new sources of intellectual and artistic inspiration. From the very beginning, Teige threw in his lot with the cosmopolitans and the modernists. His vision of the new Czechoslovakia is of a country fully integrated into the international community of avant-garde artists and intellectuals.

Teige’s views on modernity were rooted in the early programmatic statements of the Mánes group, who believed that the sources of modernism could be found primarily in the daily realities of modern life, rather than in fanciful reconstructions of a romanticized national tradition. It is in this sense that Teige rejected the “traditions” of historicism, stylistic academicism, and political conservatism. Like many of his contemporaries in the international avant-garde movement, Teige was a committed Marxist and a believer in a socialist future of humanity. Thus, for Teige modernism meant that utility and reason, tied to progressive national political development, were the main sources of national renewal; identity could not be won by mindlessly copying traditions and romantic notions of a long-gone golden age. Teige’s later views on functionalism and utilitarianism in architecture were also a clear reflection of his great admiration for the Enlightenment ideas of the French Revolution and its two siblings: American pragmatism and Marxist historical determinism.

A more nationally tinged source of inspiration for the development of Czech modernism came from Otto Wagner, who trained many of the younger generation of architects who later became prominent figures in the newly independent Czechoslovakia. It was Wagner’s new aesthetic, which elevated the tectonic element in construction as a major determinant of architectural form making, that prepared the way for Teige’s later acceptance of functionalism. It enabled Teige to see construction as the purest expression of the tectonic sources of modernism and inspired him to include the new functional requirements of a socialist transformation of society’s needs in the theory of modern architecture. Jan Kotéra, who was one of Wagner’s students, also expressed this new desire to meld the modern with the national in Volné Směry: “Our age differs from previous ages in its artistic turmoil and economic spirit. . . . [T]his obliges us to find our own way toward creating the foundations of a new architecture.”

Even before Teige and Vítězslav Nezval issued their poetist manifesto in ReD in 1929, the Czech poet F. X. Šalda tried to define the nature of beauty in the modern age in his lecture

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10) “Manifest Poetismu” (Poetist manifesto), ReD 2, no. 2 (November 1929): 317–335.
“Nová krása, její genese a charakter” (“The New Beauty: Its Genesis and Character”), presaging the later programmatic theses of Devětsil and Teige’s ideas in *Stavba a básen* (Building and Poem). Šalda expanded the notion of the German Gesamtkunstwerk to the entirety of modern life, arguing that not just architecture but all of life’s mundane experiences would be transformed by the poetic. The principle of poetism holds that the new art will not and cannot be academic, alienated from ordinary, everyday life by intellectual reification; it must become organic and unified, reaching toward a higher synthesis between truth and beauty, beauty and purpose, poetry and ecstasy, fantasy and logic, and—ultimately—dream and life.

Teige embraced this view of the future, but he was convinced that such a synthesis of desire and reality could be achieved only under socialism after Marxist dialectical materialism had triumphed, with the result that the state had withered away and the “realm of necessity” had been transformed into a “realm of freedom.” Teige was not naive enough to believe that this change could be accomplished easily and rapidly, or that events in the then young Soviet Union would guarantee this happy outcome for the rest of humanity. Still, with the horrors of the (first) world war a fresh memory, his hope that humanity would learn from that experience and accept the need to embrace a different way of living made him cling to his utopian dreams until the mid-1930s, when political events began to close one avenue after another that promised to lead to his “life as dream.” His first articulation of “functionalism with a human face” (to paraphrase the slogan of the failed 1968 attempt to humanize communism in Czechoslovakia) was published in the first Devětsil manifesto of 1920.

F. X. Šalda and Jan Kotěra, joined later by Karel Teige, may be considered the godfathers of a native Czech modernist movement in architecture. Inspired primarily by early cubism and purism, Šalda and Kotěra helped create Czech architectural cubism, a form unique in Europe. Even though Teige condemned Czech cubist architecture as overly abstract and formalist, he nevertheless recognized its value as an expression of the revolt against academic eclecticism; he also understood its appeal as an antidote to the purely mechanistic rationalism and spiritually empty utilitarianism of the German-inspired *neue Sachlichkeit*. Characteristically, its architectural features include the stereo-plastic treatment of the tectonic elements of facades and geometrical distortions of the structural support elements within. However, unlike art nouveau, Czech cubist architecture did not seek inspiration for its forms in nature; instead, it tried to imbue “structure” with a dynamic and visually emotive set of “proto-forms,” whose geometry was designed to emphasize the perceptual “reading” of abstractly rendered lines of “fields of force,” defining both space and structure. Teige rejected such visual metaphysics on principle, even though he realized that Czech cubism had much in common with the first phases of Russian constructivist designs, which similarly drew inspiration from cubism. And while he rejected references to the baroque and Gothic styles made by Czech architectural cu-

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12) “Umělecký svaz Devětsil” (The Art Association Devětsil), *Pražské pondělí* 2, no. 49 (6 December 1920): 2. “This was the first Devětsil manifesto. The founding members of this art group chose a highly original name for themselves—Devětsil (Butterbur). In Czech this term has two meanings. The first is literal: a perennial plant or herb with pink or white flowers that grows near water (*Petasites vulgaris*). The second is allegorical, meaning ‘nine forces’ or ‘nine strengths’ (in fact, there were not nine members affiliated with the group). Devětsil thus acquired one of the most fetching names of any art group of the twentieth century” (Srp, “Teige in the Twenties,” 42 n. 1). Who chose the name and why remains a mystery.
bism, he became excited by steel and concrete skeleton construction, which opened up new spatial opportunities for architecture that had been impossible with masonry construction (which led to buildings that were confined and boxlike).

