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RESIDENTIAL HOTEL (BOSTON)

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Residential hotels where people lived for a prolonged amount of time, (after 1 month of a residency in a hotel, Boston considers the tenant a resident) have a long history in Boston as well other metropolises in the United States. There were hotels for every class, and kind of community. (“We have fine hotels for fine people. Good hotels for good people. Plain hotels for plain people. And some bum hotels for bums” Hotel keeper Simeon Ford 1903, NYC). There were four types of hotels: the palace hotel, the mid-priced hotel, the rooming house, the lodging house. These four categories could be considered as two categories of hotel – a family residence, which was prominent among the upper class in the second half of the 19th century, and the SRO (Single Room Occupancy) which was meant to cater to individuals (though may have been used otherwise).

The family hotel was hotel was defined as a multi-family residence where a family occupies part or a whole floor but not multiple floors. It was in a way, the duplication of the three or four story single-family house but with the attempt to surpass it with new programs that occur on the ground floor. The Cluny Hotel (now demolished) in Boston for instance, was a luxurious hotel which included in its shared lower levels a reception area of five continuous rooms, reception room, parlor, library, dining room with a central hall with a coat room and water closet, and a smoking room off from the dining room. Each residence had 7 bedrooms with two full bathrooms, and 15 closets per floor. In many Boston apartment hotels, the kitchens of all the apartments were clustered at the top as to avoid bad odors (Shand-Tucci, 105).

The Single Room Occupancy is the most inexpensive kind of hotel. They were hotels that hosted people for flexible periods of time, so they did include transients – on average the hotel residents move as much as apartment renters (Groth, 11). The general demographic of the single room occupants was 43% under 40, 32% 40-60, 25% elderly people who did not want to live in nursing homes. The difference between boarding houses and lodging houses (rooming houses) was that boarding houses included meals whereas lodging houses did not. Boarding houses also had stricter rules, and surveillance that could have been considered oppressive at times. Lodging houses dwindled in the 80s as speculative development acquired their land as real estate prices rose, but also because they were converted to the more lucrative market of the tourist hospitality. In the 19th century and during the growth of the suburbs, lodging houses were the means for the lower classes to live alone and downtown. Though the practice of homeowners of taking boarders in a spare room for extra cash (with or without board) was also quite prominent. Social historians estimate that more than a third of 19th century residents took in boarders or were boarders themselves. Walt Whitman claimed that it is probable that nearer ¾ than 2/3 of the all the adult inhabitants of New York City lived in boarding-houses (3). The boarding house was described as an American Institution, a symbol of the uniquely transient nature of American life. (4)

“Single room occupants are omitted in the language of housing legislation, written off in the communities, ignored and rejected in urban development plans and pushed from area to another on the wave of fluctuating real estate markets” (Groth, 14). Federal housing policies have always been more comfortable with the family, with little to no understanding of “non-family persons” that function with some amount of sharing (ie. Bathrooms). But the single room occupants make up a large portion of the American adult population (in 1980, 50 million family households compared to 21 million people living alone).

The typical rooming house had earlier been a boarding house. In 1875, boarding houses made up 40% of commercial housing listings in San Francisco. By 1900, boarding houses dwindled to fewer than 10%, and by 1910, less than 1%. During these declines, boarding house keepers were not quitting but getting out of food provision – shifting their businesses to rooming houses. Public space was at a minimum, there was only a wide area on the second-floor hall near a room that served as an office and part of the manager’s unit. (Delta Hotel in San Francisco) (Groth, 97). Individual rooms often had their own sink, but shared bathrooms at a minimum of one bathroom to 8 residents. Despite the individual rooms and lack of public space, life was not isolated, it was directly social because the walls were thin and carried sound. As rooming houses proliferated the downtown, organizations such as the YMCA brought back the boardinghouses at a larger scale with more centralized administration – offering more vigilant supervision and a parlor life, which was their main criticism of the boarding house.

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Douglass Shand-Tucci, *Built in Boston*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 101-130.

Paul Erling Groth, Living Downtown, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

The Problem of Lodging Houses in Boston, full book: <https://books.google.com/books?id=ECQpAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false>