Home Suite Home: An Analysis of Comfort in Americana and Motel Culture

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This essay provides a critical look at the motel, investigating it as a souvenir, exploring its nostalgic phenomenon, and questioning its complexity of comfort. We begin by looking at the evolution of the motel and how its strange stereotype came to be. I dissect the terms “shady” and “sketchy” as both a psychological and illustrated representation of the motel while closely reading how these terms appear in other forms of media, such as Bates Motel and Bad Times at the El Royale. Through exploring nostalgic Americana, I investigate how motels connect us from the past to the present through their efforts to be a kitschy time-capsule that helps us reminisce the “good ole days.” I also analyze how motels are considered souvenir symbols by looking closely at their structure and commodified intent. Throughout the essay, I connect these ideas and my thesis project American Standard, a visual essay consisting of illustrations and short comic narratives that all occur at a southwestern Missouri motel over one day. From traveling for cancer treatment to suicide to running away from home, hypothetical realities, far from comforting, glamorous, or sleek, illustrate themselves to be entirely possible and even painfully relatable for some. Looking at the motel’s successes and failures as a symbol of a souvenir, nostalgia, and a means of comfort, we conclude with how we should perceive them today. As their popularity begins to die, their context becomes more valuable to us. What does this mean next for preservation and the hospitality industry?

Introduction

It was a hot summer day in 1999. After driving for an eternity, we finally arrived at our destination: the Thunderbird Beach Resort. “Vacation!” I thought to myself. It was my first time visiting the beach, but I had seen it on television before. I was barely old enough to understand how the world worked. This week was important; it meant playing in the sand, swimming in the ocean with my Winnie the Pooh inflatable ring, and having fun with my siblings. While I do not remember much about the interior of the hotel itself, besides some minor details about the ugly, light blue patterning on the curtains, I remember seeing the iconic exterior of the building for the first time. It mimicked the design of a mid-century motel: walk-out doors with easy vehicle access, a long, rectilinear structure, and a ginormous, bright vintage neon sign smack on the front of the building. The “T” of the hotel’s name was in the form of a green, red, and yellow-colored Aztecan-style bird. It was so big and illuminated for miles, to the point where I thought I would be able to see it back home in Missouri.

1 Book a reservation at www.thunderbirdflorida.com.
Located in Treasure Island, Florida, the Thunderbird Beach Resort was the first motel-like setting I had ever experienced. This resort was built in 1957 and has been a timeless vacation spot for many beachgoers over the centuries. Its cool, retro-aesthetic, along with many other motels, has become a built-in feature of motels, making them appealing to most; yet their intent makes them quite the opposite. Many years later, my mother told me that we did not stay at the Thunderbird that long due to how run-down it was. I have never been back to that motel since, though as I reflect on that nostalgic 1999 trip, it remains in my memory vividly.

As a typical Midwesterner, motels have been the lodging norm for me. They are so common that you do not think much about them driving down Highway 44. Since I was one of seven children, we often utilized motels or cheap hotels for road trips. I have stayed in nicer ones, which had more appealing architecture and amenities, and I have also stayed in cheaper ones, which were not as attractive. What they have in common, though, is their clientele. Because of their cheapness, they generally attract a strange crowd and, even more so, a peculiar, uncomfortable aura. A few spots remain memorable, though, and have evolved into cool, kitschy lodging spots over the last twenty years.

Most of us are familiar with hotels; however, motels, while similar, have much more distinct characteristics that define them. Let me, or the Oxford English Dictionary, define a motel for you: a “roadside hotel catering primarily for motorists, typically having rooms arranged in low blocks with parking directly outside.” Motels are typically one to two stories, employ just a few people, offer little to no services, and generally have cheaper rates. They tend to be rectilinear but vary in layouts (see Figure 1). Due to their primary purpose, motels are considered hotels, yet, not all hotels are considered motels due to their structure. Hotels, located mainly in large cities at the time, dominated the hospitality industry in the early 20th century but lacked convenience for travel growth and the necessity of automobiles. Through the evolution of the hotel, venturing from auto camps to tourist homes, the motel’s flatter, more extended structure was finally born. They varied in layouts that made them accessible from all angles.\footnote{Definition taken from the Oxford English Dictionary.} Because many of them started appearing in the 1950s, their quirky and retro mid-century aesthetic have stuck with them up until today, making them a kitschy form of lodging for travelers (see Figure 2). As they began to pop up in more rural areas between major cities, they became more convenient and affordable for everyday passersby. With the combined forces of motels and the expansion of major highways, America rapidly transformed its way of living, making it much quicker and more efficient to travel across the country at any given time.\footnote{3 See figure below from Mark Okrant’s No Vacancy: The Rise, Demise, and Reprise of America’s Motels, originally taken from John Jackle’s The Motel of America.}

Through my strange relationship with hotels and motels, I created American Standard: a visual essay that captures motel and roadside culture through sketchy, eerie, and grayscale illustrations and short comics. My project narrates a set of nonlinear stories occurring within the same day at a deserted, small-town midwestern motel. We
Above
Figure 2. present-day photo of the very famous Blue Swallow Motel, located off Route 66 in Tucumcari, New Mexico.

