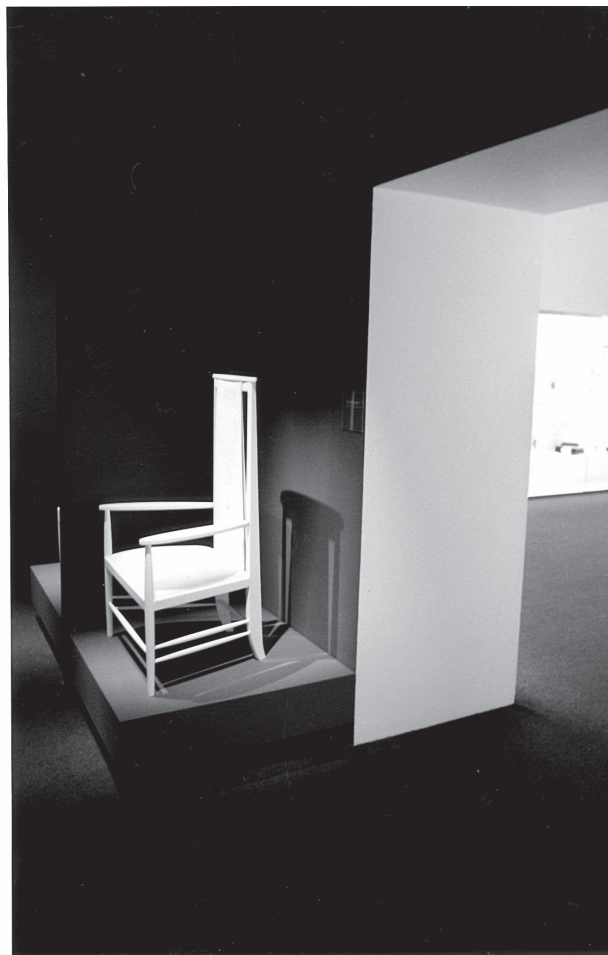


Space and place: Gordon H. Brown's Hotel North America series



Mackintosh chairs: White chair: MoMA, New York. 16 November 1974.

What do Gordon Brown and Charlie Watts have in common? Both are artists, but are better known for something other than making art. Watts is the drummer for the Rolling Stones, and Brown has been a full-time art writer for thirty years. Coincidentally, both have made a study of hotel rooms, Watts collecting his own pencil drawings just as he collects everything else. He writes:

I make a sketch of every bedroom I sleep in. If you're in place for two or three days, it's comfortable to complete. When you're in and out it's hard, but I've sketched every bed I've slept in on tour since about 1968. It's a visual diary that doesn't mean anything to anyone. I never look through them once I've done them, to be honest. It's more a record, to know I've got it... I'll look at them all one day.

Although visiting North America for the first time in the fall of 1974, Gordon Brown eschews the splendour of the passing parade of nature, and instead uses the idea of the hotel room as a lens through which to focus similarities and differences in culture.

Inevitably, hotel beds are a recurrent aspect of the rooms, as they are for Watts. Those in Washington, New York, New Haven, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Toronto where Brown stayed on his study tour from September to December in 1974 are presented as variations on a theme, the beds are made and unmade, patterned and plain, double and single with headboards and without. In one image, the bed is celebrated in a blaze of bedside and wall lighting, a witty reference to the inventor of electricity, Thomas Edison, whose name is given to the hotel. Throughout



The desk, lamp and window: The Barclay Hotel, Philadelphia. October 1974.

the photographs, this sense of humour is apparent: the valedictory image in the exhibition, nearest the door, was taken at George Washington's farm at Mount Vernon, now a National Shrine near Washington, D.C. On the sign alongside the bronze plaque that marks the tomb of Washington, the viewer is able to clearly read: 'To the Exit Gate. Shortest Route' underscored by a directional arrow. One image cleverly using reflections is titled *Mirror, mirror on the wall, Which is the fairest hotel of all?* paraphrasing the Queen's invocation from *Snow White*, and humorously suggesting one way of reading the suite of images as a whole as well as pointing to the centrality of mirrors in the images as devices for creating ambiguities of space.

Gordon Brown began seriously taking photographs in 1950 after attending Wellington Technical College. His aesthetic ability pointed to a career as an artist, and he studied for his Diploma of Fine Arts at Canterbury College 1952-55, meeting Colin McCahon while he lived in Christchurch. Opportunities in art in the late 1950s in New Zealand were few, but training as a librarian led him to pioneering work at the Alexander Turnbull, Elam and Auckland City Art Gallery libraries in the 1960s, until his first directorial position at the Waikato Art Museum in 1970. (When working there myself in the late 1980s, I discovered his meticulously preserved collection of a year's worth of product packaging, Cadbury's chocolate bar wrappers were interspersed with flattened Nyal's Tooth Drop boxes in amongst the ephemera boxes.) After an interlude introducing order to the Pictures collection at the Hocken Library in Dunedin, Brown moved north again to become Director of the Sarjeant Gallery in Wanganui in 1974. Exhibition practices in provincial galleries

in New Zealand were boosted by the ideas he introduced following his trip to North America that year.

