

# Hotel Imperial: between traces and scenarios

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## Hotel Imperial: entre restos e encenações

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Located on Rua Guaicurus, in the center of Belo Horizonte, capital of the state of Minas Gerais (Brazil), the building we now know as Hotel Imperial was built in the 1920s to function as a sanatorium - a place for the treatment of contagious diseases. In the 1940s, under Juscelino Kubistchek's administration, it was transformed into a hotel, and rebuilt in *art deco* style. At the time, the hotels in the region were still primarily used to house families coming from other cities and other states. Later the apartments were adapted to serve as prostitution premises and, at present, the building, owned by the Santa Casa of Belo Horizonte, has been closed for more than 10 years and keeps the original title of "Hotel". The play *Rua das Camélias*, from Belo Horizonte, premiered in this location in November 2016 recreating the prostitution scene.

As I first stepped into that setting to watch the play, I felt thrown into that universe, so unfamiliar and strange to me. The mystery surrounding all that staging carried my imagination to that other time when prostitutes and clients circulated in an atmosphere of seduction and negotiation, the buzz of the corridors, the stories of all those who were part of it.

Drawn by curiosity, I return the following week to photograph. Then I wander through the empty spaces as if invading the intimacy of other people, and I perceive the energy of the many souls who have passed through that place, as if it were impregnated on the walls, in the atmosphere, in the vestiges. I feel a bit like that ragpicker of History, defined by Walter Benjamin and evoked by Georges Didi-Huberman (2015), who tells us that "it is in the impurity, in the scum of things that the Yore survives" (p. 120). I walk through the rooms slowly and photograph.

Photography can be considered a privileged tool for reflecting on the experience of memory for, as it evokes the past, it also builds other realities. In these images, I try to create a game, a tension between the past and the present, between fiction and reality. By this I mean a double fiction: one given by the play itself, whose traces are in the objects left by the actors, and another given by my own imaginary, that which lets me fabulate. In some images, ghostly apparitions resurface to show that the now is steeped in the past. Wouldn't imagination be responsible for bringing affection into documentary work and for allowing the photographer to create "fiction" in the document?

I realise that there are other layers of time in this place my imagination could access, as the building once housed families travelling on tours and the sick who came to the capital seeking a cure. A place where all times intertwine, blend together and split, the former stage of several stories and many affections, the Hotel Imperial is today entrusted to a "Santa Casa" and is located on Rua Guaicurus, an indigenous word. The term *guaicurú*, according to Guido Boggiani, is etymologically divided into *guai*, which means "inhabitant, native, combative, wicked, traitor"; and *ecuru*, which means "scabies, dirty skin" (Herberts, 1998, p. 41). Guaicuru thus has the pejorative meaning - "wicked and dirty people". Coincidence or not, prostitutes are socially seen as leftovers, dirt, scum, rags of history.

In this place of overlapping times, I choose to imagine, as the actors of the play *Rua das Camélias*, the prostitution scene, of which the traces are evident. I walk into each room with the curiosity of a voyeur, by doing so, I invite the spectators to a journey through the remains of this former brothel where I discover a mosaic of precariousness, melancholy, pain and pleasure.



