

**Molly W. Berger.** *Hotel Dreams: Luxury, Technology, and Urban Ambition in America, 1829-1929.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 328 pp. \$34.95, paperback, ISBN 978-1-4214-1992-3.



**Reviewed by** Sean Seyer

**Published on** H-USA (August, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Donna Sinclair (Central Michigan University)

In this extensively researched and well-written study, Molly W. Berger analyzes the emergence of the American luxury hotel in the antebellum period and its continued development throughout the nineteenth century to the onset of the Great Depression. Over the course of eight chapters, she uses in-depth biographical histories of specific establishments—most notably the Tremont House (Boston, 1829), the Continental (Philadelphia, 1860), the Palace Hotel (San Francisco, 1875), the first Waldorf-Astoria (New York, 1893 and 1897), and the Stevens Hotel (Chicago, 1927)—to illustrate how luxury hotels constituted “an important urban venue for sorting out competing political, economic, social, and cultural ideas” (p. 2).

Berger shows how luxury hotels embodied, contested, and reconstituted social norms. The tension “between elite sovereignty and egalitarian entitlement” embedded within luxury hotels elevated them from a place of mere lodging to a central arena where Americans grappled with evolving conceptions of republican equality in an

emerging and increasingly complex capitalist system (p. 2). On their surface, luxury hotels catered to a particular clientele. Financially supported by a city’s elite to meet their perceived needs, luxury hotels provided an extravagant setting to transact business, mingle with other members of high society, and engage in ostentatious pageantry before the lower classes. But as businesses, these “palaces of the public” catered to anyone who could afford the bill (and looked the part) (p. 5). From the very beginning of the luxury hotel industry, this right of access based on the immediate possession of cash rather than family name or position exemplified the power of wealth to undermine old world social distinctions. Because quantifiable statistics provided the primary means of comparison among luxury hotels, their ever-growing size—from the 170 rooms of Boston’s Tremont House to the 2,818 rooms of Chicago’s Stevens Hotel—caused an increased reliance on middle-class patronage to turn a profit. The result was a redefinition of the very concept of luxury in the United States, one that emphasized a lev-

el of quality in service and surroundings rather than exclusivity.

The physicality of luxury hotels and the transient nature of their clientele also fostered a reimagining of societal norms among the sexes. True to Victorian sensibilities, luxury hotels included separate dining and recreational areas for men and women throughout the majority of the nineteenth century. But, as concerned social commentators observed, the creation of new courtship venues along with private spaces for secluded rendezvous allowed a new level of discretion among strangers. Some feared that the liberation of women from traditional housekeeping duties made possible by long-term hotel living and the emphasis on splendor and public displays of consumption “worked against the prescriptions for modesty and privacy that characterized domestic ideology” (p. 126). While many heralded the luxury hotel as the prime example of a burgeoning American culture, others saw it as a threat to the very foundations of the family.

As decidedly urban institutions, luxury hotels had a unique relationship with the surrounding city. As sites of an emerging industrial cosmopolitanism, they served as boosters for their cities as well as entrepôts for outside concepts of refinement. From the Tremont House to the Palace Hotel, entrepreneurs promoted their projects to investors and citizens as a matter of civic pride that would provide tangible economic, social, and cultural benefits. The existence of a massive luxury hotel showed that a city had attained, or aspired to, a certain level of success and prosperity. A first-class city required a first-class hotel, and competition among cities for the largest and most extravagant mirrored the cathedral craze of the Middle Ages.[1]

A historian of technology, Berger is at her best when analyzing luxury hotels as technological systems and sites of technological exposure. With their massive size, scale of operation, and steady inclusion of emerging infrastructure systems

(plumbing, telephonic, electrical systems, etc.), luxury hotels became “a city within a city” that came to rival bridges and railroads as expressions of the American technological sublime (p. 6). Just as the movie theater later shaped public definitions of air conditioning, the steady incorporation of new technologies into luxury hotels contributed to the development of what Berger terms “technological luxury,” a conflation of technological adoption with the good life that “drove the size, cost, and development of new hotels for one hundred years” (pp. 3, 27).[2] The adoption of new technologies as a defining characteristic of luxury hotels resulted not only in changes to their physical structure (i.e., the elevator and the abandonment of a grand staircase), but also in an increasing reliance on “measureable standards” as a judge of quality that ensured the latest and greatest hotel would not hold that title for long (p. 3). Ellsworth M. Statler’s application of Fordist principles to hotel design and operation in the first decades of the twentieth century standardized the hotel experience, established efficiency as an important component in the concept of luxury, and made stays at one of his seven hotels a familiar, comforting, and affordable experience.

Historians of American history, urban history, and the history of technology will find much of value in *Hotel Dreams*. Although the cataloguing of each hotel’s statistical data and continued claims of their unprecedented scale become tedious at times, Berger effectively uses luxury hotels as a mean to analyze larger issues central to the American experience in a period of rapid social, economic, and technological change.

#### Notes

[1]. Arnold Pacey, *The Maze of Ingenuity: Ideas and the Development of Technology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974, 1992).

[2]. Gail Coper, *Air Conditioning America: Engineers and the Controlled Environment, 1900-1960* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa>

**Citation:** Sean Seyer. Review of Berger, Molly W. *Hotel Dreams: Luxury, Technology, and Urban Ambition in America, 1829-1929*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. August, 2017.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47536>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.