His rejection of historical precedent and of applying metaphysical notions of space led the “quarrel between generations,”14 which caused a serious split between those (usually older) members of the avant-garde who saw some merit in respecting historical precedent and Teige, who demanded a new start outside of accepted historical categories and who saw first constructivism and then its outgrowth, functionalism, as the only way to escape the prison of historical memory (at least in architecture). This controversy, which marks the emergence of Teige as an influential critic and theorist of architecture, coincided with the end of the first phase of the modernist movement in Czechoslovakia, as the cubist style was absorbed into commercial architecture as ornament and as a new generation of young architects emerged. Many of these young architects became members of Devětsil and produced purist-functional designs, as suggested by Karel Teige.

Teige’s first pronouncement on modernism was the essay “Obrazy a předobrazy” (“Figurations and Prefigurations”), which appeared in the second issue of the journal Musaion. There he writes that “normally, the end of culture would signify the end of the world... but for our era, it signifies a new beginning. It is for this reason that we must create a new concept of the moral and intellectual map of a new world and of genuine humanity, because man must be considered as the principal subject of the new art, never its mere object.” Art was to become truly the art of all the people, not split into “high-” and “low-brow” versions; thus “the basic building blocks of our common efforts in art will be... love and longing, love and the hatred of evil, rather than gold and precious stones, or the greedy conquest of markets and escape into colonialism, all of which have ruled the old world, now torn to shreds by the explosion of the war.”15 In Teige’s vocabulary of the twenties, people’s art meant “proletarian art.” However, this phase of intellectual populism did not last very long. In 1922 Teige, along with his poet friend Jaroslav Seifert (later a Nobel Prize winner), was expelled from Proletkult for the trivial reason that he had published an article in a centrist daily—a foretaste of his later difficulties with the hard-liners of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia.

In 1921 Teige visited Paris, where he met Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, among other notables of the artistic avant-garde then living in the city. The Paris visit became one of the pivotal experiences of Teige’s intellectual development, matched only by his visit to Moscow in 1925. It was his meeting with Le Corbusier in Paris that led to his famous quarrel with the master, known in the West as the “Mundaneum affair,”16 a quarrel that first brought Teige to the attention of Western scholars. Teige admired Le Corbusier’s bold rejection of historical styles and his grand urban schemes but deplored his “formalistic” acceptance of “regulating lines” based on the golden section on the facade; most of all, he criticized Le Corbusier’s acceptance of monumentalism as a legitimate device of architectural creation. Yet Teige reversed his earlier position on cubism and purism, coming to favor both movements (albeit with reserva-

14) On the “quarrel between generations, see Srp, “Teige in the Twenties.” Teige believed that each succeeding generation has to establish its own views in both artistic and theoretical endeavors, thereby liberating itself from the influence of the preceding generation. He formulated the “law of antagonism” as the dynamic force driving historical processes” (16).
tions); he subsequently published “Kubismus, orfismus, purismus a neokubismus v dnešní Paříži” (“Cubism, Orphism, Purism, and Neocubism in Today’s Paris”) in Veraikon.17

Teige made contact with Walter Gropius when Czech architects participated in the Bauhaus Exhibition on International Architecture in August 1923. Two years later, Teige invited Le Corbusier and Ozenfant to lecture in Prague in the Club architektů (Architect’s Club), where Le Corbusier met members of Devětsil and visited a number of Czech modern buildings in Prague (chief among them the just-built Trade Fair Palace). Later, in October 1925, Teige visited Moscow and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) as a member of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship Society. There he met representatives of the Soviet constructivist movement and personally surveyed the architectural situation in postrevolutionary Russia. Teige thus became one of the best informed and most articulate proponents of modernism in his home country, fully deserving his new position as chief editor of the architectural journal Stavba. He immediately set out to transform the journal into an important source of news on international modern architecture abroad.

