

ILZE WOLFF

UNSTITCHING REX TRUEFORM  
THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN FACTORY

«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER

HERMAC

UNSTITCHING REX TRUEFORM:  
THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN FACTORY

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*Unstitching Rex Trueform  
The Story of an African Factory*

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*For my grandparents:  
Eileen and Paul Oliver; and Eunice and Edward Damon*



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# INTRODUCTION

The name Rex Trueform triggers multiple social imaginaries in Cape Town, depending on who you talk to, when you talk to them, and in what context. For some, the name is linked to a smart brand of men's suits. Others reference scenes of masses of workers waiting for buses along Main Road, after a day of sewing, cutting, and pressing garments in the Salt River factory. Some have personal stories of falling in love on their way to work at "Rex"; others remember planning strikes for better wages. There are some who mix the sense of pride they felt after landing a job at the company with a sense of bitterness over the mass retrenchment of workers in the early 2000s. In many of these varied responses to the name Rex Trueform, the company's buildings in Salt River, Cape Town, are central as a physical referent.

This book is a study of these buildings as a site of modern architecture as well as a site of multiple narratives, imaginaries, and constructions of identity.<sup>1</sup> It follows the life of the company, the workers, and the buildings they inhabited, with a view to raising questions around the production of modern Cape Town.<sup>2</sup> How did the construction of modern industrial space contribute to a specific version of the modern city of Cape Town? What were the particularities of this modernity? How were ideas of race and gender inscribed onto ideas of modern industrial space in particular? What was the relationship between apartheid-state-endorsed white capital and disenfranchised black labour? What is the nature of the spaces that this relationship produced, and how did this relationship translate into the form that the city assumed? What is the nature of these spaces when viewed from a post-apartheid perspective, considering the ongoing post-apartheid national project of reconciliation, economic development, land reform, and new identity formation?<sup>3</sup>

The life of the company spans nearly eighty years. After closing down its manufacturing section in 2005,<sup>4</sup> it now operates as an administration hub for the importation of global goods, and employs about one hundred people. The nature and scale of the business today are vastly different from its original configuration, in which thousands of workers

<sup>1</sup> Orhan Pamuk's book *Istanbul, memories of a city* is an example of the study of a city as a narrative, a personal account, written from within the disciplinary field of literary studies. My approach was inspired in part by Pamuk's narrative methodology. Pamuk: 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Lokko: 2000, Judin & Vladislavic: 1999, Murray, Shepherd & Hall: 2007, and Mbembe & Nuttal: 2008 stand out as recent cross-disciplinary studies with a focus on identity, space, and the politics of the city.

<sup>3</sup> Robins: 2005; Salo: 2005; Steinberg: 2002, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> IOL news: 2005.

were employed to operate the most modern machinery and produce highly sought-after clothing. The buildings were specially designed for these purposes. The company reached a high point in the 1960s, when it employed nearly 5000 workers in various factories and warehouses all over Cape Town, as well as one in Scotland. The textile-manufacturing industry employed thousands of Capetonians, and Rex Trueform, one of the largest companies in the industry, was the main source of income for many households.

Since its closure in 2005, I have been drawn to the buildings, with a desire to uncover their meaning. My architectural work and practice have circled around this site in interesting ways. In 2011, I organised regular tours of the buildings for the public, and then later for individuals who were interested in the key work of the architects involved: Max Policansky, Doug E Andrews and Henk Niegeman. I blogged about these events and also produced information brochures, which were made available on the tours and as free downloads on the blog. The buildings resonated with me for two reasons. First, as an architect, I had developed an appreciation for the quirky aesthetic of South African modern architecture. These buildings, in their semi-abandoned state, evoked a sense of nostalgia in me for the heroism of the utopian social programme of South African modernism that I learnt about during my undergraduate architecture studies at UCT.<sup>5</sup> Second, I grew up with stories of “shift work” and “overtime”, as told by my aunts, uncles, and grandparents who worked in various textile factories around Cape Town, including Rex Trueform. I remember, too, long worried discussions around my grandparents’ kitchen table in the Cape Flats suburb of Grassy Park about “early retirement packages” and “retrenchments”, this amid the rapid closure and restructuring of various manufacturing plants in the Western Cape in the early 2000s. The textile industry in Cape Town was the foundation upon which many families like mine constructed a world of middle-class respectability, while recognising the limits of what that world could be when you were racially inscribed as “coloured”.<sup>6</sup>

