

HVS Reviews Sascha Reichstein's Book Be my Guest

JULY 23, 2012

This review of Sascha Reichstein's *Be my Guest*, examines Hilton's dual role as an international American symbol and a local institution. Reichstein's book uses photographic images and employee interviews to contrast two international Hilton hotels.

Sascha Reichstein's 2006 book *Be my Guest* shares its title with the autobiography of Conrad Hilton, founder of the hotel chain, whose vision for projecting American economic and technological dominance throughout the globe inspired the creation of the Hilton brand. In Hilton's sense, "be my guest" was meant as an invitation to Western businessmen seeking a familiar American brand. Reichstein lends the expression a further meaning, suggesting that the hotels are themselves guests in a foreign culture. *Be my Guest* is Reichstein's exploration of the relationship between hotel and host community.

In its original iteration, *Be my Guest* was a gallery show that took place in Salzburg, Austria in 2005. That exhibit presented slides of images of the Hilton hotels in Vienna and Colombo while audio recordings of interviews with employees were played as a soundtrack. *Be my Guest* adapts that gallery show into a text that alternates photographic images with transcriptions of the employee interviews. Reichstein's book captures the artistic spirit of the original exhibition beautifully, presenting the original material in a stunning fashion. The result is an art book that is at once tactile and informative.

Founded in 1919, Hilton Hotels rapidly expanded its international presence throughout the 50's and 60's as part of Conrad Hilton's program to promote American hospitality presence worldwide. Hilton's expansion meticulously preserved a certain American style in each of his hotels in order to foster a sense of comfort and familiarity. The unambiguously American hotels also served as a kind of anti-communist beacon in Cold War-Europe, where the threat of Soviet expansion was felt most immediately. Reichstein's book shows with great insight just how this vision for architectural and aesthetic uniformity takes shape in two iconic hotels on opposite sides of the globe. Reichstein compares two Hilton hotels in vastly different locales (one in Vienna, Austria; the other in Colombo, Sri Lanka) which nonetheless share a common vision.

To compare and contrast the two hotels, Reichstein artfully juxtaposes images from the Hilton Wien with those from the Hilton Colombo. These images serve on the one hand to demonstrate a thoroughgoing unity of design and aesthetic sensibility and, at the same time, to underscore the inevitable cultural differences that mark each hotel as a product of its locale. One striking example of this tension is evident in a pair of images early in the book which show views from guestroom windows in each hotel. Although the two views are certainly different (the view from the Hilton Wien is unmistakably European), far more striking is their fundamental similarity. Both images show a river surrounded by trees, parks, and recreational areas, situated in front of a backdrop of a crowded city and distant skyscrapers. It is clear from these images that the relative position of these two hotels is the same – they serve, in the words of Christian Kravagna, whose essay "Hotel Life" concludes the book, to "not only define the urban surroundings, but also allow for an over-view, which appropriates the city as an image." Moreover, Kravagna observes, "[t]he hotel is designed as a place which allows

the traveler to take visual control over the place he has traveled to.” The common aim of the structural design of these hotels is to allow the guest to feel at once safe and adventurous, free to explore the city from the comfort of the American décor of her own room. The distinctive feeling of the city nonetheless creeps into view as an inescapable presence which, despite every effort at familiarity, marks the environment as essentially foreign.

Perhaps even more striking than the visual comparisons are the interviews Reichstein collects in this volume. The picture that emerges from these interview excerpts – from sources as diverse as concierges, bellboys, chambermaids, and upper management – gives even deeper significance to ubiquity of the Hilton brand. The interviews relate a touching and positive account of the Hilton presence as an institution that provides upward mobility to those who might otherwise be dispossessed. In each city, as the interviews make clear, the brand stands as an icon of stability and economic promise. For many of the employees who have migrated from other cities or nations (a significant proportion of interviews at both hotels relay stories of immigration and relocation), the Hilton serves as a familiar environ in an unfamiliar land, just as it does for the guests who seek out the Hilton’s recognizable, comforting atmosphere while traveling abroad.

The interviews and images in Reichstein’s book make clear that for all of Conrad Hilton’s efforts to promote the Hilton as a demonstration of American economic power, his hotels cannot help but become enmeshed in their particular cultural and geographical contexts. Even as the brand figures prominently as an international symbol of hospitality, its influence and significance to the cities it touches is undeniably local. It is possible, in a superficial reading of *Be my Guest*, to find a critique of American economic imperialism. The more pressing message of the book, however, is that the ideal of such imperialism is basically unattainable; the nature of a hotel pushes directly up against the local, the unique, and the foreign. *Be my Guest* succeeds in demonstrating how such an interaction affects the lives of those who work in hospitality, and showing that the significance of a hotel to a city extends beyond the economic impact of a hotel’s operations. The Hilton, a symbol of American power and wealth, does not simply stand in invasive opposition to the everyday life of the locals, but grows to become part of its community, and is therefore at once a global and an eminently local institution.