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HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS: ADAPTATION OF BRNO VILLAS FOR MUSEUM PURPOSES[1]

MUZEA W ZABYTKOWYCH REZYDENCJACH: ADAPTACJA BRNEŃSKICH WILLI NA CELE MUZEALNE

A b s t r a c t

This article examines the adaptation of Brno villas for museum purposes. The aim is to analyse the possibilities for preserving authenticity whilst making them accessible to the public. The research is based on a comparative multi-case study of Villa Tugendhat, Villa Löw-Beer, Jurkovič's Villa, Villa Stiassni and Arnold's Villa. The results highlight different models of restoration and presentation. The conclusion is that successful conversion into a museum requires a balance between protecting heritage values and contemporary operations.

Keywords: *adaptive reuse, Brno, Czech Republic, historic house museums, historic villas*

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W artykule przeanalizowano sposób zaadaptowania brneńskich willi na cele muzealne. Celem pracy jest zbadanie możliwości zachowania autentyczności obiektów przy jednoczesnym udostępnieniu ich publiczności. Zastosowana metoda badawcza opiera się na porównawczym studium wielu przypadków, obejmującym Wille Tugendhat, Löw-Beer, Jurkovič, Stiassni i Arnold. Wyniki badań ukazują różne modele restauracji i prezentacji obiektów. W artykule stwierdzono, że udana adaptacja obiektu na cele muzealne wymaga zachowania równowagi między ochroną wartości dziedzictwa kulturowego a współczesnymi wymogami użytkowania.

Słowa kluczowe: *adaptacja zabytków, Brno, muzea w rezydencjach, Republika Czeska, zabytkowe wille*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Brno's villas represent a significant part of the city's architectural heritage. They document the development of modern residential architecture from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century. Their architectural form reflects not only the artistic trends of the time, technological progress and the social status of their owners, but also the urban development of Brno. In recent years, several of these buildings have undergone restoration and adaptation for new uses, most commonly as museums or representative and cultural spaces.

The issue of adapting historic villas for museum purposes is closely linked to the principles of heritage conservation, adaptive reuse, and the functioning of so-called historic house museums, or villa museums.[2] We pay particular attention to Brno's most famous villas: Villa Tugendhat, Villa Löw-Beer, Jurkovič's Villa, Stiassni Villa and Arnold's Villa, which represent different approaches to restoration, musealisation and making the historic environment accessible, approaches that are also linked to the different operators of these buildings. The aim of this paper is to identify, through comparison, the common principles and differences in approaches to the conservation, interpretation and contemporary use of historic villas as house museums.

2. ON THE METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCHING HISTORIC HOUSES AND VILLAS FOR MUSEUM PURPOSES

Unlike traditional museums, where the building often serves as a neutral exhibition space, in the case of a house museum, the building itself is the bearer of meaning, cultural value and the primary exhibit.[2] The functional definition of a house museum characterises it as a dwelling that has been turned into a museum and in which the very act of living is presented, with houses representing exceptionally complex objects combining real estate, physical structure, layout, furnishings and human associations.[3] The value of the building, therefore, lies not only in its architectural form, but also in its layout, the nature of its materials, its technical fittings, its relationship to the surroundings (e.g. the garden) and its links to specific owners or various historical events. A house-museum creates a specific form of engagement with the past. This is because visitors perceive the living space more naturally, as this environment is part of everyday human experience. This 'liveability' of the space allows the social, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of a particular era to be conveyed in a way different from a traditional museum setting.[4]

From a methodological perspective, several types of house museums can be distinguished, e.g. houses associated with prominent figures, artists, architects, writers, etc., where their main value lies in preserving the genius loci. The second group consists of stately villas, which are primarily turned into museums for their architectural, design, and artistic qualities.

[2] G. Pinna, *Introduction to historic house museums*, "Museum International: Historic House Museums" 2001, no. 53(2), p. 4.

[3] L. Young, *Is There a Museum in the House? Historic Houses as a Species of Museum*, "Museum Management and Curatorship" 2007, no. 22(1), pp. 60–61.

[4] R. Pavoni, *Towards a definition and typology of historic house museums*, "Museum international" 2001, no. 53(2), pp. 16–19.