Like many others,<sup>7</sup> I believe that a reading of the socio-physiological political conditions under which creative work is produced enriches our understanding of the disciplinary contribution of the work of art, literature, or architecture in question. A narrow and traditionally disciplinary focus may continue to disavow violent epistemic practices of the past.<sup>8</sup> In this book, I chose to write from my discipline as an architectural scholar, but I also chose to explore the archive using a variety of humanities-based disciplinary practices, such as historiography, sociology, philosophy, and visual art. This interdisciplinary approach allowed me to explore political themes like gender, identity, and race, with a concern for the spatial implications that these themes had on architecture, the city at large, and vice versa.<sup>9</sup> In 2012, I was awarded a formal commission by the Rex Trueform Company to survey the site and compile a heritage report for submission to Heritage Western Cape, a requirement by law prior to the

<sup>5</sup> Japha: 1986, 1995; Le Grange: 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Erasmus & Pieterse: 1999; Erasmus: 2000, 2001; Adhikari: 2005; Jacobs: 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault: 1982; Said: 1979, 1993; Spivak: 1999; Nuttal: 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Spivak: 1988.

<sup>9</sup> The work of contemporary architectural scholars such as Celik: 2008, Prakash: 2002, Heynen: 1999, and Colomina and Bloomer: 2001 has been instrumental in my arrival at this particular interdisciplinary nexus.

development of all buildings that are older than sixty years (as Rex Trueform at the time was).<sup>10</sup> I learnt during this process that Heritage Impact Assessments (HIAs), the reports compiled by heritage professionals,<sup>11</sup> are produced largely for the purpose of defining developmental rights. The work for this book ran parallel to the compilation of a professional heritage report, and I found that a mysterious, productive force was released between the twin systems of practice.

Both sets of knowledge production – the book, set within the framework described above, and the professional heritage report – are concerned with the genesis and historical trajectory of the Rex Trueform buildings. However, where the report deals with the how, where, and what of the buildings, this book deals more broadly with the how, where, and what of the conditions under which the structures were conceived and built. Where the report is situated within a singular disciplinary realm, dictated primarily by heritage legislation, this book is an enquiry based on interdisciplinary practice, with its roots in decolonial theory, as part of an unfixed and unsettled pursuit of a reflexive architectural practice.

This double exploration was therefore an opportunity to reflect on the episteme of “heritage” in two ways: first, heritage as a “resource” to be managed and secured by the state; and second, heritage as a discourse and a “primary site for negotiating issues of culture, identity and citizenship in the postcolony”.<sup>12</sup> The latter meaning of heritage resonates with the themes of this book.

#### FOLLOWING THE ARCHIVE

“To define is to understand, to describe is to merely observe.”<sup>13</sup>

In studying Rex Trueform, I do not have the desire to construct a grand narrative of apartheid as it pertains to labour practices in Cape Town. Nor do I have the desire, based on my observations in the selected archive, to come to a definite understanding of the post-apartheid condition. I do, however, hope to define some of the key questions that emerge from a reading or a *following*<sup>14</sup> of the archive, and to come to a resolute understanding of some of the conditions that have allowed these questions to emerge. It is for this reason that I consulted a wide range of archival sources. I conducted interviews with current and ex-workers, with family members of architect Max Policansky, and with retired partners of the Andrews and Niegeman architectural firm. I was fortunate that a large amount of visual material was available, giving me a sense of the factory buildings as they operated prior to their closure. The visual material included architectural drawings from the UCT Policansky collection, promotional brochures and newspaper articles of the factory dating from 1938 until 1993, and a 2004 documentary film. But the most impor-

<sup>10</sup> South African National Heritage Resources Act of 1999.

<sup>11</sup> APHP: 2012 [online].

<sup>12</sup> Shepherd: 2008, 124. See also UCT Centre for African Studies: 2003 [online].

<sup>13</sup> Ndebele: 1991, 158.