Right
A 1939 vintage photograph of The Blue Swallow Motel when it first opened, originally named The Blue Swallow Court.
Below
A full page spread from American Standard, which foreshadows a tragedy.

I can't go on
the world is you,
didn't care about
This is what I'm
you. This God's
Happy Birthday, and
Christmas. And I lo

HOLY
BIBLE
“...[American Standard] portrays a hypothetical reality far from comforting, glamorous, and sleek, yet can be entirely possible and even painfully relatable for some.”
begin our story in southwestern Missouri in an unnamed area where the Crawford Comfort Inn becomes a roadside attraction for different people’s stories. From traveling for cancer treatment to suicide to running away from home, these narratives represent some sort of struggle with comfort, physically or psychologically, within the boundaries of a motel. While all of their struggles are different, the container of a motel ties them together. These people’s motives, where they came from, and where they are going remain vaguely answered, leaving it up to the reader to decide their fate. This project portrays a hypothetical reality far from comforting, glamorous, and sleek yet can be entirely possible and even painfully relatable for some.

The American motel is a perfect object, both physically and metaphorically, that symbolizes the ideas of comfort, nostalgia, and souvenirs. Its welcoming appearance is deceiving as the cheap amenities can be very uncomfortable for most, and its retro aesthetic is a time capsule that becomes iconic through the commodity of souvenirs. While their popularity declined, their simple accessibility has become a popular form of lodging, especially during the pandemic. But, so what? To parody Richard Hamiton’s iconic piece: Just what is it that makes [motels] so different, so appealing? Is it the magic of marketing or misinformation? Why are motels sold to guests as the epitome of comfort while they are instead far from it? Why are they nostalgic to us? This essay will investigate these questions and examine other related concepts to construct this duality of comfort vs. discomfort within the average midwestern motel.

I want to first start with the overall theme of my project, or more specifically, my “north star”: comfort is a complicated feeling. This idea expresses how I feel about people, places, things, nostalgia, memories, and the instances of my experiences with comfort and discomfort throughout my life. Similar to a rollercoaster, I have experienced a series of ups and downs that have finally led me to a comfortable position. The word comfort is a large umbrella of various definitions. Initially, the term was derived from the French term confort, and then earlier from the Latin term confortare (which came from the older Latin term com-fortis), which means to “render strong and, by extension, to alleviate pain or fatigue.” Some terms that define or are associated with this word include cheer, console, support, relief, encouragement, satisfying, enjoyable, assist, and content. This phenomenon can create physical, mental, social, and economic strains or gains as people deal, or strive for, comfort in a variety of ways. Whether we are grieving, helping a friend in need, or relaxing on the couch after a stressful day, we are experiencing this sensation of comfort or discomfort, in one way or another.

My research began with looking into how the evolution of motel spaces have influenced how we deal with comfort today. Daniel A. Barber hit the nail on the head during his Climate Future lecture at RISD in 2019:1


7 Full transcript is available at opentranscripts.org/transcript/after-comfort.

5 Richard Hamilton is a British artist, most well known for his collage piece titled Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Home’s So Different, So Appealing? from 1956.
“The opposite of comfort is, obviously, discomfort. The first we seek, the second we try to avoid. Comfort is valued because it promises consistency, normalcy, and predictability, which allow for increased productivity or a good night’s sleep. Our collective allegiance to comfort is a form of self-assurance—that we are not threatened and that tomorrow will be like today. Comfort indicates that one has risen above the inconsistencies of the natural world and triumphed, not only over nature and the weather but over chance itself. We can rely on comfort. It will be there when we get back.”

He starts his presentation by introducing his essay “After Comfort,” which explores the relationship between comfort, architecture, and global warming. While his overall idea heads in a slightly different direction than my project, Barber makes a relatable point about how space influences this sense of consistency, normalcy, and predictability. He proposes the question of how we can design for discomfort, more so, eliminating amenities such as HVAC that harm the environment. Motels are already doing this to an extent by lacking dazzling amenities. The purpose of a motel is to be a comfortable “home-away-from-home” for most; however, they tend to be the opposite through cheap mattresses and horrible-tasting coffee packets. While they are typically small, cramped, and not sound-proof, they transformed how we live in spaces today. The layout of the motel room became normalized in our homes over time, including characteristics such as a television in the bedroom and vanities for bathrooms.8 These structures are a good example of how we can force ourselves to be uncomfortable temporarily and appreciate the comfort that we have permanently.

