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book review of

Hotel Dreams: Luxury, Technology, and Urban Ambition in America, 1829–1929 by Molly W. Berger
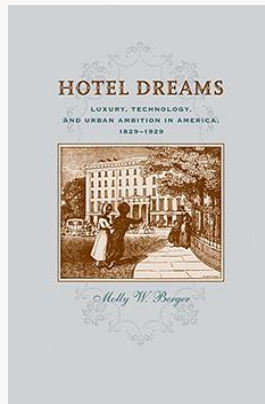
Molly W. Berger,
Hotel Dreams: Luxury, Technology, and Urban Ambition in America, 1829–1929.
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Molly W. Berger's *Hotel Dreams: Luxury, Technology, and Urban Ambition in America, 1829–1929* is a welcome addition to a growing, yet still small, body of scholarship on the American hotel. Other recent works of the last decade that address this topic include A. K. Sandoval-Strausz's, *Hotel: An American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); the volume edited by Marianne Lamonaca and Jonathan Mogul, *Grand Hotels of the Jazz Age: The Architecture of Schultze & Weaver* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005); a special issue of *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* edited by Molly W. Berger entitled "The American Hotel" (2005); Susan R. Braden's *The Architecture of Leisure: The Florida Resort Hotels of Henry Flagler and Henry Plant* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); and Annabel Jane Wharton's *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001). This contribution to the history of hotels is focused on the luxury hotel, which occupied the highest position amongst all types of hotels.

In the introduction, Berger defines the luxury hotel and explains why and how she is going to study this building type. Obviously, luxury hotels were the fanciest hotels in any city, but as Berger explicates, the status of these buildings was largely based on notions of what she terms "technological luxury" (3). This concept helped make the luxury hotel the setting where politics, commerce, and consumption took place, and where issues of race, class, and gender were negotiated, reinforced, and subverted. The book begins with the development of the modern hotel, a building type that was defined by its incorporation of the most recent technological innovations with little to no concern for cost. Berger locates the attention to technological advancement in hotel design within the context of an era in which technology and progress had merged into a unified concept in American society. Therefore, a fancy hotel that incorporated the latest technology and hosted important political and commercial

activities functioned as a symbol of a city's status within the nation. Because the luxury hotel was arguably the most important building in a city, it played a significant part in defining local identity and in nation building. To trace this, Berger presents the history of these hotels from initial conception to final concrete and operational form. This allows her to illustrate the economic and political forces that shaped their creation, as well as allowing her an opportunity to discuss the life of these hotels as spaces for commerce and local and national politics. Because of its size and the various activities that went on inside it, the luxury hotel was simultaneously understood to be a "city within a city" and part of a larger process of urbanization taking place during the period under study.

The book is organized into a series of chronologically-ordered case studies that are separated by what the author describes as "interpretive essays," chapters that cover the world of hotels more broadly and ultimately work to connect a case study from one period to that of another. She starts her history with an overview of the emergence of the modern luxury hotel in the 1820s, which was designed to have a form and characteristics that set it apart from previously established means of accommodation. ; A first-class hotel came to be defined by decoration and design that provided comfort and reinforced one's station in life, an attention to cleanliness and good service, the provision of plentiful food, a central and convenient location, and its large size, which helped to distinguish it in the urban environment. In this chapter Berger also traces the general acceptance of luxury as a positive concept, one that was increasingly understood as a symbol of an expanding national wealth. In turn, there was a stylistic move away from a domestic architectural vocabulary to the lexicon of commercial architecture.

Chapter two presents a case study of Boston's Tremont Hotel. Understood at the time of its construction to be something wholly new in the U.S. and in Europe, the Tremont Hotel played a significant role in shaping subsequent hotel design. Berger takes care to tie the hotel to the politics of the early republic and the emergence of the luxury hotel. Her analysis of the forces behind the hotel that worked together, the old merchant families and the nouveau-riche textile barons, signifies the changes that were apace in the economic and political worlds of Boston. Different groups came together to promote the hotel as a public interest project and to address the attending debate over government support for a private investment project. As Berger shows, the seeming good will of the Boston elite in creating a hotel was contradicted by deep-seated class distinctions—they would have never viewed the tradesmen, so vital for the construction of the hotel, as potential or appropriate patrons. The Tremont Hotel is famously known for its incorporation of toilets and showers, a convenience, or luxury, possible through technological advancements. Berger also covers the other ways in which technology defined the Tremont Hotel, such as the new rail lines used to transport huge blocks of granite into the city for the construction of the hotel, an act that garnered much public attention at the time. In addition, the Tremont Hotel played a decisive role in establishing the architectural style of luxury hotels. The Tremont was designed in a Greek Revival style that imitated the design of other commercial and civic buildings, such as banks and market houses. ; Berger reiterates her discussion of the Greek Revival style from the previous chapter when she explains that "in the American political economy of the early republic, the politics of government were in symbiosis with a capitalist economy," which means that "an architecture that symbolized democracy's purest ideals also honored capitalism's greatest achievements," making it "no

great leap to apply the architectural form of classic sacred shrines to the cathedrals of American commerce: banks, markets, and hotels" (42).

