

Robert A. Davidson
The Hotel: Occupied Space

Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2018, 224 pp.

Associated equally with the buzzing of a seedy neon sign as it is with the glamour of the Ritz, the modern hotel is a study in contrasts that Robert Davidson, in his new book *The Hotel: Occupied Space* (2018) thoroughly explores as valuable case studies for understanding contemporary cosmopolitanism and globalization. Take, for example, that during the day hotel rooms are lethargic and empty while at night they become lived-in spaces, as intimate and alive as a home. Furthermore, while they provide travelers with intimate personal space, they are also the conduits of worldwide connectivity, what Davidson terms “global conduct” or the “movement of goods and people, behavior, styles and aesthetics” (3) across the planet.

This dialectic – between intimacy and globalization - is the backdrop against which he defines his concept of occupancy, a state of being unique to modernity expressed alongside the equation “space over time” (4), that anchors his research of representations of the hotel across a wide array of 20th century and contemporary media. Conceived in contrast to the Heideggerian notion of dwelling, and distinct from both the family dynamics that characterize the home and the cultural conventions that govern public spaces, occupancy serves as a useful tool not only for describing the modern subject’s relationship to this multipotent built environment, but also as one of the main conditions that inspire its representation by artists and journalists.

It is fitting, then, that the book is divided into two main parts, *The Realm of the Imagination* and *The Built Environment*. In the first part, the highly mutable concept of occupancy carries forward Siegfried Kracauer’s observation that denizens of the liminal space of the hotel

lobby, especially as represented in the German detective novel, become “tensionless”. While the critic of early mass culture posits the space as a “negative church”, a place for those “who neither seek nor find the one who is always sought” (5), Davidson contends that the hotel exerts a positive force through provision of a “secular sanctuary” (6), fostering a sense of temporal decompression experienced by the traveller for whom time and space are effectively condensed in the midst of increasingly fast modern travel. It is precisely the artist’s perception of an interaction with the built environment as distinct from hurriedness, pressure, or tension that the book’s first chapter, *The Pictorial Hotel*, seeks to explore through an analysis of several of Edward Hopper’s most famous paintings. Notably, 1931’s *Hotel Room* is read as a case study for the potential of the modern subject to engage in “détente” (20) with their surrounding built environment. Davidson upholds the celebrated painting as the first appearance on canvas of a subject incarnating a state of occupancy, distinct from a notion of ennui or the supposed alienation inherent to modern metropolitan existence critiqued by the Kracauer.

It should be noted that the defining question of the painting, “is the subject coming or going?” is analogous to the ambiguity that so perturbs the great German critic in his reflections on the alienation of modern urban life. While this negative attitude toward the hotel with which Davidson contends is steeped in a suspicion of the increasing spectacularization of modern culture, positing the hotel as a space for empty performances, Davidson turns his attention to journalism and reconfigures the performative potential of the hotel as a particular source of intrigue through an analysis of photographs of the military occupation of the Habana Libre hotel, a truly transnational space that functioned as a staging ground of both capitalist and socialist revolution. The second chapter, *The Cinematic Hotel*, further explores the performative potential of the hotel as analyses of films ranging from *El hotel eléctrico* (de Chomón, 1905) to Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003) highlight the space’s facilitation of meetings of disparate people. A particularly detailed study of Godard’s *Vivre sa vie* (1962) allows for a reflection on prostitution and the mutation of the equation of occupancy that gives extra weight to the exchange of money for time and the

infrastructure of hospitality that characterizes the contractual nature of the hotel. Throughout, Davidson effectively explores how the medium of the moving picture can inform our understanding of the inherent temporal element of the equation of occupancy, while also contributing to a naturalization of how we experience it in the hotel space itself, something perhaps less effective with non time-based media. This nuances what another book that also focuses on artists' and cinematographers' representations of urban spaces, Vincenzo Trione's *Effetto Città* (Bompiani, 2014), calls the difference between "cities of situations" rather than "cities of space", that can be used to distinguish the modern metropolis since it is no longer governed by geometrical perspective as cities were in the past, but rather now require flexibility from their inhabitants to accommodate their constant change. Indeed, both thinkers suggest that it is not so much the spatial axis, but the temporal one, that accounts for the connectedness of contemporary cosmopolitan experience.