<sup>14</sup> Coetzee: 1991.

tant archival source was, of course, the buildings themselves. I had the site professionally photographed, and documented its current condition. Countless walks through the building to look at the walls, observe the nature of the space, and chat to some of the current users made me realise the simultaneously historical and contemporary nature of the Rex Trueform archive.

#### CHAPTER OUTLINES

The book consists of four chapters. Chapter One looks at the urban character of Salt River prior to the construction of the first factory in 1938. The site of the new factory was a vacant property within a nascent industrial neighbourhood. Rex Trueform was viewed as one of the pioneering modern industries in the area, and a key building in the architectural oeuvre of Max Policansky, regarded as an important South African modernist architect. The biographies of the factory owners, both Lithuanian Jewish immigrants, are also discussed in this chapter, in order to raise questions about white industrial settlement and its relationship to the conditions of coloniality<sup>15</sup> that existed in Cape Town at the time. These conditions include racial segregation and the colonial modernising<sup>16</sup> of African land through modern industry.

Chapter Two offers a continued close reading of the site, beginning in 1948, the date of completion of the second factory. It looks at how the architecture reinforced some of the segregationist policies, still under discussion prior to 1948. It overlays the spatial development of the site with important moments in the political life of South Africa in order to contemplate the relationship between the apartheid state, white capital, and black labour. Mandela's release in 1991 meant enfranchisement for black South Africans, on the one hand, and job insecurity for Rex Trueform workers, on the other. In order to cope with the loss of economic protection from the state, as well as the introduction of neo-liberal economic policies by the new democratically elected government, the clothing industry as a whole succumbed to the easy profits that could be made from the sale of global imports. The result, in Rex Trueform's case, was the closure of the manufacturing side of the company, the shift from manufacturing to retail, and thus, in 2005, a huge amount of job losses. The chapter will describe some of the contemporary visions for the now-empty site.

"Is she coloured?" is the main title of Chapter Three. This chapter considers the construction of Cape identities, using the previous architectural analysis as a substrate. It follows the family histories of architect Max Policansky and political activist Cissie Gool, in order to understand how Anglo-white Jewish identities were constructed and how colouredness was ascribed and stabilised in modern Cape Town. Rex Trueform, as an employer of thousands of people classified as "coloured", became a

<sup>15</sup> Maldonado-Torres: 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Avermaete, Karakayali & von Osten: 2010.

site where identity constructions were performed and spatially ascribed. Gender and notions of beauty were also actively constructed and contested, through the factory's participation in the annual Spring Queen beauty pageant. Interviews with ex-workers and an ex-beauty pageant coordinator bring these contestations into sharp relief.

Finally, Chapter Four is a pragmatic description of how the factory operated: a breakdown of the clothing production line, with its regimented schedule of hourly production targets and its clocking-in card system. The chapter addresses how these regimens of time and production played a role in the production of model workers, model employers, and model citizens. During the 1930s and 1940s, the factories were prime sites for sociological studies of the conditions surrounding poverty and race. The disciplines of social work and sociology (which at the time were emerging as accredited disciplines in South Africa) led the interest in the field and were instrumental in linking studies of poverty and industrialisation to studies of race and gender.



# CHAPTER 1

## BUILDING SETTLER MODERNITY: THE REX TRUEFORM FACTORY 1937-1944

This chapter is an architectural analysis of the first factory of the Rex Trueform manufacturing plant, built in Salt River in 1938. As the visual material shows, the 1938 building is illustrative of an important rupture in the aesthetic of the city that involved a radical move away from a fairly consistent Victorian/Edwardian/Neoclassical-inspired built environment towards the adoption of architectural modernism. However, parallel to the adoption of a modern architectural language, local architects were required to creatively respond to certain conditions of coloniality<sup>1</sup> that existed at the Cape. The conditions of coloniality that I highlight in this chapter are the perception of African space as primarily a space of settler prospect and the attendant desire for racial segregation. The architecture that emerged from these conditions was highly particular, yet it simultaneously espoused the universal spatial principles of modernism. The purpose of this chapter is to set out exactly how the design of the buildings achieved this simultaneity.