His ostensible purpose for travel is made explicit in the images of Charles Rennie Mackintosh chairs, installed for exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in November 1974. Yet they operate as more than simple documentation, being studies in light and shadow that perfectly complement the pattern-making inherent in the Glaswegian Arts and Crafts artist's designs. Like the objects in the exhibition halls, the furniture and fittings of the hotel rooms are also put on display in these photographs. These are not four-star luxury appointments but the often mismatched furnishings of the cheap hotel. There is comfort here in the idea of home being recreated in each place, but also strangeness. Brown designs compositions which foreground the foreign: the air conditioning unit, the squat telephone, multi-channel television, bathrooms where water from powerful faucets goes the opposite direction down the plughole from the way it does at home. Personal effects offer clues to the identity of the occupant should the viewer wish to unravel them: an art book glimpsed on a table, a V8 can opened and on a shelf, an unmade single bed, a razor and shaving brush alongside New Zealand toothpaste, a raised toilet seat, the lamp always on over the writing desk. The hotel guest is antipodean, male and meticulous, studied and studious, and a long way from home.

Linda Tyler

Director, Centre for New Zealand Art Research and Discovery,
National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries,
The University of Auckland.

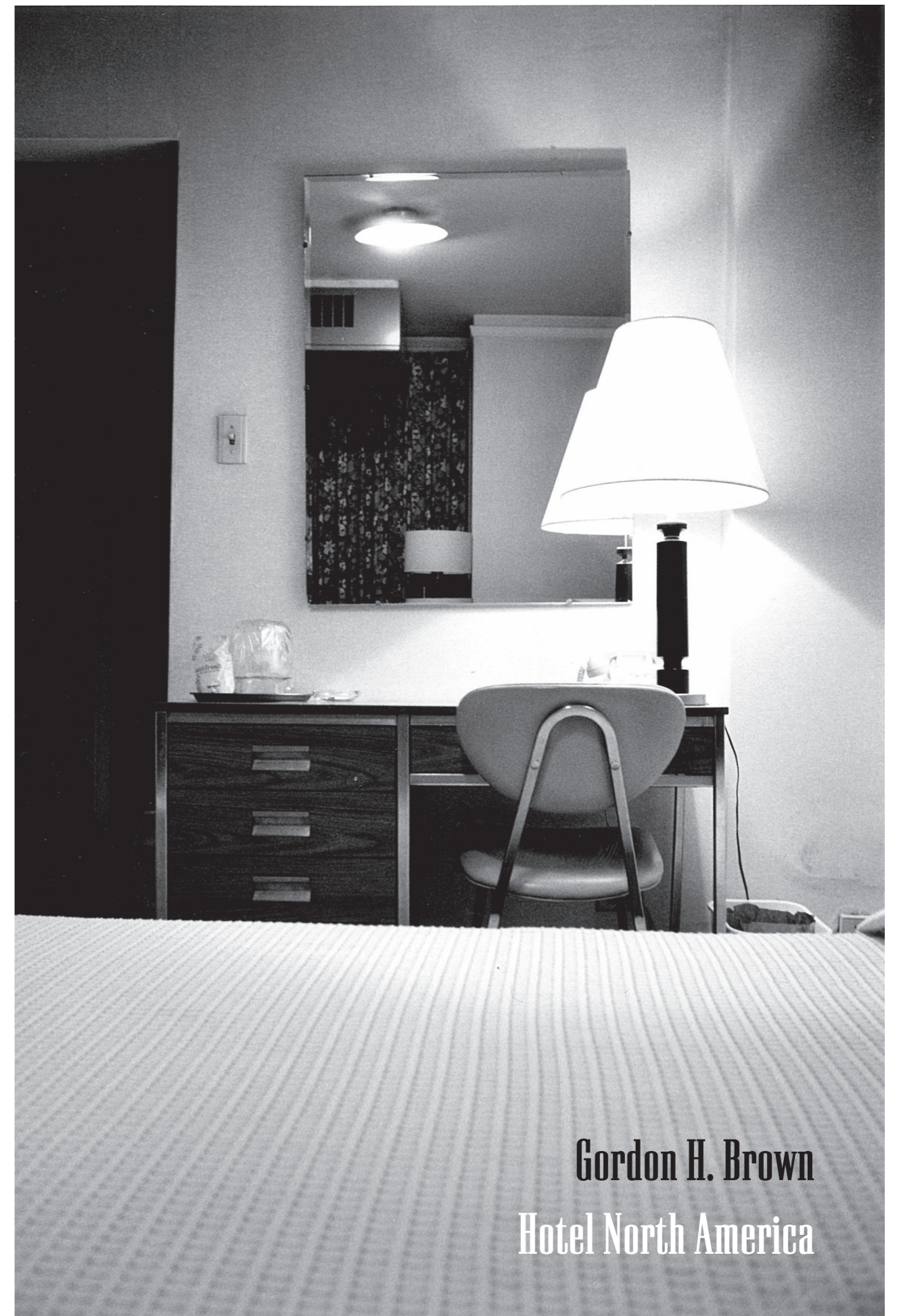
**Gordon H. Brown, Hotel North America,
The Gus Fisher Gallery at The University of Auckland,
8 June – 14 July 2007**

