

Traveling to the Architecture of Femininity and Fear

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"Solo female travelers are floored by the welcome they're getting at some hotels."¹

The media, via the travel industry, is alerting us to the fact that women are increasingly traveling solo and that our "special needs" are finally being served in urban hotels. For example, a recent national newspaper article informed readers of the opportunities available for individual women travelers to reserve rooms at hotels offering "women-only" floors.² Although the perception of safety and security is seemingly the concept driving such a consumer offering, the hotel industry is taking the opportunity to include other female-directed amenities. Suites filled with more bath products and an array of fashion magazines are an example of what several hotel chains include in their single and woman-only packages .

With this essay, I take a critical look at how gender boundaries are constructed and/or reified via representations from the tourist industry in the use of the architecture in urban hotels. The rhetoric and representations of major hotel chains exposes how, what they propose as a supportive architecture for women, actually constricts the movement of women in the city by reinforcing the threat of crime.

THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

With this paper I conduct a content and discursive analysis of US based hotel chain descriptions of their woman-only floors targeted at solo women travelers. Using a framework that makes gender central, I problematize how women's safety from crime and gender are framed by the corporate travel industry. Their representations of women are important to analyze, I will contend in the conclusion of this paper, as the mythology surrounding travel and crime disproportionately affect women and work to limit our use of cities. Further, the reification of traditional femininity also helps maintain asymmetric gendered norms and expectations for women as potential victims.

WHAT IS GENDER?

It is important here to set the terminology used in this paper. Sociologists and gender scholars speak both of "sex" and "gender" differentiation: the former when biological sex or the "sex category" into which people are placed at birth is the *basis* for classification and differential treatment; the later to refers to the *result* of that differential treatment.³ The process of *converting the sex category into gender* is a social one. That is, most differences that are assumed to distinguish the sexes are socially created. We have a innumerable processes, from naming (Jane vs. John) to color coding (pink vs. blue) to sex segregated work (structural engineers vs. interior decorators) that signify difference and construct a feminine or masculine expectation. The gender attribution process assumes dimorphism and seeks evidence of it to justify classifying people as male and female and treating them unequally.⁴ This paper examines how those differences are reproduced in the tourist industry via corporate hotel chains in large cities. I work from the assumption that architecture is political, in that consuming it via the urban hotel, is inherently about power relations.

THE HOTELS' REPRESENTATION OF SAFETY FROM CRIME

In a series of press releases, major corporate hotels with properties in most US cities and Western Europe, announced that they are responding to women's demands for a "safer service."⁵ They have met this consumer mandate with a series of services and architectural arrangements that are deployed with the intention of making women feel that precautions are taken to avoid putting them in harms way. For example, at a high rise London hotel, women can check in at a "private lobby area" where their luggage is delivered to their rooms on the 22nd floor, in what they call a "man-free zone," by a bell-girl. We are told that bedroom doors have "more secure locks and larger spyholes." Lifts within the hotel cannot be operated except by keys given *only to registered guests of the particular*

floor. If the female guest orders room service, it is delivered by a female member of the hotel staff.

Offerings at other London hotels ensure a woman's security from the time she enters the city: "Businesswomen have the assurance of a guaranteed 24 hour airport transfer to and from the Hotel. The Hotel also offers ladies a private limousine service that collects guests from evening restaurant or theatre locations that are likely to cause inconvenience, or disconcerting feelings of safety, in hailing a cab in the late evening." The hotel claims to offer, "a safe secure environment from which women can arrive and depart from meetings at any time."⁶

Similarly, a US hotel in Washington DC that makes "safety and security a top priority for women traveling alone," is expanding its women-only offering to two floors of the hotel. They maintain that the demand from female guests for segregation from men is increasing.⁷

THE HOTEL'S REPRESENTATION OF FEMINITY

The hotels offering a safer environment for women business travelers are also supplying products and services for what they perceive to be society's expectations for the typical female guest who is traveling on business. An architect/interior designer was consulted and the floor was modified for women with "rooms decorated in more feminine style(s)."⁸ The bathroom counters are more spacious. Rather than a just one room with a bed, they have portioned off a sitting area where women may conduct business in a suite setting. A London hotel reports that, "The 64 seat...Restaurant and Bar, with attractive interior design, situated on the ground floor..., offers women a tastefully feminine light and airy venue in which to conduct informal meetings and appointments."