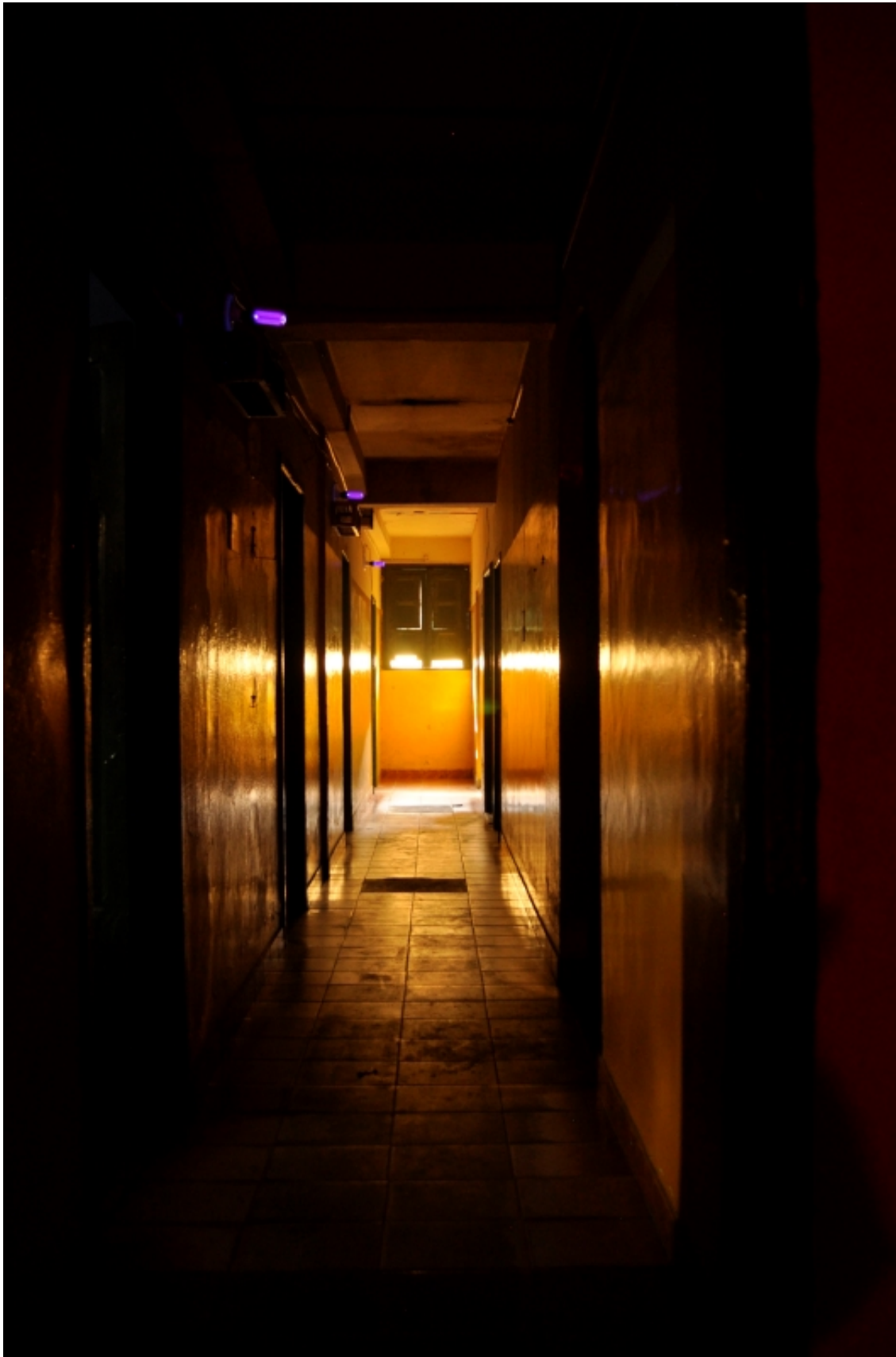
Figure 1. Entrance



**Figure 2.** *Precariousness*



**Figure 3.** *Protector of warriors*



**Figure 4.** *Passage 1*



**Figure 5.** *Room 1*



**Figure 6.** *Traces 1*



**Figure 7.** *Traces 2*





**Figure 8.** *Rua das Camélias*



**Figure 9.** *Traces 3*



**Figure 10.** *Rua das Camélias*



**Figure 11.** *Rua das Camélias*



**Figure 12.** *Rua das Camélias*



**Figure 13.** *Passage 2*



Figure 14. Canteen

Translation: Dúnya Azevedo | Revision: Anabela Delgado

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## Biographical note

**Dúnya Azevedo** has a PhD in Social Communication from the Federal University of Minas Gerais, with a sandwich scholarship at the University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne (Paris, France); she has a Masters' degree in Design from the School of Industrial Design, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro; and a degree in Social Communication from the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais. She has work experience in the area of Social Communication focusing on Design and Photography. Her research focuses on the meanings of the photographic image and the relationships between art, document and memory. Dúnya teaches short courses and workshops in the areas of photography, design, art and culture. Dúnya has been a professor for over 20 years, teaching subjects related to image, photography, semiotics, image theory and visual language at undergraduate, postgraduate and masters' courses. She is a professor affiliated to the research group "Media and Narrative" of the Postgraduate Program in Social Communication at the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

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