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"Room for the night"

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HOW HOTELS BECAME
24-HOUR PAMPER PALACES



ROOM FOR THE NIGHT

By Williston Dye AIA

From the very beginning, hotels have successfully provided enticements to travelers, new features to satisfy our desires and whims — often whether we knew we had them or not. And while the history of the hotel has had many defining evolutionary moments, the single best idea hotel operators ever had, bar none, was when they simply threw out the clock — in other words, when they decided hotels should become 24-hour pamper palaces.

OK, so it didn't happen in one single *aha!* night. It was a slow, gradual process that took thousands of years. And it went something like this:

The earliest hotel operators owned modest accommodations that provided ancient travelers-by-day a safe shelter to sleep at night. The very first guests were traders plying the ancient trade routes, but as the inevitable military incursions put lots of people on roads across the Middle East and Asia, post houses and caravansaries, as they were called, sprang up. (These travelers were true road warriors.) Located every 25 to 40 miles along major routes, these post houses, both simple and palatial, became important anchors for the development of villages and towns. For the first time, the location of

PHOTO: CORBIS.

Burj Al Arab Hotel, Dubai.
Architect: W.S. Atkins & Partners

accommodations influenced community settlement and place-making. During the years of Roman rule and into the Dark Ages accommodations were minimal, efficient, and sparse. Monasteries also often served as shelter; the religious motives of medieval pilgrimages required only the most spartan of resting places.

Social change and broader formal education brought about the next evolution: the cozy wayside inn and tavern of Chaucer's *Canterbury* and Glastonbury. Well-furnished guest rooms (even if they were often shared with strangers), libations, sustenance, and celebration were quickly associated with the sturdy, well-detailed, and easily identifiable buildings that proliferated across the countryside. The inn became the social hub of the town. Minus the cockfighting, it was the progenitor of today's hotels.

Although the first "hotel" in this country, the City Hotel on Broadway in New York, was built in 1794, the beginnings of the boom in hotels as we know them occurred in the 1820s, corresponding with economic growth and, especially, better roads and conveyances. Travel had become a much more enjoyable, comfortable experience, and as a logical evolution of the inn, the urban hotel — built for longer stays and to accommodate larger numbers of guests — became a base for visitors to explore the city and conduct business. In contrast to the old post houses, the attractions of the place now established the need for accommodations. In *New Hotels for Global Nomads*, Donald Albrecht notes

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that Boston's Tremont House, which opened in 1829, became the model for the modern urban hotel. It certainly set the precedent for offering new technologies and new services to attract guests: it introduced locks on guest-room doors, in-room washbowls, complimentary soaps, and an à la carte menu. But other hoteliers were no slouches: the City Hotel in Baltimore was the first to use gas light, and Holt's Hotel in New York later was the first to offer a service elevator.

It was also during the 1820s that real-estate developers, especially in New York, began to see the hotel as an attractive investment and economic stimulus. The City Hotel had sparked a hotel boom along Broadway, part of a decades-long transition from fashionable residences to "trade." (The New York Public Library documents this transition in its online exhibition, *Moving Uptown*.) But it was John Jacob Astor's luxury Astor House that really generated excitement when it opened in 1836, with its indoor carpeting, walnut interiors, and excellent cuisine. The outrageous two-dollar-a-night room

tariff conveyed a very clear message to the public: *You can't afford it!* The hotel became one of the first exclusive hot-spots for the wealthy and the elite: businessmen, politicians, artists, actors, and celebrities. Thanks to the paparazzi of the day — the hyperactive New York City press — the public's fascination with hotels was ignited.

By now, hotels had begun to offer something new in the fabric of the city: a social center that was accessible to the public — and that offered a new kind of urban nightlife. Social functions found a place outside the domain of the private home or club and, in the process,



High-school girls gather for a dance at a hotel, circa 1950s.

became a form of public spectacle. Soon, the hotel-as-community-center would cater to weddings, charity events, political gatherings, business meetings and, of course, games of chance. As hotel operators realized that dining could be an attraction in itself, they competed to offer the finest cuisine, attracting city dwellers as well as hotel guests.

The development of the railroad system only accelerated the hotel boom. Between 1850 and 1854, 19 new hotels were built on Broadway. Elsewhere, railroads contributed to the rise of the destination resort hotel, often located in remote, naturally beautiful locations. But it was the luxury city hotel that brought a new dynamic of sophistication, style, and pride to the city. As the Industrial Revolution brought increased personal wealth toward the end of the century, the emerging hotel industry responded with new levels of service, comfort, and hospitality. Hoteliers and restaurateurs such as César Ritz, Eduard Sacher, and George Auguste Escoffier themselves became celebrities. The years

between 1890 and 1910 saw the construction of an astonishing number of extraordinary luxury hotels, many still among the most successful hotels in the world, such as the Paris Ritz (1898), the Savoy in London (1889), the Copley Plaza in Boston (1912), the Waldorf-Astoria in New York (1893, rebuilt 1931), and the Willard in Washington, DC (1904).