Here, the building is often understood as a 'walk-through artwork', in which the architecture, interior, technical fittings and garden are perceived as a single whole.[5]

The process of adaptive reuse of historic villas involves the restoration and adaptation of existing buildings for new or continued functional use. When transforming a residential house into a museum, it is necessary to reconcile the protection of heritage values with the requirements of contemporary operation and visitor comfort. In practice, it is therefore necessary to create two parallel operational levels: a public exhibition space and a non-public area for technical and organisational facilities. An important requirement of the adaptation remains the preservation of the building's original 'appearance', that is, the authentic character of the building both externally and internally.[6]

A particular challenge in the restoration of interwar villa architecture is striking a balance between preserving the 'traces of time' and returning to the original architectural concept. As an architectural type, the villa is an individually designed residential building set within a garden environment, characterised by its high standard of design and craftsmanship. The key principle of heritage conservation is authenticity, which involves preserving the historical fabric, respecting the original materials, and restoring the original architectural intent. It is also important to view the villa as a cohesive whole. Consequently, heritage value is not confined to the representative rooms, but also extends to the technical floors and engineering systems, which document the technical standards of their era and the original design concept.[7] The historic garden is also an inseparable part of the villa's architecture, forming an integral part of the architectural concept.

3. FIVE ACCESSIBLE HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS IN BRNO: A MULTI-CASE STUDY

The study examines museum buildings in Brno that meet the criteria for historic house museums/villa museums. Methodologically, we have focused not on individual selected buildings, but on their perception within the context of urban culture, with the possibility of comparing approaches to their restoration and opening to the public, which closely intertwine heritage conservation and museum approaches and concern both the buildings themselves, their interiors, and their immediate surroundings (gardens).

The research methods and approaches include an analysis of a wide range of documents and information on the buildings, their restoration and opening to the public, as well as data from our own field research and documentation. The research sample consists of five iconic villas in Brno, exceptional examples of private family housing from the late 19th century, through Modernism and Art Nouveau in the early 20th century, to the interwar avant-garde.

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[5] L. Young, *House museums are not all the same! Understanding motivation to guide conservation*, 2012, p. 1. https://www.academia.edu/8460924/House_museums_are_not_all_the_same_Understanding_motivation_to_guide_conservation (access: 2.06.2026).

[6] M. Liefooghe, *The Musealisation of the Artist's House as an Architectural Project,* [in:] A. Guglielmetti, G.A. Mina, S. Wuhrmann (eds.)*. Casa d'artisti. Between private universe and public space: artists' houses converted into museums*, vol. 5, Museo Vincenzo Vela, Ligornetto 2011, pp. 59–74.

[7] M. Solař et al., *Památková obnova vilové architektury 20. a 30. let 20. století*, Národní památkový ústav, Brno 2015, pp. 14–18.

3.1. VILLA TUGENDHAT

The construction of the functionalist villa (1929–1930) in the Černá Pole district, designed by the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, was commissioned by Greta and Fritz Tugendhat, who came from industrial and merchant families (Ill. 1). The building plot was part of the land adjacent to the Art Nouveau villa of Greta's parents, née Löw-Beer, which took the form of a 19th-century English park. The garden of Villa Tugendhat, together with the lower part of the Löw-Beer villa's garden, formed a spatial, though not an architectural, whole.

The three-storey villa is set on sloping ground. The basement houses the technical facilities. The ground floor comprises the main living and social area with a conservatory and terrace, as well as the kitchen with ancillary rooms and staff quarters. On the third (top) floor is the main entrance from the street with access to the terrace, an entrance hall, and the parents', children's and nanny's bedrooms with en-suite facilities. The chauffeur's flat, with a garage and terrace, has a separate entrance. The main façade of the house faces the garden.

The building's structure consists of a steel frame, reinforced concrete floors and brick infill walls. The slender load-bearing columns with a cross-section run partly through the masonry and partly through the open space across all storeys. In the living areas, they are clad in polished chrome. The more prestigious areas, in particular, were designed as works of art, with great attention to detail and the positioning of individual pieces of furniture and decorative accessories. The interior could be opened up to the garden by lowering two large window panels.

