

Book review

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This book is part of the “Tourism and Cultural Change” series. The aim of the series is to explore the dynamic relationship between tourism and culture and how each shape and influence the other.

The author argues that hotels, whilst part of tourist economy, deserve separate focus and analysis. “Hotels are part of the infrastructure of travel, conventionally understood and studied as a place of rest, not of motion.” Hotels not only represent culture (either the local culture or that of its owner (colonial or corporate), but also develop a culture of their own. This book seeks to explore the hotel as a cultural object.

The stated goal of the book is to act as an introduction to hotel scholarship in three selected areas:

1. The American hotel as a social technology, as a driver of technological innovation and as an institution that represented American dominance in the commercial hospitality sector after the Second World War.
2. The changing nature of the hotel's identity and role in colonial and post-colonial environments.
3. The hotel's role and symbolism in urban conflict zones.

Why look at the hotel as an object of social study? The author states that the “hotel's locational features, their material forms and their symbolisms have made them important objects to study during processes of urbanization, capitalist development, nation building and colonial expansion.” These topics in relation to the modern hotel are explored over six chapters.

The history of the modern hotel is explored with a specific focus on three types of hotels which the author feels are institutions with coherent histories and identities. The focus is

on urban hotels. He divides the modern hotel into the “American Hotel” the “colonial hotel” and the “wartime hotel”. A chapter is devoted to each hotel type.

An introduction serves as Chapter 1. The author explores the definition of a hotel, the hotel as part of the urban milieu, reviews modern hotel history scholarship and explores the hotel as a symbol of modernity.

Chapter 2 explores the interpretations and approaches that have been used to study the history of the hotel. It reviews the nineteenth-century hotel and the influential role that railways played for the hotel which emerged as a modern distinctive form of commercial accommodation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in both Western Europe and America.

The author explores how hotel historians have viewed American, continental and British hotels as different; influenced by different legal systems, cultures, indigenous architectural styles and the different markets that they served.

Chapter 3 explores the American hotel and in particular its “precocious technologisation”; its role within urban civic life and the role as an indicator of America's international status after the Second World War. The early American modern hotel is described as having three distinctive features: its form (larger scale, central location and networked), its leisure facilities and its luxury.

The rise of the American hotel chain in the era of post-Second World War globalization is explored as a signifier of American power exporting its technology, service culture and aesthetic via the modern hotel chain.

Chapter 4 explores the colonial hotel and how it represented the colonial power in the setting of its colony. Colonial hotels were seen as markers of colonial power, a visible element in a built environment of what the colonial power was trying to represent. For some colonialist, the colonial hotel was a place of retreat, where they could go back to the familiarity of their colonial home. But colonial hotels were

Histories, Meanings and Representations of the Modern Hotel

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also often a hybrid a space to mediate between the colonial traditions and that of the colonized nation. The duality of the colonial hotel is discussed in the sub chapter “enclave or site of encounter.” The hotel as a provider of “comfort zones” as well as “contact zones” with local culture provides some interesting thoughts for accommodations of the future. The post-colonial hotel is discussed as the colonial hotel no longer has an explicit need to signify the authority of the colonial power. In the post-colonial era, these hotels have had to adopt and change (or be knocked down) and the author uses this to show the “protean identities of hotels.”

Chapter 5 looks at the modern hotel in its most recent context and may be of greatest interest to futurists. Here hotels are examined in the contexts of terrorism and urban warfare. In times of conflict, the modern urban hotel has a strategic value and may be considered a soft target. The hotel thus can play a dual role as a place of sanctuary (wartime correspondents and international media being safely housed in the hotel as their base) as well as a place to target (hotel bombings). The author discusses the openness, vulnerability and securitization of the modern urban hotel in this era. During this period, and during the Cold War, hotels become key actors in global geopolitics acting as places where high-level talks and meetings took place or where hotels were requisitioned to act as organizational bases from which to plan peace or conflict.

Chapter 6 acts as the conclusion to the book.

I reviewed this book with the maxim in mind that futurists should look back twice as far as they look forward. However, the book is relatively narrow in its focus in that it focuses on the modern, primarily urban, hotel through three lenses: the American hotel, the colonial hotel and the wartime hotel. The book is a

historical academic review and as such is not a light easy read and thus not easily skimmable for those with a cursory interest.

The book clearly states that its focus is on the history of the modern hotel. As futurists the recent shift to new forms of accommodation that are home like, home based or shared, is not explored. The book is also clearly focused on the urban hotel environment and the author acknowledges that, particularly with the rise of the modern traveler using personal motor vehicles as transport, there is room to explore the rise and role of non-urban accommodation.

The book has a very western focus which is clearly acknowledged in Chapter 2 when the author states that there were a number of historical processes that led to the [modern] American “hotel’s emergence as a lodestar of Western modernity” (p. 39). I would argue that the American hotel is also a form of a colonial hotel.

However, the duality of role that hotels have played has the potential to lead to interesting futures discussions on the protean role of hotels and accommodations in social change, its place as zones for comfort vs contact with the local tourism economy and its role as a place of sanctuary vs target. How will these play out in a tourism future where over-tourism, respect for local culture and traditions and sustainability are now the conversations that we are having?

The book will be of interest to anyone in the hotel industry but specifically for those hotels that fall into the focus category of American modern colonial and wartime hotel.

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