Hospitable Environments

The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and Green’s Hotel as Sites of Cultural Production in Bombay

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During the first half of the 20th century Bombay (now Mumbai) emerged as the centre of modern art in India: It was in Bombay that the now canonised Progressive Artists Group (hereafter Progressives) was founded in 1947, one year after the launch of Marg, a pathbreaking art and architecture magazine initiated by the Modern Architecture Research Group.1 A number of factors combined to enable this. The transformation of Bombay’s swampy archipelago landscape into colonial India’s economically most important port created a wealthy local industrial class, who invested their fortunes in the city. They contributed hugely to both shaping the topography of the metropolis, including the artscape, and patronising the arts.2 Late 19th-century art infrastructure including the J.J. School of Art and the Bombay Art Society, combined with the burgeoning film industry, Parsi theatre, a vigorous local print media and a lively civil society, was also an important aspect in cultivating the art scene. In the 1930s, refugees fleeing the rise of fascism in Europe began arriving in Bombay, a “migropolis” (Migropolis 2010) with a multicultural population. Among them were dancers, composers, screenwriters, art historians, art collectors, painters, illustrators, photographers and writers.3 Although small in number, these exiles contributed to the development of Bombay’s art scene in numerous ways: they established schools, held salons, joined societies, gave public performances, curated exhibitions, lectured and published articles. Crucially, they worked together with local artists, curators and patrons to catalyse the emergence of modern art.4

Rather than focus on individual figures, this essay explores specific sites in the city in which collaborations and exchanges took place between locals and exiles, where discourses developed and where art was exhibited. Within the realm of informal places that functioned as spaces of sociability – urban locations where diverse people could meet and share ideas – it investigates a largely overlooked
typology: the hotel. Drawing on diverse sources, including guidebooks, newspapers, travelogues and novels, as well as archives, this essay constructs an argument for considering hotels as significant spaces of sociability that contributed to the cultural life of the local inhabitants as well as providing accommodation to transient visitors to the city. Focusing on two of Bombay’s prominent hotels – the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and Green’s Hotel – it outlines the ways in which they fostered culture, generated intellectual discourse and supported the local art scene. By anchoring the exiled and local artists to the activities in the hotels, it makes a case for conceiving of hotels as contact zones. Finally, it considers whether Bombay presents an exceptional case or whether similar situations can be found in other colonial or post-colonial environments.

**Situating local people within the historiography of hotels**

In her recent book *Setting the Stage for Modernity*, in which she examines cafes, hotels and restaurants as spatial typologies that were “trendsetters of modernity”, Franziska Bollerey presents the hotel as a cosmos, a city within a city, and compares it to an ocean liner (Bollerey 2019, 6, 68, 75, 111). Although she recognises hotels as catalysts of urbanisation and thus as key institutions within cities, they appear as autarkic entities with little connection to the urban life unfolding outside their revolving doors. By linking the development of hotels with the rise of the bourgeois leisure class and tourism, she overlooks possible relationships between the local population and the functions of the hotel, beyond their employment as staff. In fact, Bollerey suggests that the cleft between hotel users and locals was so wide that hotels produced radical forms of othering: “The locals are confronted with a civilization alien to them. […] The hotel guests in turn regard the locals as an exoticum.” (Bollerey 2019, 118) Indeed, it is not until she discusses 21st-century hotel (re)development strategies that local people are regarded as potential patrons and part of the hotel market – as Parisian hotel managers attempt to “seduce locals” through the design of their hotels’ public spaces (ibid., 121).