The hotels are offering other female-specific services that meet what they perceive to be the single woman traveler's every need. She may take advantage of room service and lobby restaurants with "reduced calorie or lite meals." Available for a "private consultation and assessment" is a personal trainer in the hotel health clubs who understands the exercise needs of the female traveler. One hotel reminds women that a "blow dry or manicure in the beauty salon situated in the lobby of the hotel is available to businesswomen to assist in personal grooming for important meetings." Yet another hotel offers shorter bathrobes and bath salts that are ph balanced for women. A hotel in London publicizes, "For convenience, (the hotel) guarantees a return of within 4 hours on laundry and dry cleaning services required for those last minute functions and meetings. And an independent personal shopper can be made available, on request to the concierge desk, to deliver a variety of clothing items suitable for all occasions that may arise unexpectedly."⁹

All of the hotels that offer women-only or "man-free zones" do so at an additional room rate that is typically about one hundred dollars more than their business-room expenditure. One hotel reported that a single-room occupancy on their all female floor begins at \$320.00 per night. That rate is \$100.00 more than on a "mixed floor."

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GENDERED USE OF SPACE: CONSTRUCTING FEAR

Clearly, the preconditions for generating women-only hotel floors is a society that: (1) views women as the primary targets of crimes to-the-person; (2) those crimes are carried out by men who are strangers to them; and (3) most of the crimes happen to women in cities. Popular culture and the mass media reproduce such images. Movies and television programs in the US often have as their basis women in perilous and life threatening situations at the hands of unknown men.¹⁰ The idea that a shadowy figure is lurking around the next corner of the city, waiting to assault the random woman who mistakenly walks by, is a common image and then fear shared by women. But what is the reality of crime in the city?

Crime statistics *do* report that women are the disproportionate victims of assault. Exploring the extent of violence against women in the general population is important in that it consistently demonstrates how widespread it is. However, the actuality of such crime is much different than the picture painted in popular culture. Men known to women, not the vilified strangers of criminological conceptualization, are the greatest threat to women's safety. Over nine out of ten female victims of assault (homicide, rape, and physical battering) were victimized by men that they know as intimates, co-workers, biological relatives, neighbors, classmates, friends of the family, or other such personal connections.¹¹ There are clearly two needs, one that exposes the spate of domestic and acquaintance violence against women and the other that exposes the popular culture misconception about stranger violence against women in the city.

Ironically, crime prevention advice targets women's use of public space. Despite over 20 years of sustained campaigning, feminist work has not shifted attention in criminology away from thinking about the danger of strangers.¹² We are still told to be careful when walking on the streets at night, when checking into our out-of-town hotel, or hailing a cab. Highly publicized cases of random murder against middle-class women have given rise to media commentary that 'no woman alone is safe in public.' Observations from feminist researchers and commentators, such as Caputi, Cameron, and Frazer, who argue that domestic and acquaintance violence are not just unfortunate individual events but part of systemic violence against women, are not to be found in these public comments.¹³ While the evidence that we have much more to fear in our homes is

overwhelming; the implications about such danger are denied. The commonly held belief is that strangers hurt women; the reality is that most violence against women is perpetrated by the men that we know.

The perceived necessity of women-only hotel floors as a means to thwart violence against women has other implications for men, cities and social class/race. The first implication is that all men not known to women are potential assailants. Surely, this portrayal of maleness and masculinity is damaging to society and constricting to individual men as it casts narrowly defined roles for men as tough guys or unfeeling louts at best, and rapists or murderers at worst.¹⁴

The second implication is for cities. There is mounting evidence that women lead more restricted lives and use greater caution when out in public in urban places.¹⁵ Cities, like men, are cast as the objects of fear and trepidation. Researchers find that if given choices, middle class women will not travel to cities "alone."¹⁶ In business situations where travel is required the perception of impending crime in cities finds women turning down job opportunities that involve travel.¹⁷ Surely, the impact of promoting and publicizing violence against women in cities must be acknowledged as a collective harm against all women.

The third implication is for social class and race inequality. The hotel industry is reinforcing these commonly held fears and they are playing upon them for profit. Although statistics show that women earn less annual income than men and still make proportionally less than their male counterparts for the same work, we are paying more to secure our safety in the hotel.¹⁸ The social class implications are many. Wealthier women can pay the higher rates to secure their perception of safety, while working class women act as their "bell-girls" and room-service clerks. Apparently, the hotel is not as concerned for the safety of the service-class women as they negotiate the "mixed" terrain of the hotel elevators and service areas.¹⁹ Aggregate statistics show that women of color are over-represented in the service industries and that predominantly white women are in white collar business industries.²⁰ Our hotels are clearly stratified by race and social class as women-only floors are segregating female guests from men and from other women.

Thus, raising the potential of victimization because one is a woman may also raise a form of dubious biological determinism: women, accordingly, are "natural" victims. Reconceptualizing danger means reconceptualizing situations that jeopardize women's lives, and it demands that we reexamine what constitutes real crime to most female victims of violence. The greatest threat to women is within personal relationships, as feminist research has emphasized the instrumental impact of serial, intentional, and direct violence by men on women in domestic settings.²¹

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GENDERED USE OF SPACE: CONSTRUCTING THE FEMININE

As formulated in the introduction, gender is a social construction. We are not born knowing that men are "aggressors" while women are potential victims. The power of gender characterization comes partially from the larger society coding that differences are biologically determined, and are thus natural. These images of masculinity and femininity must be constructed and reconstructed and studying such representations, or challenges to these representations, is a large part of the scholarship in gender studies. To that end, I contend the hotel industry is in the gender boundary making and gender reification business as well.