At the same time, Teige introduced the Czechoslovak architectural community to his experiences in the young Soviet Union with his seminal article on constructivism, “Konstruktivismus a nová architektura v SSSR” (“Constructivism and the New Architecture in the USSR”).18 Teige’s “Sovětská architektura” (“Soviet Architecture”) was first published in a series of monographs in 1936.19 Shorter versions on the same subjects appeared even earlier, in issues of Host, Tvorba, and Stavba published between 1924 and 1926.20 An extended version of these essays with the title “Vývoj sovětské architektury” (“The Evolution of Soviet Architecture”) was republished in 1936 in book form, and again in 1969, together with Jiří Kroha’s contribution “Bytová otázka v SSSR” (“The Housing Question in the USSR”), in Avantgardní architektura (Avant-Garde Architecture).21 During the thirties, Teige also became intensely involved in the controversies surrounding the fate of constructivism in the USSR. As part of these discussions, he invited Ilya Ehrenburg to lecture in Prague and published his comments on that lecture in Stavba as well.22 He stated his own views on this subject in “Podstata konstruktivismu” (“The essence of Constructivism”), also published in Stavba, and “K teorii konstruktivismu” (“On the Theory of Constructivism”) in ReD.23 Aspects of Teige’s Marxist view on architecture are set out in “Architektura a třídní boj” (“Architecture and the Class Struggle”), which appeared in the last issue of ReD.24 This list of Teige’s publications on the subject of Russian architecture clearly reveals his tendency to recycle, review, modify, edit, expand, and occasionally correct his own writing, publishing shorter or longer versions of the same material both as essays and as books. The text

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19) Karel Teige Sovětský svaz (Soviet Union) (Prague, 1936).
20) Karel Teige, “Umění soudobého Ruska” (The art of contemporary Russia), Host 4, no. 2 (1924): 34–46; “Z SSSR” (From the USSR), Tvorba 1, no. 5 (1 January 1926): 85–88; “Konstruktivismus a nová architektura v SSSR.”
22) Karel Teige, “Přednáška Ilji Ehrenburga, čili konstruktivismus a romantismus” (A lecture by Ilya Ehrenburg, or constructivism and romanticism), Stavba 5, no. 9 (March 1927): 145–146.
“Vyvoj sovetské architektury” (“The Evolution of Soviet Architecture”) consists mainly if not entirely of material published previously under different titles. The only significant additions are his final, bitter comments on the “betrayal” of the modernist avant-garde by Stalin’s decrees of 1932 and on the calamity of the Palace of Soviets competition held that same year. At this point a summary of the arguments in “Vyvoj sovetské architektury,” Teige’s extended discussion of constructivism, would be useful, since he considered constructivism not only the basis for his theory of collective dwelling but also the foundation on which his (and Nezval’s) “poetist” utopia was to be realized. Teige also used constructivism as the starting point for a new theory and history of architecture, unencumbered by academic historicism and free of bourgeois metaphysics. This book was his first attempt to view the history of architecture independently of \textit{post facto} historical notions of style and academic conventions of periodization. It aims instead at tracing constructivism’s development from its early manifestation in utopian expressionistic symbolism, dependent on cubist and purist painterly models, to its mature phase, its most accomplished period, namely functionalism. Once free from relying on stylistic precedent, Teige believes, constructivism develops as a means of expression working actively to transform society in the direction of socialism.

The imposition of “socialist realism” by Stalin caused Teige much grief and confusion, as he seemed almost desperate to save his faith in the rightness of the Russian Revolution; he tried to understand the Russian need to abandon utopian architecture when faced with the realities of social and economic transformation necessary to rebuild the Soviet economy after the civil war. However, he could not bring himself to agree that neoclassicism and historical eclecticism could provide a formal vocabulary for socialist realism in the arts. He acknowledged that the backward state of Soviet technology and a long reliance on culture imported from the West made it difficult for the young Soviet state to leap into the unknown by embracing the utopian visions of the inexperienced young constructivists. The easy choice was to return to the “safety” of prerevolutionary, architecture, a return that included the reinstatement of the previous generation of specialists and architects in the reconstruction laid out in the first five-year plan in 1929. But Teige could not understand why constructivism and avant-garde modernism in all branches of the arts and literature should be both condemned by the party as an “ultra-left” deviation and labeled a surreptitious attempt by the same ultra-left avant-garde to introduce a foreign “cosmopolitan” capitalist element into Soviet cultural development. Despite his efforts to deal with these issues objectively and sympathetically, in the end Teige was unable to hide his deep disappointment in the superficiality and vulgarity of the arguments proposed by Stalin’s cultural theoreticians, who tried to justify their preference for mindlessly accepting facades of czarist neoclassical and neo-Renaissance architectural pastiches as exemplifying the new “socialist” architecture.

Long before Anatole Kopp and others brought this subject to the attention of a Western readership with their own versions of what went wrong in Soviet avant-garde cultural development,\textsuperscript{25} Teige not only managed to capture the confusion of these years but also indirectly provided the Soviets with a rigorous lesson, offering a tightly reasoned dialectical-materialist interpretation that modeled what he considered the correct way to write a history of architecture, based on Marxist principles.\textsuperscript{26} Though he admitted that the efforts of the early proponents of constructivism, mostly represented by members of ASNOVA (the Association of New


\footnotetext{\textsuperscript{26}} Teige’s thoughts on socialist realism are contained in his article “Socialisticky realismus a surrealismus” (Socialist realism and surrealism) in the collection of lectures \textit{Socialisticky realismus} (Prague, 1935).