As we turn to the built environment in the second half of the book, the performative aspect required of the hotel is pushed to its extreme and the concept of occupancy takes on a political urgency through the distinction between travel by choice and forced travel, or displacement. In Chapter Three: *The Wartime Hotel* Davidson explores how hotels have functioned as sanctuaries for members of the media during prolonged armed conflicts. These are travellers by choice who have been pinned down by circumstance, whose journalistic gaze, Davidson posits, resembles in a jarring fashion that of the sniper in its negotiation of the built environment. He contends that these two vectors in fact collided in a tragedy that changed the wartime hotel forever, namely the direct strike by American forces on the Hotel Palestine during the Battle of Baghdad that effectively ended what had previously been the wartime hotel's "real-world symbolic status as a secular sanctuary" (90), a site where reporters could gather in relative safety and disseminate information. The sophisticated and provocative comparison between the gaze of the tourist and that of the wartime sniper is set up brilliantly by an analysis of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Through his reading of the novel, Davidson highlights Orwell's simultaneous

identities as sniper, victim of a sniper's bullet, and tourist in wartime Barcelona, which, though distinct from one another, share a characteristic increased awareness of the surrounding built environment, whether out of volition or vital necessity.

Chapter Four, *The Displacement Hotel*, considers occupancy's validity in the context of national borders and inflections of state power. Through an analysis of representations of detention centers for migrants and refugees, people for whom travel is undertaken unwillingly or under duress, Davidson explores the tension between private and public spaces and the inversion of occupancy's decompression effect. Indeed, perhaps no one is as in need of the privacy that hotel rooms afford voluntary travellers as the migrant who is shoved in the public eye, suddenly the subject of political debate in the most vulnerable of times. For these travellers, the hotel room of the detention hotel is mutated into a cell, and the equation of occupancy inverted by the migrant's impeded free movement. To understand this dynamic, Davidson includes comparisons between representations of refugee camps to those of hotels, considering works such as the 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda* to further nuance this intersection of intimacy and globalization. As he emphasizes, however, in keeping with the multifaceted nature of the hotel, its function as a place of refuge can still be found alongside this mutated form. The chapter ends with an analysis of the CBC radio documentary *Hotel Limbo* (2016), which chronicles Toronto's Plaza Hotel's role in welcoming Syrian refugees to Canada and the surrounding public reaction.

It should be noted that this last example hints at the unique perspective that Davidson, as a Canadian expert on Catalan modernism, brings to the topic at hand. His interest in modern urban spaces can be traced back to his first monograph, *Jazz Age Barcelona* (University of Toronto Press, 2009). While jazz music was indeed the sound of the modern city during *els felços vint*, today, it could very well be considered that of tourists' suitcases rolling down the paved streets as the Catalan capital finds itself at the heart of heated debate about the radically changing hospitality industry in the globalized sharing economy. In a diachronic way, Davidson frames this situation through an

interpretation of the transatlantic potential of Catalan *modernisme* and its desire to overcome its peripheral condition as the book's conclusion, *Hotel Attraction*, focuses on an illustration that fittingly encapsulates the intersection of the built environment and the realm of the imagination: a sketch by one of Antoni's Gaudí's disciples of a hotel intended to be built in New York that was falsely attributed to the master architect himself.

In concluding as such, Davidson makes an original contribution to a growing body of scholarship seeking to remedy the relative lack of study on what his introduction titles *the* overlooked space in studies of Modernism. Distinct from the exhaustive survey of scholarship on the history of the hotel found in Kevin J. James' *Histories, Meanings and Representations of the Modern Hotel* (Channel View Publications, 2018), its assemblage of sources unique to Davidson's perspective and its original articulation of the concept of occupancy makes *The Hotel: Occupied Space* a topical study that, while broad in scope, is refreshingly clear and accessible to anyone interested in our evolving relationship with the built environment in the age of global conduct.

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