Attractiveness and attention to appearance are primary characteristics that are used to measure women in our society. Many women report that they receive more positive cultural reinforcement for being attractive (in the traditional way) than for their achievements. For white middle-class or upper-class women, especially, the social norm of thinness is a heavy burden. Eating disorders and negative body images are pervasive. Advertisements and the mass media are the purveyors of accepted notions of feminine appearance.²² The corporate hotel chains are supporting this traditional notion of feminine attractiveness and attention to appearance for women guests they imagine as high-powered executives. Providing women with information regarding their low calorie menus and personal fitness trainers reinforces the notion that women should be uniquely interested in their own weight. Giving women more bathroom counter space than men is ensuring a place for their cosmetics. Make-up and other grooming toiletries play into this beauty mythology. Placing fashion magazines in their rooms and directing them to the beauty salon for assistance in "personal grooming for important meetings" reinforces the notion that women should be especially concerned about beauty and fashion.

CONCLUSION

This sort of gender boundary production is effective. Substitute the above amenities for male solo travelers and it almost makes us laugh. Men traveling on business are provided data ports and fax machines. Can we imagine a hotel promoting its masculine décor and male-only floors for individual or single men travelers? It is unthinkable.

Understanding the relationship between cultural ideologies and social practices, particularly as they work to restrict women's lives, is crucial in working toward a more equitable world. By reproducing gendered expectations that paint men as perpetrators and women as victims of crime, it underpins how freely men and how carefully women maneuver the cities in which they travel. Men feel entitled to the streets and to simply any

room in the hotel. Women are told to constantly be alert, to hold our keys in our hands as we walk toward our rental cars, to not put the room service breakfast notice out if it reports "one room guest," to block our hotel door open while we search our rooms for infiltrators, to never say in public that we are traveling alone (always say that our husbands are joining us,) to wear wedding bands while traveling, to call the front desk and ask if they have sent a maid before letting any worker in the room, to never open our hotel room drapes, and so on.²³ The travel tips for women in cities are unlimited, while the enjoyment of the city is very much limited by such self-conscious fear of predators.

By physically segregating women from "mixed" encounters, we are literally constructing social boundaries in space and architecture and reconstructing gender. In urban hotels, women are imagined to be busy making themselves beautiful for encounters with men they know, while simultaneously fearing the metaphorical stranger from whom the hotel is paternally protecting women. We may pay lip service to the independent business woman traveling to the city as an symbol of all that the women's movement has gained. But checking into to the hotel architecture of femininity and fear truly constricts women's movement and feels much like one giant step backward.

NOTES

¹ Yancey, K. B. "Forward-thinking hotels yield the floor to women," *USA Today* (October 24, 2003):D-1.

² Ibid.

³ West C. and Zimmerman D. "Doing Gender." (*Gender and Society* 1997)1:125-51.

⁴ Thornham, S. *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies: Stories of Unsettled Relations*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)

⁵ Press release from Hilton Hotel corporate office April 16, 2003. "Hilton Hotel Creates Private Floor for Women"

⁶ Press release from Conrad Hotel July, 2003.

⁷ Press release from Hamilton Crowne Plaza, October 2003.

⁸ Yancey, 2003.

⁹ Press release from Hilton Hotel corporate office May 15, 2003.

¹⁰ For example, slasher movies have as their basis, women as screaming, bloody victims. The cable "Lifetime Channel for Women" makes normative programming that portrays women in imminent danger of violence from strange men.

¹¹ Stanko, E. A. "Women, Danger, and Criminology," in *Women, Crime and Criminal Justice* C. M. Renzetti and L. Goodstein (Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing, 2001) pp 13-26

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Caputi, K.

¹⁴ Connell, R. W. *The Men and the Boys* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Davies, K. "The Myth of Urban Places and Crimes Against Women." National Criminological Society, San Diego, April 2003.

¹⁶ "Alone" means without a man that is known to them.

¹⁷ McCall, L. *Complex Inequality: Gender, Class, and Race in the New Economy*. New York: Routledge, 2001)

¹⁸ (about 73% of what men earn.) Reskin, B. "The Price of Equality," *SSSP*, July 2003: 11-17.

¹⁹ The much publicized Kobe Bryant rape case notwithstanding, women in the service industry are more often victims of crimes than are the guests of the hotels. The fear is that the Bryant case paints this alleged victim as "asking for it," and that properly behaving women will have nothing to fear.

²⁰ McCall, L. *Complex Inequality: Gender, Class, and Race in the New Economy*. New York: Routledge, 2001)

²¹ (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Hoff 1990).

²² Bordo, S. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. University of California Press, 1993.

²³ From the website