1. Air-conditioning and phone: Hotel National, Washington D.C. September 1974, 160 x 236 mm.
2. Bed and chair: Hotel National, Washington D.C. September 1974, 161 x 237 mm.
3. Shower and toilet: Hotel National, Washington D.C. September 1974, 236 x 161 mm.
4. The bathroom: Hotel National, Washington D.C. September 1974, 237 x 161 mm.
5. Hand-basin: Hotel National, Washington D.C. September 1974, 135 x 202 mm.
6. Soap and glasses: Hotel Edison, New York. September 1974, 161 x 236 mm.
7. Bathroom: Hotel Edison, New York. September 1974, 236 x 161 mm.
8. Hand-basin: Hotel Edison, New York. September 1974, 202 x 136 mm.
9. Bed, desk, TV: Hotel Edison, New York. September 1974, 237 x 161 mm.
10. The television and chair: Hotel Edison, New York. September 1974, 235 x 160 mm.
11. Shower curtain: Hotel Edison, New York. September 1974, 161 x 236 mm.
12. The Television: Hotel Duncan, New Haven. September 1974, 160 x 236 mm.
13. Mirror, mirror on the wall, Which is the best hotel of all? Hotel Duncan, New Haven. September 1974, 161 x 236 mm.
14. Bed, TV and window: Copley Square Hotel, Boston. September 1974, 127 x 161 mm.
15. The bed: Copley Square Hotel, Boston. September 1974, 127 x 161 mm.
16. Mirror reflecting TV and bed: The Barclay Hotel, Philadelphia. October 1974, 114 x 172 mm.
17. The desk, lamp and window: The Barclay Hotel, Philadelphia. October 1974, 161 x 237 mm.
18. Twin beds: The Barclay Hotel, Philadelphia. October 1974, 161 x 237 mm.
19. Chair, bureau, TV and bed: The Barclay Hotel, Philadelphia. October 1974, 137 x 161 mm.
20. Hand-basin and mirror: The Barclay Hotel, Philadelphia. October 1974, 236 x 161 mm.
21. The entrance hall: Lord Baltimore Hotel, Baltimore. October 1974, 237 x 161 mm.
22. The bed and the bureau: Lord Baltimore Hotel, Baltimore. October 1974, 237 x 161 mm.
23. TV and window: Lord Baltimore Hotel, Baltimore. October 1974, 237 x 161 mm.
24. Bathroom (1): Hotel Strathcona, Toronto. November 1974, 239 x 169 mm.
25. Bed and bureau: Midland Hotel, Chicago. November 1974, 237 x 161 mm.
26. Roof-top car park: Roosevelt Hotel, Portland. December 1974, 237 x 161 mm.
27. Mackintosh chairs: Title: MoMA, New York. 16 November 1974, 115 x 174 mm.
28. Mackintosh chairs: White chair: MoMA, New York. 16 November 1974, 174 x 115 mm.
29. Mackintosh chairs: Black chairs: MoMA, New York. 16 November 1974, 174 x 115 mm.
30. Mackintosh chairs: Chairs with reflections: MoMA, New York. 16 November 1974, 115 x 174 mm.
31. To the exit gate: Mount Vernon. 14 September 1974, 115 x 176 mm.

Note from the photographer:

Although these black and white photographs were taken during 1974, all were printed by Jenny Tomlin to the photographer's instructions during 2004-07, except three, less expertly printed during 1980 for an exhibition called *Rooms*. All the photographs from numbers 1 to 26 are from the *Hotel North America* series, though 26 also belongs to an open series called *Windows*. The last image belongs to a small series taken at George Washington's farm at Mount Vernon, now a National Shrine near Washington D.C. All photographs available on order through McNamara Gallery, Wanganui.

Front cover image: Bed and bureau: Midland Hotel, Chicago. November 1974.



Gordon H. Brown
Hotel North America