

## Hotel Maintenance Made Easy

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We don't know why architect Isaiah Rogers put a lobby in his design for the 1829 Tremont House, but he probably wasn't thinking about all that extra marble to buff, all that brass to wipe and polish. Through most of its short two-century history, hotel design has often focused first on the experience of the customer, not the requirements of labor, with the result that the need for labor—especially the labor of maintaining spaces and machines—has gone up instead of down. This was especially true in the nineteenth century. Mirrors, gilt and plush sparked paroxysms of praise, incited jeremiads against moral corruption, and had to be scrupulously washed and cleaned. New technologies like indoor plumbing, gas lights, and elevators required maintenance crews and, in the last case, operators for every trip up and down. From oysters to spring mattresses, a vast array of consumer products had to be chosen from among competing distributors, purchased, delivered, installed, and served to the hotel's guests and customers. Like architect Isaiah Rogers, most hotel proprietors left no evidence that they thought about the effects of these ever-multiplying activities on the division of labor; they probably just patched up the labor force as developments made it necessary.

This began to change in the twentieth century, and no figure was more important than hotelier E.M. Statler. In February 1907, after building a couple of temporary hotels at world's fairs, Statler embarked on a permanent hotel venture, financing construction of a three-hundred room hotel across Ellicott Square from his restaurant in Buffalo. The new Hotel Statler opened at the end of June, the first expression of the central idea of

Statler's career: "a bed and a bath for a dollar and a half." This marketing slogan represented a strategic revolution in the hotel industry. The first half of the phrase promised a democratization of privacy in hotels by attaching a bathroom to every room. Until then, guests in all but the most expensive rooms washed their faces in a basin built against the bedroom wall, beneath a strip of oilcloth to protect the wallpaper. They went down the hall to use the toilet. Guests deplored the filth, worried about contagion, and no doubt held very complicated feelings about sharing facilities with strangers. The innovation of a bathroom for every room proved a boon to people who would have stayed in a hotel anyway, but it also increased the hotel's appeal to a broader range of customers, especially families.

The second half of the slogan promised a dramatic shift in pricing, opening a new segment of the market for a growing middle class. Statler offered a plain but respectable room at a low cost achieved through economies of scale and simplified service. He found many ways to cut costs. His architectural design (he evidently participated extensively in drawing up blueprints) ran shafts encasing water and heating pipes straight up and down the buildings, with access to the shafts behind the mirrors of identical bathrooms stacked on top of each other. Statler's design saved money in construction and, more importantly, easy access to pipes meant cheaper maintenance. "Statler plumbing shafts," as they were sometimes known, became common in the construction of apartment and office buildings. Though he did not see it at the time, Statler later realized that his individual bathrooms took up less floor space than common baths generally used. Statler also put a telephone in every room of the hotel and developed a system of pipes for circulating ice water through the building. Both devices cut down the demand for bellhops. Such

innovations marked a departure from the nineteenth century, when increased capital investment in technology did little to decrease hotels' labor costs, and new technologies often required hiring more and more expensive employees.

Statler also studied work design to use chambermaids more efficiently. One innovation replaced the standard bed linen, which had a three-inch hem at the head and a one-inch hem at the toe, with bed sheets of his own design—one-inch hems on both sides of single-bed sheets, and double-bed sheets with two inch hems on each side. Looking at the hem, a Statler maid could quickly distinguish single sheets from doubles, and would never lose time unfolding and refolding the wrong type or putting a sheet on the wrong way. These changes helped Statler cut his labor costs. The Ritz-Carleton, one of New York's most expensive hotels, had a ratio of three workers to every guest room, while Statler hotels managed with fewer than one worker per room. There were multiple layers to these savings—of time, labor, labor costs, and intrusion of maintenance into the guest's experience.

Compare this to the practice of dusting commercial office space in the early twentieth century. Cleaning kicks up dust, and dust takes its time to settle. In the 1920s, as business boomed and corporations clogged the sky, skyscraper managers believed there ought to be a gap of hours between cleaning and dusting, and they wrote about it in the journal *Buildings and Building Management*. Around the same time, perhaps by the beginning of the 1920s and definitely by their end, a bunch of fairly unskilled, mostly immigrant women dictated new work hours that ran counter to management theory. How did they do it? We don't really know.

Building managers hired “the maimed, the halt and almost blind and the aged” to

clean office buildings, and called them scrubwomen. They treated them pitifully. In 1919, the Minimum Wage Commission of Massachusetts conducted a survey of scrubwomen in 201 buildings and found 94% making less than nine dollars a week, much less than the \$11.65 a week the commission deemed a necessity to live “in any kind of comfort.”

Another indignity was the split shift. In some offices, scrubwork came in two short periods every day; from five to eight pm, say, and back again six to eight am. This followed the industry’s best practice of waiting hours after cleaning to dust away the day’s particles from desks, lamps, chairs, filing cabinets, radiator covers, the leaves of potted plants, framed photos and degrees, mantelpieces in fancy offices, and windowsills. This high standard of cleanliness was of a piece with other standards in office buildings that have since slipped—a hat on every head, a mail chute on each floor, no more than thirty or thirty-four seconds wait for an elevator.

There are no statistics on the prevalence of the two-shift scrubwoman model. The only extant evidence is a series of articles from *Buildings and Building Management* that cluster first around World War I, when all kinds of bosses struggled to keep workers because of high demand for labor, and then a month or two after the market crash of 1929, with another tight labor market about to crumble. The articles debate the hours a scrubwoman should work each night: five to midnight, six to midnight, seven to midnight, ten pm to seven am, two to nine am, three-thirty to eight-thirty. Managers make various claims for the superiority of cleaning before or after midnight—in winter, the heat is turned off at night and it is warmer to clean before midnight; after dawn, lights can be turned off to save electricity; etc. They all acknowledge the end of the split shift, and

look back wistfully.

Why did it end? Not, it should be stressed, through advances in cleaning technology. By the 1920s, new materials like linoleum and tools like vacuum cleaners decreased the amount of necessary labor, so fewer women cleaned more offices. New window treatments may even have decreased the number of particles in the air. But they did not affect the speed at which the remaining dust settled on surfaces.

*Buildings and Building Management* does not come right out and say it, but articles in the journal suggest that the split shift ended because scrubwomen kept fighting it. Absenteeism. Outright demands for better hours. Pleas that they needed time for their responsibilities at home, cooking, cleaning, and raising children. One building manager told a BBM reporter, “here in New York we cannot get women to work those hours. They are an independent lot.” Another wrote that scrubwomen “have pretty definite ideas of what hours they want to work.” None acknowledged that from the perspective of both the worker and the boss, the split shift was a remarkably inefficient use of labor.

Today, office and hotel cleaning and maintenance workers are likely to encounter a pre-Statler mentality among managers. “Service design,” as design scholar David Brody calls it, still takes a backseat to considerations of architecture, engineering, and décor, to the detriment of managers, workers, and probably customers. And even if design *is* used to reduce labor and inconvenience, it is likely inspired from on high. This is too bad. Like the skyscraper scrubwomen of the early twentieth century, cleaning and maintenance workers today could probably teach their managers a lot about efficiency, savings, and customer service.