### TOWARDS A NEW ARCHITECTURE FOR SALT RIVER

The Rex Trueform factories currently occupy two city blocks in Salt River, one of Cape Town's early industrial cores (Fig. 1). The area is 5 kilometres outside of Cape Town's historic centre and takes its name from an estuary that once physically dominated the settlement.<sup>2</sup> From about the middle of the 18th century through to the beginning of the 19th century, the area was typified by the small number of farms and residential estates that were plotted on the slopes of Devils Peak.<sup>3</sup> The Salt River estuary mostly disappeared from the imagination of Capetonians when it was reclaimed to make way for railway lines and train stations in 1862.<sup>4</sup> The mobility that the railway lines introduced sped up urban development, and by 1928 the area was a densely urbanised part of Cape Town.<sup>5</sup> The neighbourhood, although a consequence of modern industrial develop-

<sup>1</sup> Mamdani: 2001; Maldonado-Torres: 2007.

<sup>2</sup> 19th-century landscape painter Thomas Bowler produced paintings of Salt River circa 1855, where the estuary is depicted as a cross between an indigenous and untouched "vlei", with its local bird and plant life, and a bucolic European landscape dotted with windmills, oxen, and a foot bridge. Bradlow: 1955.

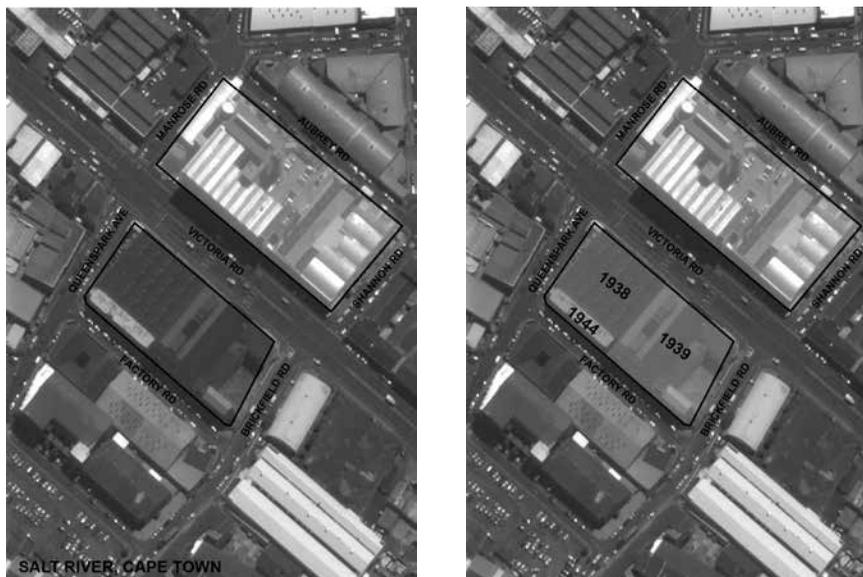
<sup>3</sup> See Figure 5, a map dating from 1882.

<sup>4</sup> Pama: 1977.

<sup>5</sup> See Figure 4. Photo by Arthur Elliot, Groote Schuur Hospital Collection, South African National Archives.

Fig. 1. An aerial view indicating the two sites currently occupied by Rex Trueform. The area bounded by Queenspark Avenue, Factory Road, Brickfield Road and Victoria Road is the focus of this chapter. Source: Google Earth (2011), own annotations.

Fig. 2. An areal view indicating orientation and the development of the site. Source: Google earth (2011), own annotations.



ment, was at odds with the dominant modernist discourse of the time. In 1923, Franco-Swiss architect, and key figure of the modern movement, Le Corbusier called for a radical purification and abstraction of the spatial environment, urging architects to mimic the pure forms generated by the pragmatism of engineers.<sup>6</sup> His proclamations extended to the urban realm. His belief, shared by many other architects,<sup>7</sup> was that architectural form could initiate social well-being. Le Corbusier lamented the overcrowded, dark, and unsanitary conditions of large European industrial towns such as London and Paris:

It is time that we repudiate the existing lay-out of our towns, in which the congestion of buildings grows greater, interlaced by narrow streets full of noise, petrol fumes and dust; and where on each storey the windows open wide on to this foul confusion.

...

Where order reigns, well-being begins.<sup>8</sup>

This was a view that Frampton called “dandified” and “bourgeois, but radically new nonetheless”.<sup>9</sup> There was a strong belief in the early 20th century that architecture could bring about social change.