In the 20th century, three specific factors revolutionized what was to become known as the hospitality industry: the Three M's —

Resorts in the Caribbean and Hawaii were suddenly economically feasible. Howard Johnson and Holiday Inn responded to postwar highway construction with chains of motels, which offered standardized, familiar comfort. J.W. Marriott opened the first “motor hotel” next to the airport in Washington, DC, containing all the amenities of a full-service hotel with the appeal of the motel’s street-level access to rooms.

The third M came courtesy of the Marketing department. The 1980s — a period of prosperous economic circumstances —



Exterior of Manhattan’s Astor Hotel and the lounge at Dusseldorf’s Hof Hotel, circa 1950s.

Money (1920s), Mass Transportation (1950s), and Marketing (1980s). In Boston, the economic prosperity of the ’20s brought the Ritz Carlton in Boston (now the Taj Boston) and the Statler (now the Park Plaza). As the industry matured, it also became more professional. The Cornell Hotel School was established in 1922. Hotel owners hired specialty architects, as the component functions and management of hotels were by now numerous, complex, and costly. Among the best known was the firm Schultz and Weaver, a partnership formed by an architect and a socially-connected real-estate developer, whose work included the Waldorf-Astoria, the Pierre, the Park-Lane, and the Sherry-Netherland in New York; the Breakers in Palm Beach; and the Biltmore hotels in Los Angeles and Miami.

The second M, Mass Transportation, meant the automobile and the airplane, which now provided easy, quick access anywhere around the world. As had the railroads a century before, the highways and the airplanes created new demand for lodging.

created the evolution, strategic refinement, and invention of over 40 hotel typologies — new business models such as the extended-stay hotel, the business hotel, and time-share ownership. The ease and affordability of business travel and the relative wealth of baby boomers (and their parents) with the desire to see the world created a windfall for hotel chains and developers alike. Hyatt reintroduced the grand hotel atrium in many cities around the United States, fulfilling a desire for spectacular visual experiences. Marriott International separated what was now known as the hotel “product” into market tiers: luxury, full service, and limited or “select” service, thus maintaining control of the market while also controlling business factors such as locations, quality, design, and management. Marketing departments introduced guest surveys and focus groups to determine functional needs and amenities.

The ’80s also saw new proponents of hotels: city planners, urban designers, and politicians who saw hotels as cornerstones

of urban economic development and an opportunity to build on the momentum of the back-to-the-city trend that had begun in the '70s with projects such as Boston's Quincy Market and the Baltimore Inner Harbor. Hotels were key to the increasing emphasis on tourism as a "clean industry," which also spawned the rise in convention and conference centers. Hotels lured both out-of-towners with money to spend and elusive suburbanites drawn by excellent restaurants as well as cultural and social events. Hotels brought prestige and economic activity, and served as the underpinning of the 24-hour (or at least 18-hour) city that increasingly was seen as the measure of urban vitality. As had the post houses of the ancient trade routes, hotels once again were seen as catalysts for place-making.

But with the rising influence of marketing, the selling of formula-driven consistency and value dramatically standardized the hotel industry. Design quality and contextualism, as well as the regionalism that had previously influenced everything from architecture to hotel menus, was rendered almost extinct. A predictable backlash occurred in the following decade, a renaissance of historic inns and classic urban hotels as well as new developments such as boutique hotels and eco-hotels.

Significantly, hoteliers also learned to distinguish their products from the competition with ever-increasing levels of luxe. The pamper palace was born. The minibar, in-room rental movies, and complimentary shampoo were no longer enough.

Internet access for today's road warriors, exercise rooms, pools, and full-service spas — many available to the public — have become *de rigeur*. Hotel restaurants featuring celebrity chefs are promoted energetically. Thread-count, luxe bathrooms, and even accommodations for the equally pampered pooch are part of the package. And significantly, hotels have pursued mixed-use strategies, either through adjacent uses such as movie theaters and shopping, or through ownership structures, such as the condo-hotel and jointly developed condominiums with full access to hotel services such as housekeeping and room service (in Boston, the Heritage on the Common, Millennium tower, and the upcoming Mandarin Oriental).

The forces that led to the development of hotels over the centuries are still at play today — economics, culture, transportation, politics, and pleasure-seeking — and those forces are more powerful than ever. Over 1,000 hotels of all types opened around the world just last year. As the world changes, so too will the hospitality industry. For now, it seems that the future of hotel development is in the hands of the 24-hour pleasure-seeker — and there is at least a little of that person in all of us. ■

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