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Ever a Hotel Whose Twilit Heart Is in Its Lobby

By STEPHEN DRUCKER

ARCHITECTURE is not a science. An architect simply cannot know that some chunks of oak and a few 18th-century English knockoffs will create an illusion like the one on West 44th Street: a perpetual cocktail hour, with an entire city invited.

It has felt like 5:30 P.M. in the lobby of the Algonquin Hotel for nearly 90 years now. While the city changes around it, the Algonquin just goes on and on in chronic, romantic twilight, haunted by some lost souls who ate club sandwiches at a certain round table a long time ago.

But even the Algonquin changes hands every 40 years or so. In 1987, the Aoki Corporation, a Tokyo-based hotel group that also owns Westin Hotels and Resorts, bought the Algonquin for \$30 million. The sale prompted relatively little of the usual xenophobic hand-wringing. What little there was seemed to occur in the Algonquin lobby.

This spring, Aoki will finish two and a half years of renovations at the hotel, which many people felt was in need of some oxygen; \$20 million is being spent. The 165 rooms where Noël Coward, Harpo Marx, Tallulah Bankhead and many other literary and theatrical celebrities slept have all been redecorated, with a gentle emphasis on who slept where. Many of the 23 suites have been dedicated as well, to the likes of Helen Hayes and Vanity Fair magazine. Pick your ghost.

One recent weekend, I checked into a room that I chose to think of as the Dorothy Parker Single.

It costs \$160 a night on weekends (\$175 on weekdays), and its electronic key card brings a quick reminder that the Algonquin is a hotel from another era. Room 812 was all of 10 by 16 feet, and its main architectural features were three doors, to the bathroom, a walk-in closet and the hallway.

If not a place to linger in, it was at very least comfortable, like a bedroom in some Connecticut saltbox: heavy on green and beige, with Chippendale-style mahogany pieces and a big old steeping tub. There was no view; most Algonquin rooms are rather dark. But one gets to fall asleep listening to the doorman's whistle, with visions of silk stockings stepping off running boards.

Each room is stocked with recent issues of The New Yorker. The hotel is almost prayerful of the magazine, which is said to have been founded at the Round Table. One half-expects the bellboys to speak in Talk of the Town cadences: "We heard from a friend in Flatbush..."

CHECKING IN
The Algonquin Hotel



Sara Schwartz



William E. Sauro/The New York Times

Where it always seems like 5:30 P.M. — Some people just sit in the Algonquin's lobby and let the rest of New York go by.

So the rooms are small; guests seem to make peace with this fact. Going to the Algonquin and staying in your room is like sailing across the Atlantic and never leaving your cabin. The room is merely a ticket to the show.

Some people just sit in the lobby and let New York go by; it is a New Yorker magazine cartoon come to life. The lobby, which looks as if it was decorated by Brooks Brothers, was also refurbished two years ago with hopes that no one would notice. No one has noticed.

It still has that Victorian loathing of sunlight. The velvet chairs and tapestry settles still look dusty (the good kind of dust). The little side tables all still seem to be varnished with maple syrup. There is something comforting about the white rings on the tabletops and the bald spots on the table bases, rubbed raw by so many black Oxfords.

The lobby's well-starved waiters are a breed distinct from the exterminating angels across the street at the Royalton Hotel, which one comes to think of as the Algonquin's evil twin. (To put things in perspective, the Algonquin was the Royalton of the Twenties.)

Across the street, the young guests tend to order design statements, like Absolut and tonic. The Algonquin crowd, on the other hand, comes to drink Up. Neat. Twist. Rocks. These people, with every imaginable shape and size of glass in their hands, seemed to speak a foreign language. People talked of this highball and that mixed drink ("Is this dry vermouth? It looks a little dark...").

Even someone who does not usually order martinis changed his habits, just to try holding one of the Algonquin's martini glasses by the unusual little grip in its stem. The fumes were unexpectedly powerful.

"You should try a Manhattan," a neighbor in a wing chair advised the wincing drinker. "It is winter."

Buck Buchholz was at the piano, as he is Tuesday through Saturday from 5 to 8 P.M. Mr. Buchholz did not sing, nor did he pound out "The Rockies may tumble, Gibraltar may crumble" with a cocktail pianist's usual vengeance. He seemed to come from the Eddy Duchin school, that is, the subliminal school of piano playing. One can only surmise what a lifetime of "These Foolish Things," drifting through the air, can do to a person.

Looking around, one surmised it affects a person's taste in clothes.

The Algonquin's bookish crowd was dressed like Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward in "Mr. and Mrs. Bridge." The women seemed to like plaid kilts. For a man, a corduroy suit or a Harris tweed jacket (elbow patches optional) does quite nicely. There was also a young après-ski contingent, in bright, layered sweaters.

The lobby is designed for drinking, and one is welcome to do so almost anywhere, except perhaps on the elevator floor. (This hypothesis was not tested.) The Oak Bar is one possible place to go. The closet-size Blue Bar, the ultimate Algonquin idiosyncrasy, would have been, too. But it is closed, and at the moment no one would commit to whether or not the condition is temporary.

Champagne is what one probably wants in the Oak Room, a boite that defines the word. At first its paneled walls and iron chandeliers bring back memories of a college dining hall, or at least a trip to the Cloisters. But then the lights are dimmed. All one can see are the little pink lampshades, the glowing tips of cigarettes and many sparkly earlobes. At that moment the audience seems in silent agreement: "Now this is New York."

Susannah McCorkle was performing, turning love songs into smoke rings. The couple at the next table held hands for the entire hour.

Dinner arrived five minutes before the show began. The waiters, apparently trained as cat burglars, made their rounds in silence while Ms. McCorkle sang. More distracting were the hummers, spoon-tappers and finger-snappers in the pailleted audience.

Wit, Then and Now

After-theater supper, as well as breakfast, lunch and dinner, is served behind the fringed curtain of the Rose Room, where the Round Table stood during the Twenties. There have been countless paens to the witty conversations that took place in this room, and they are getting a bit tedious; nobody could have been that clever. "Let's go to Macy's" is about as witty as things get these days in the Rose Room (surely Dorothy Parker herself once said it).

One might as well concentrate on the décor, which even after Aoki's refurbishing looks like Elsie de Wolfe's last stand. Mirror, crystal, raspberry pink upholstery, paneling that seems to have been painted with heavy cream — the Rose Room still looks like the grandest of ice cream parlors.

In fact, it was probably designed with calf's liver in mind. But the menu has been updated by Aoki, and there is a new chef, Claude Scudder, so instead one finds grilled swordfish fillet with tri-citrus butter.

The Charm of a Literary Air

The waiters are not aspiring actors. Like much of the staff, they are an older, loyal bunch. Some have worked at the hotel all their lives.

They make mistakes. It was hard to believe that professional waiters

could forget to lay out napkins two days in a row. But they were good company. When the check came (sometimes to a gasp — a bagel and lox and juice approaches \$25) and it was time to tip, the tax was doubled and something was invariably added for good measure.

Indeed, many Manhattan hotels are more efficient, more spacious and more luxurious. But the floors at the Helmsley Palace do not squeak. The shop at the Paramount Hotel does not sell The Antioch Review. The lobby at the Marriott Marquis does not have a cat, much less one named Hamlet, dodging those light-studded elevators.

Genuine friendliness, good manners and a few well-intended literary pretensions are hard to come by these days. The Algonquin might just be the hotelier's equivalent of horfe cooking.