Bollerey’s analysis, which largely focuses on examples from the ‘Global North’, is in line with much architectural historical research on the hotel typology. In this field, hotels have been primarily understood as providers of temporary accommodation for tourists and people travelling for work, and have been examined in terms of architectural form, spatial arrangement and style, often with an additional focus on their use of new technologies.
While Annabel Wharton explored hotels in terms of soft power and Americanisation (Wharton 2001), and their political significance has recently begun to be assessed (Craggs 2012), their local social and cultural functions have so far met with limited academic interest. Bernard L. Jim has investigated hotels’ roles in the formation of local citizenry’s individual and collective memories, noting that “hotels hosted some of the most important cultural events in their cities” and listing the users of a hotel in Cleveland as “the traveler, the meeting attendee, and Cleveland regulars” (Jim 2005, 294, 310, author’s emphasis). Significantly more agency is ascribed to local people as hotel users in Karl Raitz and John Paul Jones’ study of taverns and hotels on the settlement frontier of the USA. Therein hotels are credited with giving identity to the city, having a “vital function in organizing the interactions of both local residents and visitors” and being at the heart of civil life (Raitz/Jones 1988, 21).

Maurizio Peleggi’s work on British Colombo and Singapore is a rare example of a study of hotels in colonial contexts. As well as “comfort zones”, he defines hotels as “‘contact zones’ par excellence within the colonial city, where different social, ethnic, and national groups interacted” (Peleggi 2012, 125). While stating that potential patrons were rarely excluded from colonial hotels on the basis of race, he focuses his exploration of the hotel as contact zone around deeply asymmetric exchanges between foreign visitors and local staff, noting that:

Within hotels, the comforts of domesticity were made available to colonial residents and travelers courtesy of Asian bartenders, waiters, and room servants; around hotels, doormen, guides, and rickshaw pullers domesticated the colonial city’s perils, and less respectable pleasures, for the tourist’s sake. (Peleggi 2012, 146)

In addition, Peleggi also briefly mentions Chinese and Eurasian women who were paid to dance with single western men at the hotels. However, he does not discuss other types of activity that may have occurred within the contact zone on a more equitable basis. In the following I expand Peleggi’s notion of the colonial hotel as contact zone to include less imbalanced interactions that comprise local figures from a range of milieus, among them culture, science, business and art, as well as exiled European artists.
The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and Green’s Hotel in cosmopolitan Bombay

Although hotels had emerged as a recognisable typology in Europe and the USA around 1800 (Watkin 1984, 15), according to Dinshaw Wacha there were no “decent” hotels in Bombay until the mid-19th century (Wacha 1920, 289). Until then, visitors from abroad or other parts of India had tended to stay with friends or acquaintances. Taverns, or, as he terms them, “third-rate grog shops” were perhaps a less salubrious option, and clubs, such as the Byculla Club, a more exclusive one (Patel 2015, 131). Bombay’s first hotels, Hope Hall and the Adelphi, opened in Mazagaon in 1837 and in Byculla in 1859 respectively (Wacha 1920, 287–293). Wacha credits a spate of hotel building in the late 19th century not so much to increased business brought to the port city by the cotton boom or tourism, but rather to the influx of foreigners involved in cultural production and performance in the city, such as the Italian Ballet Company and the comedian Dave Carson and his troupe (Wacha 1920, 297). And according to Simin Patel, after single male travellers and families, groups of performers were indeed the third category in need of accommodation (Patel 2015, 127).

Among those late 19th-century hotels, the Esplanade Hotel (also known as Watson’s Hotel), which opened in 1871, is important both architecturally and culturally. Built by John Watson on a site that became available through the demolition of the city’s ramparts, the hotel was housed in an ambitiously modern prefabricated cast-iron structure imported from England. In addition to its pioneering architecture, the Esplanade boasted over 100 rooms, an in-house doctor and a steam-powered lift (Patel 2015, 141). Apart from counting Mark Twain among its guests, the Esplanade Hotel was the site of the first film screening in India: the Lumière Brothers’ Arrival of a Train, The Sea Bath, A Demolition, Leaving the Factory and Ladies and Soldiers on Wheels were shown there in 1896 (Johari 2019). Charging an entry fee, yet open to the public and not just to guests, this film screening is perhaps indicative of the cultural role that this and other hotels were beginning to play in Bombay’s urban society (fig. 1). The Esplanade Hotel is also significant for another reason: it is credited as catalysing the Parsi industrialist J.N. (Jamsetji Nusserwanji) Tata’s decision to build the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel.