In Barber’s essay, he also introduces how class structures and geopolitics control our accessibility to comfort. If we lived over a hundred years ago, we would be more worried about not having substantial nourishment, shelter, and amenities, such as heating and cooling. We are much more spoiled today. Once we obtain comfort, something so precious, we become addicted, making it too difficult to let go.9 If we cannot learn to live somewhat uncomfortably, humankind will not be long-lasting as we slowly begin to kill ourselves and experience life “after comfort.” Comfort is complex as it is different for each person’s situation. Definitions are different for everyone, depending on their priorities. Someone who grew up in rural America may have a different view of comfort than someone living in a large urban city. Someone who may have grown up in the lower class may have a different idea of comfort than someone born into a wealthy family. As for someone who has grown up in both former situations, the justification of this complex idea of comfort is due to where I started vs. where I ended up in life, physically and mentally. Agreeing with Barber’s point, I believe that it would be difficult to revert to the original state I was in ten years ago because I have become too comfortable with what I have now.

Tomas Maldonado also talks about how space influences our sense of comfort. In his essay “The Idea of Comfort” he agrees with how comfort is a highly complex idea. He begins by exploring the word livability, its relationship with reality, and how it defines comfort in the sense of “convenience, ease, and habitability.”10 In addition to that, he also makes the claim that comfort is a modern idea, deriving from the Industrial Revolution.” Many of Maldonado’s ideas align with Barber’s as he talks about how space and class influence our access to comfort. For most, to feel “comfortable” was a privilege that only the higher class had access to because they owned most housing and businesses, and the lower class were the ones living and working in poor conditions under them. Access to privacy is also a characteristic of comfort, which authorizes the house as a place for social activity, which, as a result, helped create “the modern nuclear family.”11 Comfort became a model for the new lifestyle of the wealthy.

Much of the illustrations that I am creating in my visual essay depict the characteristics of comfort and livability. American Standard hints at a lower-class audience and how they perceive comfort in a more “familiar”

environment, being the motel. As a result, these people bring strange stories to The Crawford Comfort Inn. When entering these spaces, or more specifically, illustrations, we feel as if we, as the viewer, are also existing in the same place as the characters. Many single-page illustrations include objects such as the microwave on top of the mini-fridge or the retro television displaying a famous late-night commercial. For most, this is familiar because of our experiences at motels and hotels that create this sense of nostalgia, that we may or may not be yearning for.

Shady and Sketchy Creatures

From a young age, motels have always been exciting creatures to me. I use this word to describe their strange and shady nature. These smaller infrastructures live like hosts, while their reputations are made up of people passing through and temporarily living inside them, like a parasite. People may stay temporarily, or even permanently, and their actions within the motel influence how these motor courts are viewed by society—which, most of the time, is strange, or “shady.”

Shade encompasses a variety of meanings: first, the term “shady” derives from the original meaning that a person, place, or thing may not appear honest, genuine, or correct. Because motels are so cheap, they tend to attract impoverished people, which can sometimes bring inappropriate behaviors that make them appear “shady.” Motels are located in more rural, deserted places, and while they were initially family-friendly, they now include shady clientele in recent years, associated with murders, drug deals, prostitution, and other crimes. Similar to a cause and effect method, the actions of these guests give the motel the reputation of being “shady.” Hotels, on the other hand, attract a more upper class due to their location in more appealing, populated areas, and travelers may prefer them for safety reasons. While most motels appear strange and unusual, not all of them do. Some characteristics of the motel change depending on what type of people visit it. If taken care of or advertised correctly, they put off a kitschy, fun, nostalgic vibe, which may attract either a better or younger class of clientele; however, the downside to this is that their room rates may be more expensive.

Light, shadow, and color is a secondary definition of the term shade and is used effectively in American Standard. There is two ways it is utilized: by value and shadow. By pushing harder and drawing lines closer together, one begins the process of shading, which creates a darker tone. While the illustrations are grayscale, a wide range of value is created through the use of whites, midtones, and harsh blacks. Another way create a dark shade is by the interference of light by an object. A tree is the easiest way to illustrate this: when the sun projects onto the tree, it produces a shadow on the opposite side. That shadow creates shade, which typically feels cooler and appears darker because of the lack of heat, light, and warm color. The amount of visible shade depends on what time of day it is, and where the sun is positioned in the sky; the lower and more diagonal the sun is, the longer the casted shadow, and vice versa. This physical use of shade is illustrated in American Standard; while there is no linear story, we instead follow the visual essay from beginning to end by watching the sun move through the illustrations until it becomes nighttime, concluding the book. The shadows, or shade, that the motel casts from the sun create a dramatic effect and only enhance the shadiness that it represents.