The family's Jewish origins were the reason for their forced emigration in 1938. The house was confiscated by the Gestapo and damaged by Soviet troops at the end of the Second World War. From the late 1940s, it was used as a dance school and subsequently as a rehabilitation centre for children. The first repairs to the building took place between 1980 and 1985, and the house served as a venue for official functions for the City of Brno. In 1994, the Brno City Museum opened it to the public as the first designated monument of modern architecture in the Czech Republic. A complete restoration between 2010 and 2012 restored the building, interiors and furnishings, as well as the garden, to their 1930 appearance. The interiors are furnished with replicas of the original furniture. In the basement, the villa's technical facilities were restored and are now open to the public as part of an extended tour route. There is also an exhibition here presenting the architect, the builders and the family's life in the villa. In addition to guided tours of the interiors, it is possible to take *The Villa from the Outside* tour. The garden and the exhibition in the villa's technical basement, where the museum shop is located, are accessible free of charge.[8]

3.2. VILLA LÖW-BEER

This prestigious Art Nouveau family villa (Ill. 2) was built (1903–1904) in the villa colony in Černá Pole by the industrialist Moritz Fuhrmann, based on a design by the architect Alexander Neumann. Originally, the single-storey villa contained four flats. Art Nouveau plant motifs adorn the street and garden façades of the house as well as the interiors.

[8] *VillaTugendhatmiesvanderrohe*,"VillaTugenedhat",https://www.tugendhat.eu/en/(access:30.05.2026); *Národní památkový ústav: Památkový katalog*, "Památkový katalog", https://pamatkovykatalog.cz/ (access: 30.05.2026).

Following Fuhrmann's death, his heirs sold the villa in 1913 to the Jewish textile entrepreneur Alfred Löw-Beer and his wife Marianna. In 1929, Alfred Löw-Beer gifted a plot in the upper part of the estate to his daughter Greta, later known as Greta Tugendhat, for the construction of a family home. In the 1930s, Löw-Beer had his villa partially renovated by the architect Rudolf Baumfeld, primarily the central staircase hall. The villa complex also included a garden house, known as the 'customs office' after its original purpose, whose rooms were used by the family as stables and a garage for carriages, and later for cars, while also serving as staff accommodation for the gardener or the villa's caretaker. Alfred Löw-Beer lived in the villa with his family until 1939, when most of the family fled to Great Britain.

The villa was then confiscated for the needs of the Gestapo, and after the war, it housed the State Security office for a year, followed by a brief period as the American Institute. In 1954, the villa became the property of the Czechoslovak state, and it served as a youth hostel until 2012.

The villa is a four-storey building with a rectangular floor plan and an asymmetrically designed garden façade. It has a three-wing layout, centred around a central hall with a marble fireplace and overhead lighting, from which a staircase leads to the living quarters on the first floor.

From the 1950s until the end of the 20th century, no major structural alterations were made to the villa. Thanks to the preserved original structural elements and other features, it was designated a listed building in 1958; nevertheless, the property remained neglected and underfunded for a long time. In 2013–2014, the villa, the adjacent garden, and the garden cottage situated within it underwent restoration to their 1930s appearance. The roof was repaired and new external plasterwork was applied; the skylight was reconstructed, and the damp basement was insulated. Central heating and distribution systems, sanitary facilities and a lift for barrier-free access were newly installed. During the renovation of the garden grounds, the fountain with a water jet was repaired and put into operation.

Almost none of the interior furnishings have survived, which is why the Brno Region Museum opted for a museum presentation concept utilising the interiors. In 2016, a permanent exhibition entitled *The World of the Brno Bourgeoisie between Löw-Beer and Tugendhat* was opened, which has since been replaced by a new permanent exhibition, *Jews in Moravia. The Villa and its Inhabitants*. Temporary exhibitions are held in the other rooms. The garden adjoining the villa used to extend as far as Černopolní Street; the gardens of both the Löw-Beer and Tugendhat villas are now connected and accessible free of charge during the villas' opening hours. On the upper floor of the garden house is the freely accessible Celnice Gallery with temporary exhibitions; on the lower floor is a café.[9]