An urban legend recounts that when J.N. Tata was refused entry to the Esplanade Hotel on racial grounds, he decided to exact his revenge by founding a hotel himself. While there is very little evidence to support this theory, and indeed some evidence exists to disprove it – the Esplanade Hotel recorded Indian guests as early as the year of its opening (Patel 2015, 115) – it has helped to establish Tata’s Taj Mahal Palace Hotel (hereafter the Taj) within the collective imaginary.
of the city and beyond. Opening its doors in December 1903, the Taj set a new standard in hotel design in Bombay. Although its eclectic architectural expression, featuring corner cupolas, batteries of Rajput bay windows and a central segmented dome, may not have been the most progressive, the local designers D.N. Mirza and Sitaram Khanderao Vaidya, with W.A. Chambers as consultant architect, produced a hotel that was technologically superior to anything else in the city: a steam laundry, Turkish baths, electric lighting, a soda-water bottling plant and a post office were all part of the project (Denby 2002, 202). Both Chambers and Vaidya had previously worked with F.W. (Frederick William) Stevens, an English architect whose neo-Gothic public buildings made an enduring contribution to Bombay’s civic landscape.

The Taj, situated on Apollo Bunder and overlooking the Arabian Sea, immediately became a landmark. For those arriving by ship, it was often the first building in the city that they saw or recognised. The American author Louis Bromfield described the experience of a passenger nearing the harbour as follows:

Fig. 1: Esplanade Hotel, circa 1880s (Pump Park Vintage Photography / Alamy Stock Photo).
Perhaps the exterior’s irreverent mix of traditional architectural elements from different cultural contexts and the interior’s technological ambition can be seen as more characteristic of Bombay than the unequivocal modernism of the Esplanade Hotel. Authors of early 20th-century guidebooks and urban chronicles are unanimous in their praise of the city and its inhabitants as cosmopolitan, with some claiming it as the most cosmopolitan city in the world (Newell 1920, 7; Wacha 1920, 411; The Times of India 1926, II; Diqui 1927, 3; Contractor 1938, 45). More than assembling difference, however, Bombay also produced hybridity; as Louis Bromfield states: “Bombay wasn’t anything. It wasn’t India, or East or West, but an extraordinary muddle of everything on earth” (Bromfield 1946, 14). The Taj can be seen as a reflection of this. Beyond its fusion architecture, it was founded and directed by a local industrialist, managed by Europeans and staffed in the main by Goans. Chinese mime artists, Russian dancers and American jazz bands provided entertainment (undated newspaper cuttings, Tata Central Archives). In the words of the Australian author Frank Clune, “like many other things in Bombay, it’s a mixture of Eastern and Western ideas on the grand scale” (Clune 1947, 154).

The Taj’s cosmopolitan flair was further augmented by the outwardly rather more unassuming hotel next door. Built by William Boyd Green as mansion flats in 1890, by November 1904 the Tata Group had purchased Green’s Mansions and was operating it as part of their Indian Hotels Company Ltd, in tandem with the Taj (Sabavala 1943, 11). Defined by linear verandahs, cantilevered chajjas and fine balustrades, Green’s Hotel’s (hereafter Green’s) elegant architecture may have been overshadowed by the more pompous Taj, but its capacity for sociability was not (fig. 2). During the first half of the 20th century these two hotels provided spaces within which political and cultural discourses grew, deals were made, relationships evolved and art was exhibited; spaces where people talked, dined and danced, partied and reflected. The participants in these activities were not only itinerant businesspeople or tourists or colonial figures; many were locals, particularly from the English-speaking elite. Among them were the exiled artists.
**Keeping Bombay amused: The Taj and Green’s as spaces of sociability**

“Vere are you staying in Bombay?”
“The hotel, I suppose.”
“The Taj Mahal?”
“Yes, the Taj Mahal.” (Bromfield 1946, 16)