The next chapter traces the codification and proliferation of the modern luxury hotel type, as established by the Tremont Hotel, throughout the antebellum period. ; Berger lays out three key themes that emerged from the grand hotels of this period: the hotel as a venue for political and social events for men and women; the embellishment of the hotel with technological systems that shaped notions of comfort, service, and luxury; the movement of the model for hotel design to New York in accordance with the relocation of the leaders of finance and commerce to that city. This chapter reinforces and expands upon the connection between the luxury hotel and commerce, and introduces an analysis of gender issues in the hotel.

The second case study is Philadelphia's Continental Hotel of 1860. ; The author's narrative of this hotel reveals the general conflicts and anxieties of this period that were bound up in the hotel project from the start. She studies the public reaction to the proposed hotel to tease out the varying attitudes people had toward such concepts as progress, capitalism, large corporations, and technology in a world where the public was "acutely aware of living in times of momentous change" (84). In particular, the Continental Hotel is analyzed as an example of the way personal and communal needs were often at odds during this period (in fact, it is a theme covered in many of the case studies). Who benefitted from a large hotel such as this? ; Berger traces the tangled web of lives that were tied, for better or for worse, to the hotel. She studies the leaders and investors who stood to gain fame and fortune, the local laborers and artisans who would profit from work, and Philadelphia in general, which would gain from the commerce that the new hotel would draw back to the city. Berger also presents the other side of the coin, those that would lose from the project, specifically the other hoteliers in a city that, they argued, could not support a hotel of such magnitude. The understanding that some would win and others would lose in this venture is something that the author ties to the changing political economy of the time, wherein the Whig ideology of the self-made man was challenged by strongly stratified social classes with little social mobility. The luxury hotel, Berger argues, "served as a monument to this reality," both in the story of its genesis and the lived reality of the activities it housed.

Chapter five addresses the services, activities, and human behavior that defined the hotel in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. This is one of the most notable chapters in the book, where Berger deftly weaves a study of the designed spaces of the hotel with analysis of primary resources to present the hotel as a series of stages upon which race, gender, and class issues played out. One illustrative example is Berger's analysis of a man's firsthand account of watching a woman feast on a stack of pancakes. His description of her as a de-sexed, eating machine points to the criticism that fell upon some of the machinations of the hotel, such as the *table d'hôte* system of dining, which for this man, resulted in the disintegration of proper gender roles. As Berger shows, it is because of the very public nature of so many hotel spaces that social behaviors were under scrutiny. Issues of gender were also tied to the controversy surrounding the alleged effect of the hotel on domestic life. With more and more young couples taking up "hotel life," critics warned of the corrupting effects this would have on the modern family. Without women having to attend to their proper domestic duties, they were left to little more than a life of leisure that was, for many, located dangerously close to the public world of men and commerce. However, the hotel was not a space where all social

conventions broke down. Berger also presents the many ways in which the hotel codified popular attitudes and conventions, such as her investigation of the way that the proliferation of sumptuously decorated ladies' sitting rooms reinforced notions of the female domestic sphere. While many of the resources Berger uses are from travelogues and other personal accounts, she also draws upon a vast literature published in popular weeklies and magazines that utilized the hotel as a setting for stories, reinforcing the notion of the hotel as a city within a city, a microcosm of American society.

The third case study, San Francisco's 1875 Palace Hotel, reinforces a lot of what was covered in previous chapters while also highlighting shifts in hotel design and their role in society. The Palace typified the ongoing quest of hotel builders to construct the largest and most expensive hotel in the world, creating a system in which hotels were surpassed quickly by newer, bigger hotels. The Palace was described in accordance with the accepted manner of discussing hotels; everything was described in quantities, from the miles of pipes and carpet to the number of light bulbs and teacups. This approach was in keeping with the period's tendency to look at things in terms of commodities, which were understood to be the logical components of progress and growth. To show the continuity in hotel design, Berger discusses similarities between the Palace Hotel and the Tremont Hotel—both were places where local and national political and commercial leaders convened, for example. In considering the differences between the two, Berger highlights a shift in hotel design and in American society in general. Whereas Berger stresses the community effort that was highlighted in the Tremont Hotel, she paints the Palace Hotel as symbolic of a shift in attitude that favored material gain and consumption over communal interests.