Sketchy is a slang word that serves a similar purpose to shady—meaning that people, places, and things can behave weirdly, poorly, and unauthentic. As mentioned before, the clientele of motels have the stereotype of being “sketchy,” and I wanted to portray that within my illustrations. This definition is also created visually with a pencil-like texture and cold grayscale tone. The sketchiness and monochromatic palette attend to an earlier period: the mid-1990s. I chose this time period for several reasons. First, it was more of a personal choice as I was born around this time, so it felt very relevant and I was able to cover a wide range of 90s memorabilia without being inaccurate. Second, this decade is both far away yet close enough for someone around my age to still relate with. Lastly, I felt that the 90s were a perfect fit aesthetically as I have a high interest in antique and thrift shopping, as 90s clothing and ephemera bring me joy. The decision to use both the grayscale and pencil-like texture emphasizes this idea of nostalgia, making the viewer reminisce and yearn for this past-time. The grain produced by the digital pencil brush, as well as the gray tones, make the illustrations in this book appear loose, uncrisp, and somewhat fuzzy, referencing to a dream or a memory.

“From a young age, motels have always been exciting creatures to me. I use this term to describe their strange and shady nature.”
As a part of my research for this thesis project, I won a grant that allowed me to take a trip down to Springfield, Missouri and stay in three different motels during one cold January weekend. There was a wide range of motels we stayed at, from really nice to complete shit. Having stayed in many of these places before, I thought I knew what I was getting into, but I was dead wrong - worth the exciting experience though. One issue I was coming across during this project was obtaining enough references to unusual motel ephemera to make the illustrations in my visual essay convincing.

The first place that I had my eye on was the iconic The Munger Moss Motel, located off Route 66 in Lebanon, Missouri. My husband and I left on a Friday afternoon, and after almost three hours, we arrived around nine o'clock in the evening. Upon arriving to the motel, we assumed that we could just book a room quickly, but we were wrong. I noticed its deceptive appearance; the whole place looked like it had gone out of business, with no lights on and hardly any vehicles parked outside. While it was right off the road, it almost looked deserted.

It immediately felt strange, but we attempted to follow through anyway. We knocked on the front office door, and a little old lady named Ramona, with short, tousled gray hair and wearing pajamas, swung open a nearby door, shouting nonsense at us. I assumed that we must have woken her up, but it was only nine? Who goes to bed that early on the weekend? After shortly figuring out that we came too late and there were, in fact, no rooms available (even though it looked like there were plenty), we apologized and moved on our merry way, ending up at a more excellent motel nearby. This very strange, brief, yet genuine, moment of interaction is just one of the stories that inspired the narratives in my thesis.

The second motel we stayed at on our trip, called Rest Haven Court, was a gem, a nostalgic time capsule, the ultimate Americana stereotype. The vast, attractive neon sign and bright red doors in every room were so charming, and it had a uniqueness to it that other places we stayed lacked. There was a playground in the courtyard of this motel, which I had never seen before. Even fifty-plus years later, are some motels really still family-friendly? It made me feel safe and comfortable to stay there for some reason. I could envision the Rest Haven Court as a popular vacation spot at one time and still appears to be a popular lodging spot today by seeing how busy it was.

During our trip, the last motel we stayed in was called America’s Best Inn, located just a few miles from Route 66 in Eureka, Missouri. This place is held dear to my heart as my husband had lived there for four months when we first met back in 2014. Because the motel is located right off a major highway, its clientele was flooded with a mix of out-of-towners, immigrants, and drug addicts. I remembered it very distinctly as I had spent much of my time there. While it was the epitome of a sketchy midwestern motel, I made many memories there with my husband and other friends that I still talk to today.