3.3. ARNOLD'S VILLA

The villa in Černá Pole was designed and built in 1862 by the local builder and architect Josef Arnold in the Historicist style (Ill. 3). At the time of its construction, there were almost no other buildings in the vicinity, and the houses in the area were typically suburban holiday homes (summer residences), which is how the original owners used it. From 1883, the villa changed hands several times until it was purchased in 1909 by Cecílie Hože, the elder sister

[9] *Muzeum Brněnska...*, *op. cit.*

of Alfred Löw-Beer and aunt of Greta Tugendhat, who was married to the lawyer and businessman Cornelius Hože. Shortly after the purchase, work began on renovating the villa into its present-day late Art Nouveau form with Art Deco elements. Thanks to central heating and electrical wiring, the villa became habitable all year round. New features included a glazed wooden veranda, an extension to the kitchen and bedrooms, and alterations to the layout of the façades. The garden resembled an English park with gazebos and pavilions furnished with garden furniture. Cornelius Hože died in 1936, before the forced departure of this Jewish family, whose members perished in concentration camps. The villa was seized by the Gestapo in 1939 and later became the property of the Czechoslovak state. In 1948, it was taken over by the Brno Housing Authority and served as a nursery school from 1951 to 2012, before being closed due to structural instability. Thanks to local efforts, the threatened demolition of the villa was successfully averted.

Between 2021 and 2024, Arnold's Villa and its gardens underwent a complete renovation and restoration. A number of authentic features have been preserved in the building, though there are no interior furnishings or documentation of the interiors' original appearance, a fact that is reflected in the concept for opening the villa to the public. In addition to showcasing the architecture, the Brno City Museum presents a permanent exhibition entitled *The Legacy of the Past in the Flow of Time* within the villa's interiors, alongside a programme of regularly changing temporary exhibitions. In addition to individual visits, guided tours and educational programmes are also available for organised groups. The villa serves as a venue for social gatherings, club activities, specialist lectures and conferences, excursions, garden concerts and similar events. The gardens of the three villas, which belonged to the related Hože, Löw-Beer and Tugendhat families, were and are once again interconnected and open to the public. From 2026, the *Garden Trilogy of Brno Villas*, a guided walk through the gardens, will also be offered.[10]

3.4. STIASSNI VILLA

The Stiassni Villa in Brno is a significant example of private family housing from the interwar period. Its owners, the Jewish textile industrialists Alfred and Hermine Stiassni, had it built (1929) in the Pisárky district on a plot of consolidated land measuring exactly 3 hectares, based on a design by the architect Ernst Wiesner.[11] The family enjoyed the house only until 1938, when they emigrated out of fear of the Nazi threat, and the property was confiscated by the Gestapo during the war. The property then began to serve as a state residence ('government villa').

The villa's architectural design embodies the contrast between a stark, modern, purist exterior featuring functionalist elements and a richly decorated interior in a traditionalist style, in keeping with the owners' desire for luxurious living. The two-storey building has an L-shaped floor plan and an open loggia that seamlessly connects the house with the terraces and garden. The interior layout is strictly divided into a residential and a service area. The formal reception rooms, including the dining room and salons, were located on the ground floor, whilst the first floor served as a private zone with separate apartments for the parents and their young daughter. Whilst E. Wiesner designed the overall layout and details (marble fireplaces, window sills), the interior furnishings were likely the work of

[10] *Muzeum města Brna*, *op. cit.*

architect Franz Wilfert.[11] During the restoration work between 2012 and 2014, the interiors were largely restored to their interwar appearance, though with the deliberate retention of some later alterations. The administrator of the National Heritage Institute had a new building constructed in the northern part of the garden, housing exhibition and lecture spaces.[12] Perhaps the most significant architectural and restoration intervention of the renovation was the restoration of the villa's loggia (converted into an insulated interior space in 1961) to its original open state. An important aspect of the restoration was the reconstruction of the bathrooms, which had been rebuilt in the 1980s. The result was a compromise whereby two marble bathrooms were deliberately preserved as a historical trace of the era of the government villa, whilst the other sanitary facilities were reconstructed to their First Republic appearance.[13]

An important part of the villa's overall concept is also the extensive garden, the basic layout of which was sketched out by E. Wiesner himself. The grounds were divided into three interconnected functional zones (the southern section with sports facilities and a tennis court; the ceremonial eastern parterre in front of the loggia with a stone staircase leading to the swimming pool; and the northern slope designated for domestic purposes).[14] The complex was complemented by a driver's flat, stables and the head gardener's house with garages at the entrance gate.

