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## Book Review

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**Histories, Meanings and Representations of the Modern Hotel**

**by: Kevin J. James**

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**by Channel View Publications**

**St Nicholas House, 31-34 High Street, Bristol, BS1 2AW, UK, 153pp**

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The last two decades have witnessed a revival of interest in hotel studies, which are now characterised by critical scholarship and the production of theoretically sophisticated research. Kevin J. James has written an extremely appealing book, which addresses the modern hotel in various ways, skilfully building upon an expanding range of publications. It is a good contribution to the book series *Tourism and Cultural Change*, directed by Mike Robinson and published by Channel View. While James' work is anchored in the historiography of the urban western hotel, it goes well beyond that. *Histories, Meanings and Representations of the Modern Hotel* is a well-researched book that ties together various disciplines, and therefore not only is it relevant to historians, but to tourism, hotel and hospitality scholars, geographers, anthropologists, cultural studies and social sciences academics and various postgraduate students within these fields. Saying this, the book brings little new empirical evidence or first-hand analysis of archival materials, and is mostly a careful examination of how different scholars have approached the study of hotels.

The robust introductory chapter smoothly continues into the second chapter, named 'Hotel history: interpretations and approaches', and both intends to provide a framework for the discussion of the three key themes explored in the book:

- 1 the American
- 2 the colonial
- 3 the conflict-zone hotels.

This second chapter includes a great diversity of approaches to hotel history, which is its strength, pointing readers to multidisciplinary viewpoints. The chapter starts with a review of the birth of the modern hotel, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, both in Europe and America. It positions the hotel and distinct forms of commercial accommodation vis-à-vis the organisation of capital, transport and mobility systems development and the growth of political and commercial networks. In discussing the scale, location and technology changes produced by the modern hotel, James introduces readers to the emergence of the grand hotel and its culture, and to the grand hotel dissemination into various colonial territories. The chapter moves on to the progressive

innovations brought by the US modern hotel, to the emergence of motels, to a debate on how hotels interacted with the concept of 'home', blurring the public and the private and the notions of home and away. An important introduction is then made to the ways in which hotels are sites of transgression, helpfully conceptualised through notions of liminality and alterity, in respect to behaviours of both staff and guests. Lastly, I would highlight the opportune focus on critical scholarship of hotel design and construction history that James puts forward, encouraging a relational analysis which may include approaches from aesthetics, architects and buildings biographies, financing processes, among others themes.

Chapter 3, entitled 'The American hotel', engages with the revolutionary way in which the New World developed the modern hotel. Built from the standpoint that the US hotels have a more distinct trajectory than their European counterparts, initially, James returns to the question of the relationship of the hotel with home during the late 19th century, and the implications of 'living in hotels'. He then reviews work that connects the US hotel with the 19th century political and economic contexts of the country. Gendered spaces, bastions of bourgeois public culture, sites structured along racial lines, the US hotel was "shaped by and shaped, uneven participation in civic life" (p.68). The chapter then discusses how technology, design and managerial innovations have been regarded as central to the US hotel, in the quest for adaptation to the pressures of modern life. It ends with some interesting remarks on the internationalisation of the US hotel, notably in the post-World War II era, at first in places such as the Philippines and Panama, and later throughout the world. James explains how US multinational corporation hegemony, mirrored in the development of companies like the Hilton Hotel International, Inc. or the Intercontinental Hotel Corporation, not only illustrated the country's hospitality sector dominance and benchmark setting, but also announced the US new geopolitical power relations.

Chapter 4, named 'The colonial hotel', turns to (mostly) European hotels, and discusses how they were keys to the growth of transnational imperial commercial networks, flows of people and the circulation of capital. For some commentators, the focus is on the importance of these western institutions in the social and economic environment of cities and colonies. For others, the emphasis should lie in the ways in which the colonial hotel was a site of mediation, contest and contact. The discussion is interspersed with examples from Egypt, Jerusalem, Istanbul, Southern Rhodesia, Saigon, Singapore and others, built upon the work of academics such as Brian McLaren, Ruth Craggs, Maurizio Peleggi, Srilata Ravia or Daniel Goh.

Chapter 5, entitled 'The wartime hotel', focuses on the idea that hotels are sites of great strategic value, therefore, often being key players in war and violence, both materially and symbolically. In different ways, and as 'soft targets', hotels' regular functioning has been disrupted by war and their spaces reused and changed. Acknowledging how the hotel has assumed great relevance in the context of modern terrorism and urban guerrilla warfare, the chapter discusses how historically, at specific times and places – in theatres of war but also in locations away from conflict in wartime (hotels in neutral countries and post-war political negotiations in hotels) – hotels have been integral parts in the prosecution of conflicts. They were often requested to accommodate the apparatus of the state, used by soldiers – hotels being transformed in fortified spaces resembling barracks – adapted as hospitals or serving to host refugees. James skilfully travels through historical accounts related to the uprisings in Dublin, and

through descriptions of Beirut and Sarajevo, to illustrate how hotels participated in civil breakdowns.

The book ends with a chapter that points at future research agendas. The discussion of these avenues is overly condensed, as James merely pinpoints ideas or briefly indicates some references. The chapter lacks a common thread, not doing justice to the previous pages. Overall, the book presents a captivating analysis, profusely illustrated with interesting hotel photographs drawn from a wide range of archives and sources. Possibly, the main strength of James' work is the ability to connect multiple research conducted on hotels by a large group of academics from different disciplines, and to present three different but connected narratives of the modern hotel in the modern and contemporary world. *Histories, Meanings and Representations of the Modern Hotel* is a very pleasant read and speaks to a broad range of theoretical debates and scholarship, building a comprehensive and multifaceted view of the modern hotel. The book will appeal broadly, from practitioners who read scholarly work, to researchers and graduate students in various disciplines.