Like early industrial London and Paris, Salt River’s urban character of the late 1920s was piecemeal and reactionary.<sup>10</sup> The neighbourhood was densely populated because of its close proximity to major industries<sup>11</sup> and the railway. There was a perception among the public that the area was unsanitary, a perception influenced in part by the fatal 1918 influenza epi-

<sup>6</sup> Le Corbusier: 1923 (1989, English translation), 9-20.

<sup>7</sup> See the 1890s homes designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in Pennsylvania and Louis Sullivan’s 1895 commercial buildings in Buffalo, USA. See also Roth: 1927.

<sup>8</sup> Le Corbusier: 1923 (1989 Eng. trans), 57.

<sup>9</sup> Frampton: 2002, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Todeschini & Japha: 1986, 28.

<sup>11</sup> South African Cement Works was one of the first industrial sites in Salt River. Todeschini & Japha: 1986.



Fig. 3. UCT in 1930 with its Neoclassical design and elevated positioning. Source: Wikipedia (2010).

Fig. 4. Picture taken by Arthur Elliot circa 1928. It gives a general overview from the railway lines of the densely urbanised Salt River area with Groote Schuur on the slopes of Devil's Peak. Source: National Archives of South Africa, Groote Schuur Collection.

demical, which had generated widespread panic.<sup>12</sup> The neighbourhood was dominated by residential housing built in the highly decorative Victorian/Edwardian architectural style.<sup>13</sup> In 1930, the architectural highlights of the area included the new campus of the University of Cape Town, designed by J M Solomon in the Neoclassical style. Designed with classical Greco-Roman columns and pediments, decorative doors and windows, it was elevated, Acropolis-style, on the slopes of Devil's Peak, and accessed from an urban scale staircase (Fig. 3). Groote Schuur Hospital, designed by Sir Herbert Baker, was another architectural landmark in the area, and also followed in the Neoclassical architectural tradition, with attention to symmetry, classical detailing, and elevated positioning (Fig. 4).

#### VACANT LAND

In the centre of Salt River was a distinct triangle of space, bounded by three roads: Salt River Road to the west, Durham Avenue to the east, and Victoria Road<sup>14</sup> to the south. The typology of buildings in this zone was a mix of vacant property and light industry.<sup>15</sup> In 1937, Judge Clothing Manufacturers (Pty) Ltd (as Rex Trueform was formerly known) acquired five lots of "vacant land"<sup>16</sup> from a construction company called A A Hoheisen. The lots were located just outside the dedicated industrial triangle, fronting Main Road. In the same year, the adjacent site was transferred to L & H Policansky, the older brothers of Max Policansky, one of South Africa's leading modernist architects.<sup>17</sup> Policansky was the architect of both the developments that would later occupy the land, with these two buildings marking the beginning of his notable architectural career. The architect and new owners of these sites were members of a network of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants who moved to the Cape between 1887 and 1912. Chapter Three will track Policansky's family history, discussing constructions of identity, race, and class in early Cape Town. In this chapter, I would like to dwell on the biographies of Bernard Shub and Philip Dibowitz, the owners of Rex Trueform, in order to reflect on the arrival of Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their encounter with early Cape society.

<sup>12</sup> Howard: 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Todeschini & Japha: 1986, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Victoria Road is commonly known as Main Road, and I make use of its common name in this book.

<sup>15</sup> Cape Times Peninsula Street Directory: 1933–1974.

<sup>16</sup> Described as such in the Deed of Transfer records for even 13715–13725.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert: 1975; Righini: 1977.