Currently, Villa Stiassni is open to the public primarily through a number of guided tours. The complex also includes the period-style Café Ernst, situated on the ground floor. An integral part of the presentation is the garden, which is specifically maintained as a separate monument to garden art.

3.5. JURKOVIČ'S VILLA

Jurkovič's Villa in Brno is a significant work by the Slovak architect Dušan Samo Jurkovič and ranks among the most important monuments of Central European Art Nouveau architecture. The architect purchased the plot in the village of Žabovřesky in 1905 with the aim of building his own family residence. The building was officially presented to the public in 1906 as part of the *Exhibition of Architecture and Applied Arts*, meaning that from the outset, the building served not only a private function but also a significant representative function for its owner. The Jurkovič family lived in the villa until 1919, when they moved to Bratislava (Slovakia). The villa gradually changed hands several times. In 2006, it was purchased by the state and entrusted to the administration of the Moravian Gallery in Brno.[15]

The architectural design of the house is a synthesis of the British Arts and Crafts movement, Viennese Modernism and Central European, particularly Slovak, folk culture, which is reflected in the striking colour scheme, the interplay of volumes and the unmistakable silhouette reminiscent of a fairy-tale cottage. Jurkovič created a work that marked a fundamental shift in his oeuvre, moving away from imitating folk timber buildings towards modern

[11] P. Czajkowski et al., *Stavebně-historický průzkum a dokumentace při obnově architektury 20. století,* Národní památkový ústav, Brno 2015, p. 14.
[12] J. Sobotka, *Brněnské vilové kvarteto a pontenciál jejich zahrad*, Univerzita Karlova, Praha 2022, p. 55.
[13] M. Solař et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 41–45.
[14] J. Sobotka, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–26.
[15] *Ibidem*, pp. 18–20.

geometric reduction.[16] The villa's structural system is a hybrid, comprising a stone foundation and a timber frame with partitions featuring thermal insulation made of cork boards and plaster. The heart of the interior is the monumental staircase hall, which seamlessly connects the social and living areas on the ground floor with the work and private areas on the first floor. The exterior is enlivened in particular by the imposing stone entrance loggia, the carved wooden gate and the glass mosaic featuring a motif from the fairy tale of the shepherd and the dragon, situated on the front façade. An integral part of the concept is the gently sloping garden plot, compositionally divided into an eastern section (entrance parterre, vegetable garden and children's playground) and a western section (ornamental and fruit garden).

The comprehensive restoration of the villa took place between 2009 and 2010 with the aim of transforming the property from private residence into a fully-fledged institutionalised monument of modern architecture. The resulting restoration solution involved a differentiated approach to the individual parts of the building. For the main residential and reception areas on the ground floor, a reverential approach was adopted, whereby the entire layout and appearance were restored precisely to the period when D. Jurkovič lived there with his family, thereby creating space for an exhibition on his life and work. On the first floor, a different adaptation principle was adopted: whilst the living spaces were restored, the original interior fittings were deliberately left unreconstructed. These spaces are used to host temporary exhibitions of design and architecture. The building's attic has been converted into a research centre with wheelchair access provided by a lift.[17]

Educational and experiential programmes, in which primary school pupils learn to perceive the site as a unified organic whole, represent an exceptionally important component of the centre's outreach activities.[18]

4. CONCLUSION

The Brno villas open to the public represent a diverse collection of architectural monuments where one can observe different strategies of heritage restoration, musealisation and contemporary cultural use. They are united by their original residential function, high architectural quality, links to prominent figures and families of Brno society, as well as the complicated history of the 20th century marked by the forced departures of Jewish owners, confiscations and changes of use. These layers make them not only architectural monuments but also bearers of significant cultural and commemorative values.

A comparison of the examples examined shows that there is no single model for adapting a historic villa for museum or exhibition purposes. Villa Tugendhat represents a thorough return to the form of the house from the period when it was inhabited by the Tugendhat family; Jurkovič's Villa combines a reconstructed historical environment with exhibition and research functions; and Villa Stiassni represents a compromise between the restoration of the original concept and the preservation of selected later layers. The Löw-Beer Villa and Arnold's Villa, on the other hand, demonstrate a presentation model primarily based on exhibitions, educational and cultural and social activities.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 19.
[17] *Ibidem*, pp. 19–21.
[18] *Ibidem*, pp. 34–35.