Entitled "The 'New' Modern Hotel, 1880–1920," chapter seven looks at the period in which developing skyscraper construction and new systems of efficiency affected the American hotel. As Berger points out, skyscrapers' histories focus on corporate office buildings, but the hotel industry "participated wholeheartedly in this structural revolution" (178). These tall-building hotels drew on established principles of technological luxury, service, and size, but at a much greater scale, and Berger suggests the whole business of hotels, from design to operation, becomes much more complex. Berger focuses on the original Waldorf-Astoria as an example of the tall-building hotel, which was actually two conjoined hotels that opened in 1893 and 1897 and were thirteen and sixteen floors, respectively. ; These two structures relied upon the building materials and engineering techniques that were also being used in commercial and corporate tall buildings, aspects that were highlighted in coverage of the hotels in the professional and popular press. ; In short, Berger is trying to reclaim a place for the urban hotel in a history of skyscrapers that has come to focus solely on corporate structures. ; This chapter also includes some interesting topics that, unfortunately, are not as congruent with the rest of the book as they could be. Berger includes a lengthy analysis of the development of Ellsworth Statler's system of hotel design and operation. ; The Statler system incorporated the ideals of the luxury hotel but adapted them to target a middle class market. It seems a Statler hotel is exactly what Berger has set out not to cover, the lower cost hotels that merely aspire to be like luxury hotels. Certainly Statler is an important figure in the history of hotels, especially in terms of methods of efficiency; and certainly his innovations influenced the hotel covered in the following chapter, but Berger could better tie these ideas specifically to the luxury hotels she is focused on. In addition, the discourse of the architect suddenly appears in this chapter. This section needs a bit more clarification. ; If hotels, as Berger suggests, all of a sudden become larger and more complicated designs, thus becoming projects that fall under the

purview of the architectural and engineering professions, what does that imply about those who designed previous hotels? This is not very clear and may suggest a shift in the rhetoric of architectural primary sources that is echoed in Berger's prose but is not explicitly addressed by the author.

In the final case study we see how the development of the skyscraper and changes in American society pit the skyscraper hotel against the corporate skyscraper in a competition for the status of urban icon. Ultimately, the skyscraper hotel lost this battle, and Berger's use of Chicago's 1927 Stevens Hotel as a case study is a great example of why. To be bigger and better than the last hotel, now within the proportions of a skyscraper, meant the expenditure of enormous amounts of money. While older luxury hotel ideals were incorporated into the design, new developments related to efficiency, standardization, and economies of scale were also considered. However, because of the dual interest in old ideals and new systems of efficiency, in combination with the previous chapter's discussion of the Statler system, it becomes less clear at this point what constitutes luxury. The Great Depression hit shortly after the hotel's opening, leaving Stevens, as well as countless other hoteliers, hard-pressed to keep occupancy levels high enough to stay afloat. Large hotels such as the Stevens functioned on vast economies of scale that just could not be sustained at a time of severe economic hardship. While the hotel may not have proved to be financially successful in its time, its physical manifestation, in size and technological features, was not rivaled for decades.

Overall, *Hotel Dreams* is a worthy read, though not without a few, albeit minor, shortcomings. Berger is committed to tracing the continuity and the changes in hotel design, and this can be a little confusing to the reader at times. For example, to say that the politics behind two hotels are the same yet different can become confusing without direct and detailed comparison (rather than mere reference to previous chapters). This theme, that things change and stay the same, is but one of the many themes of the book, all of which seem too repetitive at times. This is probably no fault of Berger's, but rather indicative of the challenge that all scholars face concerning organization. Case study organization allows for a neat, chronological history of the hotel, but means that the same themes are covered over and over. ; But, to have organized the book thematically would have been at the expense of the narrative of the changing political, social, and economic values of the time, and of the continuous commitment to keep building bigger and better hotels. Because the various themes are thoroughly covered in each chapter, chapters stand well on their own and could be used as shorter readings geared to a more specific timeframe or geographic region.

One of the most praiseworthy aspects of *Hotel Dreams* is the vast amount and types of resources that the author culled from countless libraries and archives, leaving the reader with no doubt that this is a very thoroughly researched project. Berger utilizes a variety of primary resources, such as travel writings, etiquette books, personal diaries, and letters and articles published in the popular press, which help her to trace the history of hotels and to chronicle the place of the hotel in the American imagination. Instead of a traditional bibliography, Berger has included an essay on sources. This includes a section on the primary sources, as well as sections that cover scholarship pertaining to such topics as hotels, urban history, landscape and space, modernity and progress, consumer culture, technology, gender, and luxury. The book's illustrations are in black and white, which is not a bad thing, since most images and diagrams seem to have been black and white in the original as well. Like the

primary sources, the images depict a variety of aspects of the hotel aside from the expected exterior views and plans, such as sheet music showing interiors, menus, and depictions of noteworthy events that took place in hotels.

Hotel Dreams is an important contribution to many fields of scholarship. While Berger is a historian of technology and the book is published as part of the Studies in Industry and Society series, it is also a valuable study for architecture and design historians, the fields of American studies and cultural studies, and those interested in topics such as political history, consumer culture, and gender. As Berger points out, we all have a "hotel story," some memorable experience or anecdote related to a hotel. Berger's scholarship helps us to understand why we all do, by highlighting the importance of hotels in shaping American society and the urban landscape.

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