For many visitors, particularly the wealthy, the Taj was the hotel in Bombay (fig. 3). This was in part due to the high standard of accommodation and service it provided. Indeed, many writers have concurred with G.A. Mathews’ visceral reaction to the hotel’s opulence: “The Taj Hotel is on such a scale of magnificence and luxury that at first it rather took one’s breath away” (Mathews 1906, 24). Others, in contrast, have compared it unfavourably to a middle western county jail (Bromfield 1946, 67), a railway station (Cook 1939, 245) and a cottage hospital (Cameron 1974, 18), indicating that beyond the public areas different qualities of spaces existed. Certainly none of the much touted luxury is present in the military professional David King’s description of his room: “It was a dark and gloomy chamber, with walls of a dingy brown – ideal protective covering for the wall lizards and enormous
brown spiders one finds all over India” (King 1929, 19). Much as the Taj attempted to corner the luxury market, it also provided beds in shared rooms for those with lesser budgets. In contrast, the rooms at the much smaller Green’s were described as “exceptionally commodious and comfortable” (Macmillan 1928, 195).

Fig. 3: Taj Mahal Hotel luggage tag, date unknown. The Taj and Green’s are presented in the silhouetted cityscape (Author’s collection).
Louis Bromfield described the spectacle of people in the Taj’s public spaces as international, colonial and local, monied and sexualised:

Through the hallway and the bazaar [...] came and went a procession of Arab horsedealers, British Governors and Civil Servants, Russian and German trollops, Indian princes, jewel merchants, Parsee millionaires, comic middle-aged tourists, gamblers, oil prospectors. (Bromfield 1946, 67–68)

Among those missing from this scene are Indian political figures, whose numbers included Sarojini Naidu. A prominent force in the independence movement through the Indian National Congress, she became its president in 1947. For several years she rented a suite of rooms at the Taj, in which she lived with her family on an almost permanent basis, entertained visitors and conducted meetings with a wide range of people (Venkatachalam 1966, 54). In 1915, after a meeting of Congress leaders and the Muslim League, including Muhammad Jinnah, dramatically disbanded, the participants reconvened a few hours later at the Taj (Bolitho 1954, 64). As Naidu took part in the meeting, it is possible that they gathered in her rooms. Some refugees, exiled from Europe as a consequence of the rise of national socialism, also began their stays in India at the Taj. The chemistry professor Stephen Tauber recalls arriving at the Taj on 3 October 1938 and spending several nights there before travelling on to Bikaner with his parents. The hotel rooms had cost much more than his family could comfortably afford (Tauber 2015, 292f.).

According to some accounts, Green’s attracted a slightly different, edgier crowd than the Taj, which one local newspaper dubbed the “Mecca of the haut ton Society” (Anonymous 1939a). Referred to somewhat euphemistically by guests of the Taj as the “hotel across the garden”, it was a venue where less socially acceptable encounters could take place – between lower class Europeans and Eurasians, for example (Greenwall 1933, 105). Local press carried stories of brawls between seamen at Green’s (Anonymous 1948), and it was also the haunt of jockeys and the horse racing crowd during racing season (Diqui 1927, 20f.). Confirming this, Louis Bromfield conjures a vivid depiction of the multicultural scene at Green’s restaurant which, while also international, colonial and local, appears poorer and more overtly sexualised than the Taj:

[…] the people were fantastic […] seafaring men who would have been embarrassed by the mid-Victorian imperial elegance of the Taj Mahal dining-room, English officers and Civil Servants and
clerks who were there because Green’s was Bohemian and as wild a place as they dared frequent in a community where everything [...] became known; tired, plain girls shipped from the British Isles to relatives in the East to find husbands; hard girls on the verge of middle-age from Hove and Cardiff and Liverpool and London whom some strange fate had dumped into Bombay as sleazy tap dancers and members of a ladies’ orchestra. And here and there a stray Russian tart or an “advanced” Parsee or Khoja woman dining alone with a man. (Bromfield 1946, 80)