Almost eight years later, everything looked the same. Upon arrival, we checked in and started to unpack our bags. While this motel was a little more modern than the previous one we stayed at, it gave off the perfect 1990s aesthetic. Brown and yellow swallowed the room—including the telephone, bathroom tiling, and carpet; but, it was unbearable. I am not sure if it was because of my romanticized sense of the memories I made there, but it appears that the motel condition had worsened significantly. It was everything short of pleasant; dirty bathrooms, peeling wallpaper, and the lingering smell of cigarettes. Many of the neighbors we saw there did not look friendly or safe. As a result, we did not stay the night there and left shortly afterward. Sometimes revisiting places that make us feel nostalgic may ruin the memories that we experienced there.
There is a popularity of visual culture associated with motels as their aesthetic is a perfect fit for a psychological drama, suspense, or apocalyptic story, and has successfully been adapted. For example, the Stanley Hotel, which inspired the location for Stephen King’s *The Shining*¹⁴, has a reputation for being haunted. Initially built by Freelan Oscar Stanley, who suffered from tuberculosis, it was created as both a luxurious accommodation for the upper class and a health retreat for others suffering from the same disease. It is assumed that many people who stayed there also died there, leaving behind the paranormal activity that makes the location popular today.¹⁵ Whether I believe this or not, it still makes for an exciting story.

*Bates Motel* is another strong example of this shadiness that is linked to cheap hotels and motels. This popular television show, which aired between 2013 and 2017, is flooded with eeriness and drama. Created as a contemporary prequel to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* in 1960, this series begins with the Bates Motel owners Norma and her son Norman, followed by a series of events that result in a murder. Throughout the show, the audience notices Norman’s losing grip on reality and Norma’s struggle to help comfort him through his trauma.

One interesting observation of the *Bates Motel* is its architecture, which appears to be unusual for typical motels that we usually see within the Americana aesthetic. This structure represents more of a house rather than a motel, but its gothic elements make it fit the shady narrative. I assume the building itself was most likely a house in its early years and later converted, which does happen often with places such as Bed and Breakfasts. The Crawford Comfort Inn may fulfill a different aesthetic but still serves the same purpose. Its rectilinearness and long spatial extent are more nostalgic to the Americana visual embedded within the roadside culture.

Another fascinating observation about this series is the period it is set in. There is a strange conflict with Bates Motel because the director decides to shoot it in the present day. The story itself is supposed to precede *Psycho*, yet, it incorporates many modern-day elements that throw it off Hitchcock’s timeline. Had it followed the timeline accurately, the story’s premise would have been set in the 1940s. While it is set today, *Bates Motel* still uses a particularly pleasing color palette that visually represents an older, nostalgic time. Many muted tones take us back in time, similar to looking at an old photograph and remembering the “good ole days” of what once was (even if the premise of *Bates Motel* is not exactly a cheerful one to remember).

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¹⁴ *The Shining*, a best-selling novel by Stephen King, is a story about a man named Jack who attempts to cure his writer’s block while staying at a hotel in Colorado with his family. His son starts to experience psychic premonitions, which leads Jack down the unraveling of the hotel’s secrets and ends up turning into a maniac.

Another place we see good use of the strange, stereotypical motel is in Bad Times at the El Royale, a 2018 neo-noir thriller film written and directed by Drew Goddard. The premise begins in the 1960s with seven strangers who all arrive at a hotel located on the state border. Many take their last chance at redemption, resulting in quite the opposite. Each character brings their own “story” that influences the plot and characterizes the uncertainty of the hotel throughout the evening. While the film is also aesthetically pleasing, the El Royale hotel is beautiful as an object—a unique, well-designed structure, displaying the retro, nostalgic neon signage that is iconic within Americana culture – making this film stand out.

The plot for Bad Times at the El Royale is very similar to my thesis project as it focuses on different characters’ stories, with the tie between them all residing at the same strange hotel. Similar to the film, each stranger struggles with comfort and contemplates moral decisions that define them. Many of the personas that are introduced at the beginning of the film turn out to be false at the end. We see famous actor Cynthia Erivo in the struggling singer’s role of Darlene Sweet, Chris Hemsworth as the charismatic cult leader Billy Lee, and Jon Hamm, who plays Laramie Seymour Sullivan, a vacuum cleaner salesman turned undercover agent. One of the central and last surviving characters in the film, Jeff Bridges, plays Father Daniel Flynn, a supposed forgetful priest but a paroled bank robber in disguise.

Location is also critical in understanding the theme of duality in Bad Times at the El Royale. The El Royale is situated on the California/Nevada border, where conflicting strategies appeared between states and among the characters. California, a state that is looking to the West with
The famous “Come play with us” scene from Stephen King’s film The Shining shot in the “haunted” Colorado mountain resort the Stanley Hotel.

Below
opportunity and neighbors Nevada, a much less opportunistic state that pulls people away from this prosperity. This push-pull only adds to the rising tension of the plot.