Fig. 5. Map of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa dated 18th December 1882. It shows the Salt River estuary to the north and the distinct triangle of unoccupied land onto which the factory would later be built. *Source: National Archives of South Africa.*



Fig. 6. Portion of Cape Peninsula map dated 1934 showing the extent of development just prior to the construction of Rex Trueform's first factory. Note the extent to which the Salt River estuary has been reclaimed for the purposes of the railway line. *Source: Survey and Mapping, Mowbray, Cape Town.*



Dibowitz was born in 1909 in Birz, Lithuania, which at the time was an annex of Russia.<sup>18</sup> He was a child victim of the Russian Revolution, surviving hunger by scavenging for food and supplies from the dead corpses in the streets of war-torn Moscow.<sup>19</sup> During one of these raids, Dibowitz, nine years old at the time, was separated from his parents and taken to a hostel. There he was put to work and acquired tailoring skills, which would later serve as the basis for his formal training in Paris. He recalled this period in his life:

We had teaching as well; we had Russian language and so on. But there were tailors, boot makers, carpenters – and I was the unfortunate one they pushed into tailoring.<sup>20</sup>

After surviving the Russian Revolution and reuniting with his family, Dibowitz moved to London and began “turning over suits”, a custom that involved taking worn suits apart and re-stitching them with the worn side on the inside. In 1927, he sailed to Cape Town to escape continued Jewish persecution in Europe, settling in District Six. He failed to persuade his family members to emigrate to Cape Town, where he ran a small tailoring factory with Mannie Abrahams, a “little Malay man”, in Hanover Street, District Six.<sup>21</sup> Dibowitz lost fourteen relatives in the Holocaust. Of his first commission in District Six he said:

I worked day and night. I had a little Malay man to help, and I made the six suits. For this I received 30 pounds. Of course I gave the Malay some . . . but here I had money!<sup>22</sup>

Shub was a luckier man than Dibowitz. He escaped Lithuania at the age of three and grew up poor but within the sheltered surrounds of Mayfair, Johannesburg.<sup>23</sup> He signed up for the army at sixteen and re-

<sup>18</sup> Rosenthal: 1976.

<sup>19</sup> Kaplan: 1986, 242.

<sup>20</sup> Kaplan: 1986, 244.

<sup>21</sup> Rosenthal: 1976.

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan: 1986, 245.

<sup>23</sup> Shain & Mendelsohn: 2008, 114-5.

turned with an urge to provide for his family. He discovered his talent for selling and went on to become a travelling salesman in the 1920s, accompanied by an assistant named Michael:



a remarkable Zulu who subsequently became a legend in South Africa. Almost every storekeeper got to know him. He helped me with my samples and he helped me with my selling. He understood me completely – he knew me backwards, and he knew and understood the customers. I venture to suppose that if he had been a white man, he could have been as good a salesman as any . . . Michael was my assistant, my chauffeur and my valet. He took care of me. He was my constant companion . . . When he died, I felt I had lost a friend. Michael lived to see the start of what was to become Rex Trueform.<sup>24</sup>

Dibowitz's and Shub's paths crossed in District Six when, in 1932, they literally founded Rex Trueform on a simple handshake.<sup>25</sup> They nonchalantly named their new enterprise by way of a coin. Shub was keen to use the name "Trueform", which he had picked up on his many travels and was fond of. But the name was associated with an English shoe brand, and therefore could not be used on its own. At a loss, Shub took out a coin from his pocket, which read "King George V". They translated "king" into the Latin "rex", and combined the new term with "Trueform", Shub's original preference. The two immediately recognised the strength of the name and adopted it as their brand.<sup>26</sup>

The company's first premises were on Plein Street in Cape Town, but they soon outgrew the space and moved to a bigger location in Woodlands Road, Salt River.<sup>27</sup> These premises also became too small, and in 1937 they contracted the services of architect Max Policansky for the design of a large factory on Main Road, Salt River.

Shub and Dibowitz's common trajectory from poor, persecuted Jewish refugees to innovative entrepreneurs is the dominant narrative behind the publication *South African Jewry 1977*. According to the book, early Eastern European Jews in general found themselves in a "foreign, uncivilized land". As the preface states, they

had found a home here, after the trials and tribulations which were the lot of various communities whom fate had placed in a part of the world that was lagging behind in the march of civilization.<sup>28</sup>

They are portrayed as "pioneers" who

Fig. 7. Bernard Shub (left) and Philip Dibowitz (right), the main proprietors of Rex Trueform. Source: *Supplement to The Buyer (1947)*, Rex Trueform Company Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Kaplan: 1986, 242.

<sup>25</sup> Kaplan: 1986, 243.

<sup>26</sup> Rosenthal: 1976.

<sup>27</sup> Shorten: 1963, 221.

<sup>28</sup> Feldberg: 1976, 5.