Bromfield’s descriptions illustrate that both hotels were clearly sites of display and public presentation; fashionable places to be seen by a diverse array of people. Beyond that, however, the various activities that they offered render them locations of social, economic, political and cultural interaction and exchange that fostered the development of communities, civil society and even education. According to Simin Patel, from the outset, J.N. Tata and the designers of the Taj integrated social spaces within the hotel that aimed to attract clients who were not residents. These included several restaurants on different floors, a billiard room and 12 shops – the bazaar mentioned in the quotation above (Patel 2015, 153). Among these shops was a hairdresser’s and a bookshop, which the author Aldous Huxley interestingly noted contained a large collection of publications on gynaecology, obstetrics, sexual psychology and venereal disease, remarking that, “the hotel lounge is not specially frequented by doctors; it is the general public which buys these journals” (Huxley 1926, 9; author’s emphasis). It seems that, at that time, the Taj was one of the few places in Bombay where information on sexual health was available. The hotel therefore played a role, albeit a very particular one, in local public health education, again underlining its relevance to the local population. Not to be outdone by the Taj, Green’s also contributed to political discourse. According to Naresh Fernandes, Crossroads, a weekly Communist Party newspaper, was operated from an office under the stairs there (Fernandes 2012, 97).

Green’s too offered billiards and snooker (Anonymous 1939b) and a well-reputed restaurant that also catered to external events. It was also known for its incredibly long bar and its lively evening entertainment. Similarly to the Taj, it had a large ballroom and offered dance, cabaret and live music performances. The exiled Viennese expressionist dancer Hilde Holger gave her first public performance in the Taj in 1938. She was reportedly not impressed by the spatial arrangements:
Nobody at the Taj had ever heard of a dancer too proud to dance on the parquet between the dinners [sic]. Hilde Holger demanded a stage, not a cabaret artiste’s arena. She had a will of iron and she got what she wanted (Lupus 1948).

During the 1930s and 1940s jazz became popular in Bombay, and a vibrant scene emerged (Fernandes 2012). While the Taj was at its centre, Green’s was also an important venue in the jazz scene. Both hotels hosted residencies by international and local artists, and often combinations of both: well-known performers from the USA would team up with local musicians (Fernandes 2012, 78, 88, 91). Regular acts in the 1930s and 1940s included Crickett Smith, Teddy Weatherford and Chic Chocolate. Beyond being a performance space, Green’s was also a meeting point for musicians who played at other venues in the city (Fernandes 2012, 83).

Aimee (also Amy) Denton, a singer who performed at both venues, was later said to have worked as a spy for the Germans (Ghosh 2008). That a spy sought employment at Green’s and the Taj perhaps underlines the centrality of the two hotels in Bombay’s civic life. While Green’s staged “non-stop dances” (Anonymous 1938b, 6) and “six-a-week dance nights” (Anonymous 1941, 3), the Taj held charity gala dances – a cocktail dance to aid refugees, presumably from Europe, spilled out onto the pavement outside the hotel, where the dancing continued until long after midnight (Anonymous 1939a). In addition to dances, for those who could afford it the Taj was also a popular venue for social events such as wedding parties. The exiled German illustrator and Times of India art critic with a doctorate in geology Rudy von Leyden held a luncheon at the Taj to celebrate his marriage to Baroness Olga Mafalda (Nena) de Belatini (Anonymous 1949b, 3).