The Crawford Comfort Inn, which is more of a character itself, serves a similar purpose because of its strange, mysterious pulpy aura, and how the characters live their lives within it. We, as the viewers, struggle with getting to know the characters comfortably as we read the visual essay from beginning to end. We may glimpse the environments or actions they experience at the motel, but we never see their faces or dialogue contributing to their character development. We do not know their stories. My past experiences of staying at motels prove that this is also true in real life. Since these establishments were created for quick and convenient stays, it has been rare to have an actual conversation with a passerby, as they avoid lingering and instead hide within their rooms. What their stories are beyond that door is much of a mystery; however, we can make despairing assumptions.

While American Standard may not be as striking and action-packed as Bad Times at the El Royale, it still consists of a few notable characters worth mentioning. Most of these stories are autobiographical or about people I know who have experienced these situations first-hand. The stories may be sad, but they appear more personal and believable to occur within a motel. We have Stacey, a terminal cancer patient who, from the little that we know, is traveling to a hospital for treatment in hopes of surviving. Another short story includes Ramona, the older lady who lives and breathes The Crawford Comfort Inn as it revolves around her life. Another character, Matt, feels that his relationship is going down the drain, and does the unthinkable of successfully “unalive” himself. We even become emotionally attached to a nameless frog trying to catch his next meal, which results in tragedy (okay, the frog might be fictional and provide a little comedic relief, but you get the point). These characters very rarely interact with one another much throughout the book; however, still get a sense of how they deal with comfort, whether it is successful or not.

Missouri is considered the “gateway to the west;” however, people often get stuck or feel too comfortable and do not want to leave. This is the case in my hometown, as people are too afraid to venture out. Because I grew up there, I wanted to use this location to emphasize this idea. The Crawford Comfort Inn is placed in a deserted, rural area in southwestern Missouri that closely borders Oklahoma. In the world of my visual essay, this results in the characters also dealing with comfort and morality, including instances such as monotony, loneliness, and even murder.

More specifically, Route 66 is critical to the setting of The Crawford Comfort Inn. This famous highway contributed to the expansion of motel and roadside culture throughout the twentieth century. Beginning with Lewis and Clark’s travels, Route 66 has a long and rich history for optimistic dreamers going West to discover new things. Originally running from Chicago, Illinois, to Santa Monica, California, this road covers almost 2,500 miles, with a considerable chunk in Missouri. Route 66 has been reconstructed, yet many still romanticize its original intent. Many nonprofits continue to work on preserving its heritage, interpretation, and use. Living very close to

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16 This was a result of the Gold Rush of 1848, where it was arguably one of the most significant events in American history. Many people left their families in order to seek this newfound wealth.

“What their stories are beyond that door is much of a mystery; however, we can make despairing assumptions.”
Above
Outside of Rest Haven Court, taken during my research trip.
Located in Springfield, MO.
Route 66 allowed me to frequent parts of this road most of my life, and while I was not alive during its prime, I still have many experiences with it. I chose to situate my fictional motel along this Route 66 as a way to firmly tie the geography and narratives together within my thesis project. As mentioned before, many of these characters pass through to somewhere “better,” but many of them struggle along the way.

Symbol of a Souvenir

The way we experience motels and roadside icons in pop culture, such as in films versus in real life, are similar yet different. To articulate this idea, I want to briefly mention the term souvenir. Through experience, we create either a mental or physical picture that becomes an image—something of importance to us, like a souvenir, that we cherish forever (or as long as we can before being destroyed). Susan Sontag supports this idea in her essay “In Plato’s Cave” as she correlates pictures and souvenirs. Through travel, whether it be fiction or in real life, we are “converting experience into an image, a souvenir” that stays with us. She states:

“Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs. The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter. Unsure of other responses, they take a picture. This gives shape to experience: stop, take a photograph, and move on.”

Her last sentence in the previous paragraph is incredibly relatable to the motel and roadside culture. Motels are not meant to be permanent structures in our lives. We do not live in them like a house, but instead, they are a temporary place to stay while traveling. We move on from them; however, most of these places impact our lives in one way or another because of how we experience them. More iconic sites such as Route 66 are physically documented from history and preservation, while other unpopular sites may remain a memory. Within American Standard, I “capture” images of the motel in the form of single-page illustrations. While my visual essay consists of many short narratives, these single-page drawings can also act as photographic souvenirs without needing the full narratives to support them.

As Sontag states, photographs can act as souvenirs, but artifacts including knick-knacks, coffee mugs, and tees are more famously known as commercialized souvenirs. Souvenirs have a special place in our hearts: when we travel, we experience, and as a result, we collect. They make us feel comfortable. We think back on these experiences and feel positively nostalgic. The longer we hold these objects close to us, the more valuable they become. Motels, because of their history and importance, have commoditized souvenirs as a way to tie Okrant’s idea of connecting the past and present.

