
Reviewed by Maria Strannegård

Hotels are what historian Catherine Cocks (2001) has called “semi-public spaces:” arenas on the threshold between public and private that offer privacy paired with exposure and mingling. Caroline Field Levander and Matthew Pratt Guterl explore this position of being in-between in Hotel Life, a study that sets out to discuss the various cultural functions of hotels. It revolves around themes such as capitalism, modernity, the modern self, freedom, self-creation, possibility, improvement, transformation, and reform. The hotel is described as an image of modern life, with transformation and mobility at its core: “a story about the making, refining, and managing of this modern self,” as the authors put it (2). However, given this focus on the individual, there is very little discussion of the hotel’s representative role as a status symbol and identity marker. Instead, the authors turn their gaze towards the deeper psychological doings of the hotel. The aim of the book is to describe the social and political function of the hotel in modern culture, exploring how it defines experiences of modernity, globalization, class, sex, race, and gender.

Initially, the book is described as an act of friendship between the two authors. This sets a zestful tone for the project, carried out mostly because it was fun to do. There is certainly a playful flow running through the text, which takes the reader along on a journey to guesthouses ranging from urban luxury hotels to single room occupancy hotels. In an overwhelming odyssey of cases, they describe hotels as everything from utopian dream worlds to sites for dysfunction and murder. However, the choice of particular hotel types is secondary to hotels at large: it is the very phenomena of hotels and their larger operational role in contemporary society that Levander and Guterl want to discuss.

One of the book’s virtues lies in the theoretically appealing and neat division of its contents into four core themes: space (public and private), time (beginnings and endings), scale (in a socioeconomic sense, about rich and poor), and affect (fortune and failure); a disposition that lifts the subject to an adequate level of abstraction. However, due to the lack of further explanations of what these themes actually contain, it does not really clarify much of what is going to be explored throughout the book. Which is, after all, congenial with the hotel itself: having entered the lobby, there is little to reveal what is in store for the visitor (or reader).

Although claiming a focus on contemporary North American hotels, the authors collect a multitude of illuminating examples from the rich history of hotels from the late 19th and first part of the 20th century. This approach creates a dense and vivid tapestry of sorts and reassures the reader, convincing them that the empirical material is solid, relevant, and trustworthy. It also paints a good backdrop of hotel life in the past, with the hotel being the symbol for a prosperous

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town, one of the pillars of society, and socially equalizing while at the same time reinforcing class barriers.

Levander and Guterl express themselves well and elaborately, even poetically at times. Their main thesis—which is also claimed in the subtitle of the book—is that the hotel is a place where anything can happen, where you can become whoever you want to be for a short while. And this is indeed the promise of modernity: you can always reinvent yourself. It is also one of the most embraced assumptions about hotels: they are described as blank canvases, gracing the visitor with the lightness of being unknown in an unknown environment. But is this really the case? Is not the interior agora of the hotel rather a place where you are stuck with your background, where all the things that have formed you come across with painful lucidity? The way you move, behave, complain, take up place; all of it reveals who you are and where you come from. Few places have the ability of making people so self-aware as a hotel lobby. The level of ease in a lobby is a highly class related issue, and the surroundings demand something of you: that you are cool, at ease, that you behave with self esteem and look like you know where you are going. A hotel lobby is not a place where you can hesitate, be awkward and creased. It demands of you to be sophisticated and cosmopolitan. On the other hand, that transformative skill is precisely what is being claimed by the fictional hotel. In popular culture, hotels are always arenas for the temporarily breaking of rules. This blurred line between the hotel as an idea and the hotel as physical reality is one of the objections I have against Hotel Life. In many of the discussions, Levander and Guterl seem to make rather little distinction between the cultural discourse of the hotel and the hotels of real life. The narrative fabric of myths, fiction, and lore in which the hotel is enwrapped is indeed an important empirical material that certainly needs to be thoroughly examined, but it also needs to be separated from what is actually going on in the hotel. After all, what happens most of the time at hotels is that you check in, go to sleep, have a shower, have breakfast, and then check out without much self-transformation and sexual exploration having occurred at all.

Unfortunately, the authors appear—in my view—a little too fascinated by hotel sleaze. In an endless parade of examples, they describe in deep detail the fornication, decay, and gore that have checked in at various hotels throughout history. This is the book’s biggest problem, and, I am afraid, what lingers with me after reading it, is that the authors give themselves away as a tad too excited about hotel harlots, “fantasies let loose,” and horror stories about psychopaths and violence, leaving this reader with an overwhelming mix of nausea, irritation, and frustration. Because what they, at the end of the day, say with all those examples is simply that hotels are multifaceted and complicated places where bad things sometimes happen, partly because of their semi-public character. Having said this, the myriad of provoking examples is also what makes Hotel Life an easily read and, I dare say, entertaining book.

The text also suffers from a stylistic tendency towards a recurrent and over-explicit juxtaposition of privileged and poor, high morals and depravation, and so on, apparently mainly for the dramatic effect that those sharp contrasts create. This approach runs the risk of being reduced to a dramaturgic technique instead of actually pointing to real and unfair social injustice. All together, the authors seem to be a little too fond of drama. Although I am normally the first to celebrate expressive writing, in this case I find it a little tedious. My last, marginal remark refers to the many repeated, identical argumentations (sometimes with the very same words and
phrases) that reoccur throughout the book. If you can bear with this, along with the objections mentioned above, then Hotel Life can be a fine read.

References Cited

Cocks, Catherine


Maria Strannegård holds a PhD in European Ethnology from Lund University. Her ethnographic and ethnological research on hotels has appeared in a number of publications, including the Annals of Tourism Research and in her dissertation, Hotell Speciell.

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