Information about these hotel happenings was published in the local daily English-language newspaper The Times of India, which announced and advertised the events scheduled at the Taj and Green’s alongside other listings in the city. The Onlooker, a local monthly newspaper, commented on what it deemed the most interesting of them. Although these newspapers may have been of interest to visitors to the city who stayed at the hotels, the majority readership was local. The listings and commentaries were aimed at English-speaking Bombayites, as they were the people who attended the events. This group included colonial figures and expats, as well as the Indian elite and the exiled artists. After outlining the upcoming events at the Taj, The Times of India announced, “Green’s Hotel is also doing its bit to keep Bombay amused” (Anonymous 1939b). The Taj and Green’s were key sites in the public cultural and social life of Bombay’s educated English-speaking elites. Both hotels were contact zones that enabled the paths and social lives of travellers, locals, exiles and migrants to intersect.
Art, discourse and exiles in the hotels

Although it is likely that the exiled artists took part in the dances and parties held at the Taj and Green’s, a lack of documentation makes it difficult to locate them there. However, there are records of them taking part in other events at the hotels. These events contributed to the development of public discourse in the city. The urban historian Prashant Kidambi credits the emergence of a dynamic and plural civil society in Bombay to the proliferation of associational activities, including clubs and societies (Kidambi 2007, 12–13, 158). Among these, the Rotary Club stands out as significant both for the exilic community and the art scene.

During the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, the Rotary Club convened at Green’s, having met at the Taj since its founding there in 1929 (Anonymous 1980). Several of the key figures involved in the art scene that developed around the Progressives were Rotarians, and gave lectures at the regular luncheon meetings of the men-only club: Rudy von Leyden talked about “The Indian Institute of Art in Industry” (Anonymous 1946, 5), while the exiled Viennese painter, former art professor and art director at The Times of India Walter Langhammer lectured on “Design for Living” (Anonymous 1949c, 9) and Homi Bhabha, a physicist, amateur artist, art patron and collector, spoke about “Atomic Energy” (Anonymous 1945a, 3). The exiled musician, composer and co-founder of the Bombay Chamber Music Society, Walter Kaufmann, presented his thoughts on “Modern Composers” (Anonymous 1938a, 13). Kekoo Gandhy, founder of the exhibition space within Chemould Frames and later of Gallery Chemould, received an achievement award for the art exhibition programme he had instigated to showcase young artists (Anonymous 1971, 5). While none of the local artists appear to have been members, the Rotary Club nonetheless provided a platform for the exiled artists and other figures involved in the local art scene to discuss their ideas on art, to network and to cultivate interest in art. As many of those who belonged to the Club were part of the local intelligentsia and economic elite, the meetings may also have served the development of an art market.

In addition to producing discourse through hosting associational activities, the Taj was also an exhibition venue that played a role in the emerging art scene in the 1930s and 1940s. The art historian Yashodhara Dalmia credits the Taj with launching the Hungarian-Indian painter Amrita Sher-Gil’s career. As well as staying at the hotel, she also held a breakthrough exhibition there in 1936 (Dalmia 2013). Sher-Gil’s paintings were shown in the first-floor corridors together with works by Sarada Ukil, a more established artist at the time (Anonymous 1936, 18). In 1945, 75 paintings by Madhav Satwalekar were shown in the Princes’ Room (Anonymous 1945b). In 1946, the Bombay Art Society curated an exhibition of
works by Shiavax Chavda, who had also studied at the J.J. School, Slade School and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière before returning to India, where he became associated with the Progressives (Anonymous 1947, 8). According to Rudy von Leyden, the record number of visitors to the show in the Princes’ Room was due to the diligence of Kekoo Gandhy, then secretary of the Bombay Art Society and presumably the main curator of the exhibition (RVL 1947, 8). Here it is worth noting that both Langhammer and von Leyden were members of the board of the Bombay Art Society, and contributed to expanding it into an institution that catalysed ongoing discourse through regular salons and exhibitions, rather than just annual exhibitions, and were active in its curatorial programme (Dogramaci/Lee 2019). An exhibition of paintings by K.K. Hebbar, another of the Progressives, was shown in the Princes’ Room of the Taj in 1949. Among those who attended the vernissage were:

Mrs Wazir Tyabji, whose white sari had an exquisite Chinese border, Mr and Mrs W. Langhammer, Mr Hubert de Limairac, the French Consul, Mrs Mehta, in a red and gold Benaras sari […] and Mahamahopadhyaya P.V. Kane, the Vice Chancellor. (Anonymous 1949a)

That The Onlooker deemed the Langhammers’ presence worthy of note is an indication of their position in Bombay society at the time. Similarly to von Leyden, whose wedding celebration at the Taj was reported in The Times of India as mentioned above, the Langhammers were part of Bombay’s cultural elite. As well as showcasing Indian artists, the Taj also exhibited international works, by contemporary Chinese painters for example (RVL 1946, 8).