A common challenge for all these buildings remains the search for a balance between authenticity and the demands of contemporary use. As a house museum, a historic villa is itself the main exhibit, whilst its architecture, layout, materials, technical fittings, and relationship with the garden form an integral part of the values on display. Successful adaptation, therefore, depends on the ability to integrate new functions without compromising the building's historical essence.

The villas of Brno thus represent significant examples of contemporary approaches to the conservation and presentation of modern residential architecture. They demonstrate that the aim of adaptation is not merely the physical restoration of a building, but also the creation of a clear interpretative framework capable of conveying its architectural, historical and social values to a contemporary audience. Villa Wittal, the newest addition to Brno's historic house museums, now faces this challenge.

Table 1. Historic house museums in Brno

Name	Architect (year of completion)	Use as a family villa and subsequent use; *Current owner – administrator (year opened to the public)	Cultural and heritage significance	Restoration of the villa
Villa Tugendhat	Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1930)	Greta and Fritz Tugendhat (1930–1938); Gestapo, dance school (1945–1950), rehabilitation centre for children (1950s–1970s), representative building of the City of Brno (1980s); *Statutory City of Brno – Brno City Museum (1994)	cultural monument (1958); national cultural monument (1995); UNESCO World Heritage Site (2001); Iconic Houses	2010–2012
Stiassni Villa	Ernst Wiesner (1929)	Alfred and Hermine Stiassni (1929–1938); Gestapo, government villa (1945–1989); *State of the Czech Republic – National Heritage Institute (2014)	cultural monument (1958); Iconic Houses	2012–2014
Jurkovič's Villa	Dušan Jurkovič (1906)	Dušan and Božena Jurkovič (1906–1919), Bedřich Chorynský et al. (1909–1938?), the Švancara family (1938?–2006); *State of the Czech Republic – Moravian Gallery in Brno (2011)	cultural monument (1958); Iconic Houses	2009–2010
Löw-Beer Villa	Alexander Neumann (1903); Rudolf Baumfeld (alterations, 1930s)	Moritz and Karoline Fuhrmann (1904–1910), Alfred and Marianna Löw-Beer (1913–1939); Gestapo, State Security (1945–1946), American Institute (1946–1954), youth hostel (1954–2012); *South Moravian Region – Brno Region Museum (2016)	cultural monument (1958)	2013–2014

Name	Architect (year of completion)	Use as a family villa and subsequent use; *Current owner – administrator (year opened to the public)	Cultural and heritage significance	Restoration of the villa
Arnold's Villa	Josef Arnold (1862); Carl Schuhang (?) (extension, 1869); (?) (building alterations, 1909–1915)	Josef and Katharina Arnold (1862–1882), Charlotte Martini (1883–1896), Albertina Antonie Langer (1896–1909), Cecílie and Cornelius Hože (1909–1939); Gestapo, Brno Housing Authority (1948–1950s), nursery school (1952–2012); *Statutory City of Brno – Brno City Museum (2024)	cultural monument (2010)	2021–2024
Wittal Villa	Heinrich Blum (1932)	Johann and Friederike Wittal (1932–1939); Gestapo headquarters, used by prominent communists (1945–1950s), apartment block (1950s–2023); *Statutory City of Brno – Brno City Museum (2025, urbex tours only)	cultural monument (1958)	before restoration



Ill. 1. *Villa Tugendhat*, photo: authors



Ill. 2. *Villa Löw-Beer*, photo: authors



Ill. 3. Arnold's Villa, photo: authors



Ill. 4. *Villa Stiassni*, photo: authors



Ill. 5. Jurkovič‘s Villa, photo: authors

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[3] *Muzeum Brněnska: Vila Löw-Beer v Brně*, "Muzeum Brněnska", https://www.vilalowbeer.cz/cz/ (access: 30.5.2026).

[4] *Muzeum města Brna*, "Muzeum města Brna", https://www.muzeumbrna.cz/ (access: 30.05.2026).

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