How do objects represent the past? As souvenirs, of course. They communicate a history, a narrative that makes us nostalgic. In On Longing, Susan Stewart does a good job of exploring the relationship between souvenirs and nostalgia in the sense of scale. In her book, she claims that souvenirs act as this “narrative” that authenticates the experience for the tourist; however, they do not fully contain the overall context of the place, just a tiny part of it. Because souvenirs are typically small in size or miniature, we can be in control of them as long as they are in our possession. Stewart also emphasizes how “the body is our mode of perceiving scale” in the sense of longing for the past, such as our childhood when things physically appeared larger. The relationship between nostalgia and scale is important as many places, such as motels, are experienced as a souvenir on a small and large scale. As I reflect on my childhood and my experience with motels, I, like Stewart, hope to encompass these same notions within my visual essay.

Roland Barthes also discusses the idea of souvenirs and scale in his essay “Eiffel Tower.” His essay dissects the many layers of interpretations of the Eiffel Tower, discussing its functionality and the gratification it provides. While he refers to the structure as a “total monument,” he also considers it a glance, object, metaphor, and symbol.

While we see souvenirs mostly in the form of miniatures, we can consider the structure of the Eiffel Tower a souvenir itself; it is both an object and symbol for the city of Paris. Souvenirs are also objects and symbols for a bigger, more authentic picture. The way that its audience interacts with the Eiffel Tower as a souvenir can vary in scale. As a large object or monument, one can walk around it, go inside it,

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In Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*, she breaks down this Greek-derived term accordingly: *nostos* - to return home and *algia* - longing. When experiencing nostalgia, one may feel a “sentiment of loss and displacement” or even a “romance with one’s own fantasy”\(^2\). We may feel some sort of homesickness or longing for the past when things seemed better, easier, and more fun. This is prevalent in historical places such as motels. When looking at objects such as vintage neon signs associated with motels, we yearn for this American cultural past. Many people react positively to this ephemera and hold them dear to their hearts as they remind them of the “good ole days.”

Nevertheless, positive experiences are not always associated with nostalgia. Constantine Sedikides, along with others\(^3\) writes about the history, conceptions, and psychological understanding of nostalgia in “Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future.” Observed by Swiss mercenaries in the 17th and 18th centuries, nostalgia was considered a bad omen at first. They claimed that nostalgia was and feel vulnerable under it. It can also be seen from up close or far away, making it accessible at all times. On the flip side, one can purchase a tiny replica of it from a shop nearby (see Figure 3). The interaction will be different, as one can instead be in control of it and cherish it forever.

Going into this year-long project, I knew that I wanted to use America’s Best Inn as a reference for the Crawford Comfort Inn. My relationship with this place feels much more authentic and genuine, which helps me illustrate it accurately in American Standard. The motel becomes the souvenir of my thesis project, as it portrays a time capsule that forever keeps the viewer in a restorative nostalgic mode.

The comfort and discomfort are related to nostalgia as it manifests within. But why are motels so nostalgic? Is it their familiarity? Is it their aesthetic? Is it the stories they created that are passed down for many generations? Before looking into this, we must define the term nostalgia. Being homesick or experiencing a wistful yearning for the past are two definitions used to describe this term.\(^2\) Memory, history, and experience trigger this sensation about a

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\(^3\) Other contributors include Tim Wildschut, Jamie Arndt, and Clay Routledge.

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**Above**

Figure 3. Keychain souvenir of the Eiffel Tower.

**Below**

Many Route 66 souvenirs, in the form of shot glasses, mugs, and license plates, found in a random gift shop during my research trip.
demons who possessed people if they displayed symptoms of sadness, including weeping, irregular heartbeat, and even anorexia. In the 20th century, nostalgia changed into a psychiatric disorder but was later reduced to a form of depression. Nowadays, it appears to be a more regular and positive occurrence; however, Sedikides states that it is still bittersweet for most. This complexity, similarly to comfort, is relevant to my past experiences, as I have felt both happy and sad while being nostalgic.

Nostalgia plays polar opposite roles in my thesis as it relates to the idea of comfort vs. discomfort. While flipping through the book, my goal is to have the viewer feel both nostalgia’s positive and negative effects. I want people to be able to react positively to the illustrations and references and reminiscence on these elements as they begin to remember them. On the other hand, I hope the reader may also feel a sense of sorrow relating to this yearning of a past time, while also sympathizing with the sad narratives that are embedded within. This concept is important to me in terms of understanding how nostalgia works in our everyday lives.