In the Princes’ Room and the corridors of the Taj Bombay’s modern art scene converged. The Progressive artists showed their work in exhibitions curated by Kekoo Gandhy and the Bombay Art Society, the Langhammers supported the events with their presence, and Rudy von Leyden generated publicity and discourse through his criticism in The Times of India. More than a contact zone of colonial asymmetries, the associational and cultural events in the Taj and Green’s produced discursive spaces actively shared between local and exiled curators, artists, writers and activists as well as colonial figures.

Nevertheless, these spaces were also exclusionary. Mainly English-speaking, they were the haunts of the local intelligentsia and cultural and monied elites – to which the exiled artists also belonged – rather than Marathi-speaking mill workers or unskilled labourers from Bihar, for example. As the Rotary Club
example illustrates, these spaces were also gendered. The rather exclusive nature of the Taj also raises questions about unwritten rules and social codes, while the public consumption of alcohol would have undoubtedly deterred the participation of people from certain religious communities. Nevertheless, the asymmetries, hierarchies and segregations at work here are far more complex than the binary of coloniser and colonised.

**Hotels as Hospitable Environments**

When considering the concept of hospitality, whether it be the act of welcoming an outsider into a home, a hotel, a nation or a language, Derrida defined it as an irreconcilable antinomy. Oscillating between the requirement of unconditionality and the rules of the host, hospitality becomes the threshold of itself (Derrida/Dufourmantelle 2000). One possible socio-spatial outcome of Derrida's hospitality conundrum is the hotel lobby as a ‘non-place’, or, as described by Siegfried Kracauer, a desert. According to Kracauer, the “invalidation of togetherness” that hotel architecture and spatiality produce inhibits meaningful social interaction and exchange (Kracauer 1922, 4). Interpreting Kracauer and building on an analysis of the diverse functions embodied by hotels, Marc Katz posits them as “cities in microcosm” (Katz 1999, 137). These interiorised ‘microcities’ are peopled by transient guests; they are gated enclaves protected from the urban world outside. However, beyond these rather anti-social interpretations, hotels can articulate Derrida’s hospitality threshold in different ways. Inherent in the nature of a threshold is that it is both a thing in itself and a liminal space, held in tension by the realms that border it. It is a concrete place, yet always in a state of becoming. As such, it has transformative potential. It is a space of possibilities. Hotels, with their spatial realms that move from the public street to the private bedroom through a variety of semi-public spaces including the foyer, the lobby, restaurants, bars, meeting rooms, ballrooms, conference spaces, lounges, sports and spa areas, commercial spaces, stairwells, lifts and corridors are perhaps particularly potent. Not only is the space ambiguous, but the hotel visitor is too. Perhaps, in addition to their cosmopolitan nature, this is a reason why hotels appeal as a place of exchange, including to local people and exiles.

This essay has suggested that in Bombay hotels served the local English-speaking elite population and the exile communities as spaces of sociability that enabled forms of ‘togetherness’. By exploring two Bombay hotels at their intersections with art, culture and exile a vibrant if somewhat exclusionary image of pleasure, politics, interaction and exchange has emerged. For the group of exiles who became crucial
protagonists in the development of Bombay’s modern art scene, the hotels provided spaces of temporary accommodation, performance, amusement, celebration, networking, discourse production and exhibition. As these findings contrast so strongly with those of Kracauer and other scholars discussed earlier, it is perhaps worth questioning whether Bombay presents a unique case, or whether similar situations could be found in hotels in other cities, perhaps particularly in colonised and formerly colonised territories. Perhaps in cities with colonial histories, where the development of social infrastructure may have been limited or inhibited by the colonial government, hotels played a particularly important role. A clue can be found in the writings of the Polish journalist and author Ryszard Kapuściński who, recounting his experiences in Tanzania in the early 1960s, described the centrality of a hotel in Dar es Salaam:

In the very center of Dar es Salaam, halfway along Independence Avenue, stands a four-story, poured-concrete building encircled with balconies: the New Africa Hotel. There is a large terrace on the roof, with a long bar and several tables. All of Africa conspires here these days. Here gather the fugitives, refugees, and emigrants from various parts of the continent. […] In the evening, when it grows cooler and a refreshing breeze blows in from the sea, the terrace fills with people discussing, planning courses of action, calculating their strengths and assessing their chances. It becomes a command center, a temporary captain’s bridge. We, the correspondents, come by here frequently, to pick up something. (Kapuściński 2001, 97)

Walter Bgoya, a Dar es Salaam-based publisher and heritage activist, reiterated Kapuściński’s thoughts in an interview with me (Lee et al. 2017, 107). Somewhat further north, in Nairobi, Kenny Mann, daughter of the exiled architect and town planner Erica Mann, tells a similar story while recounting her experiences as a teenager in Kenya:

I might drop in at the old Torrs Hotel where Granny Emma baked her famous cakes at the Cafe Vienna, and where other European exiles came for a fleeting taste of home […] On Saturday mornings I met friends at the New Stanley Hotel’s world famous Thorn Tree Cafe. You could pin a note for anyone in the world on the acacia tree. Legend had it that they would eventually find it. (Mann 2014)
These anecdotes intimate that hotels in East Africa were also sites of sociability, culture and politics where local, transient, migrant and exile populations regularly convened and interacted. Whether they also functioned as exhibition venues or contributed to the development of art discourses through associational activities, as the Taj and Green’s did in Bombay, however, is the subject for another essay.

Notes


2 For more on this see: Chopra 2011; Dogramaci/Lee 2019.

3 For more on exiled artists in India see: Franz 2008, 2015; Singh 2017; Lee 2019b, 2019c; Dogramaci/Lee 2019.

4 See also Margit Franz’s essay “From Dinner Parties to Galleries: The Langhammer-Leyden-Schlesinger Circle in Bombay – 1940s through the 1950s”, in this volume.

5 The Tata Central Archives in Pune, India, and the Hilde Holger Archive in London, UK, were crucial here.

6 See, for example: Denby 2002; McNeill 2008.

7 The opening date is listed variously as 1869 in Dalvi 2019, 1870 in Wacha 1920, 299, or 1871 in Patel 2015, 115.

8 Mehta 2004, 76; Patel 2015, 115; Prakash 2010, 327. The story also features in the Tata’s own history writing: Tata Group n.d.

9 In these writings the term cosmopolitan is understood in the sense of gathering people from diverse geographical and racial backgrounds. While criticism has been levelled at cosmopolitanism as being essentially Eurocentric and elite (Hannerz 1991) and intrinsically linked to colonialism (Mignolo 2000), it has been used as a tool for examining the effects of globalisation. Increasingly cosmopolitanism is being understood as locally differentiated and diverse (see e.g. Clifford 1992; Vertovec/Cohen 2003; Werbner 2006; Mignolo 2011; Assche/Teampău 2015.)

10 See also: Lee 2019a.

11 Beyond the Rotary Club, other cultural groups that convened at the Taj and Green’s included the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, the Royal Society of Arts, the Motion Picture Society of India, the Film Journalists’ luncheon and the All India Editors’ Meet (fig. 3). More political gatherings were organised by the European Association, the Princely States conference, the American Women’s Club, the Progressive Group, and the Australian Association of India (undated newspaper cuttings, Tata Central Archive).
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