Svetlana Byom’s book explores the familiar feeling of nostalgia, and its function in society but categorizes them into two different types: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia indicates returning “home,” picturing past experiences as a “perfect snapshot” rather than a timeline of events. During this process one may want to focus too much on reconstructing and reviving the past. When experiencing restorative nostalgia, we may have cheerful memories and are more likely to seek out new and rewarding experiences. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, focuses more on the longing process, marinating this feeling of yearning while also accepting the past as it is and not trying to revive it. Doom and gloom is more associated with reflective nostalgia; one may lack to see the potential in the present because of being consumed by how much they miss the past. Both forms of nostalgia may seem polar opposites, but they are still empowering and achieve a similar goal.

The world I have created with The Crawford Comfort

25 In this journal he states that this bittersweetness is associated with loss, disappointment, and separation.

Left
Illustration of a television playing a Miss Cleo commercial, taken from American Standard.

Below
Corner of an America’s Best Inn motel room, taken during my research trip. This image became a reference for an illustration in American Standard.
The Muger Moss Motel, located in Lebanon, Missouri. Photo courtesy of Jack Hayhow.
“. . . motels may become a tourism landscape that the next generation will never have the pleasure to experience.”
Inn is doing both kinds of this nostalgic work that Byom mentions. Through minimal dialogue and actions, we can infer the sadness of the characters who pass through, and see them relive sad moments over and over again while staying at the motel. The motel itself is thus a time capsule that stops these characters from being reflective about their past memories and traumas. We only know their stories and intent during this very specific time.

Motels have become a dying form of lodging, yet many of them have done a good job in maintaining their charm that helped keep their business alive. Mark Okrant’s *No Vacancy: The Rise, Demise, and Reprise of America’s Motels* consists of an investigation of the changing tourism landscape, including interviews with various lodgers and dives into their experiences with motels and offers a solution to keep their business going.27 At the beginning of the book, he focuses much of his attention on the relationship between motels and nostalgia. He says that “The power of nostalgia comes from the fact that past experiences resonate in our memories; it makes statements of whom we are and where we begin—it connects the past to the present.”28 Motels are a few places that still connect us with this past time; for as long as they are still standing, we will continue to remember and sustain our relationship between this past and present moment.

Creating *American Standard* helps me capture this idea of preservation and nostalgia so people can look back years later and remember what once was. I did this through the “sketchy” style that mimics this idea of memory and the monochromatic, grayscale palette representing time (similar to an old photograph). Another detail contributing to nostalgia is the timely pop culture references included in some of the illustrations that reveal the period it takes place. For example, in the “Morning Routine” one-page comic, a man reads a newspaper headline “The Day that Music Died: Nirvana’s Cobain Dead at 27”. In the “Pizza” comic, we see a familiar Miss Cleo psychic commercial playing on Ramona’s television late at night. Even some


of the print-related logos, such as on the Pizza Hut box and the Meramec Caverns brochure, are noticeably unmodern to most. These references hint that this visual essay most likely occurs in the mid-1990s.

Motels are a time capsule in their aesthetic form and make people feel a certain way, which is nostalgic. One big assumption may be the time we live in now. We live in a world with people who have experienced the rise and fall of motel culture over the age of fifty. They have memories from their childhood of vacationing at these motels with their families, back when it was the norm, and have stories to tell their grandchildren. As a result, they hold these places dear to their hearts. However, due to their decline in popularity, some have prospered through rebranding. Thanks to Airbnbs, Vbros, and other more hip and unique lodging places, motels may become a tourism landscape that the next generation will never have the pleasure to experience.

Conclusion

The motel successfully symbolizes the idea of comfort, nostalgia, and the souvenir. These structures have a misleading appearance of comfort, and yet, just like many other things, we still buy into it. The unique atmosphere and visual aesthetic of these structures appear so tangible that they have become represented in commoditized souvenirs which make us feel nostalgic. Most hotels cannot achieve this same goal due to their luxurious nature. Motels have the stereotype of being strange and unusual which makes them interesting. In American Standard, the Crawford Comfort Inn is illustrated to strike importance to its object-ness as a sketchy, shady, and deserted entity, while the characters’ narratives also do the same. Motels, while permanent in structure, are also temporary through their functionality. As we come and go from these places, we can only remember them by taking something away from them, whether it be a picture, a souvenir, or just a memory; however, these items are also temporary as they can be disposed of at any moment. The American motel’s iconic neon signage, structural design, and strange history remain preserved and glorified, especially in mainstream media. For something originally mundane, they were a major influence on our cultural history and turned into visually pleasing gems. What’s next for the hospitality industry? While other forms of lodging may continue to grow more popular, we must continue to preserve the American motel, understand their importance, and resurrect their purpose in the future years to come.
Bibliography


Image Bibliography


Image Bibliography cont.


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