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Plantation Housing in Hawai'i

The cultivation of sugar changed the face of Hawai'i. Sugar cane, which originally arrived in Hawai'i in Polynesian voyaging canoes, eventually became Hawai'i's most successful agricultural product. Sugar changed the economic patterns, land ownership, and the demographics of the islands. By the turn of the 20th century, sugar was grown by large companies, mostly aligned with American interests. Much of the land fell into the control of foreigners after the *mahele* of 1848, when the crown lands were divided. As a highly labor intensive crop, the cultivation of sugar—coupled with pineapple production by the beginning of the 20th century—required the importation of over 400,000 workers in a 50-year period. These patterns can still be seen today in the continued development of planned communi-

ties often under corporate sponsorship, and a population that is primarily Asian in background.

Many pockets of plantation communities still exist, primarily in the agricultural areas. Some of these contain excellent examples of the housing built for sugar workers; a number of which were the result of a major program of the Hawai'i Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA). The HSPA was formed in 1895 to support the technical and agricultural requirements of the booming sugar industry. Partially as a result of several strikes by workers a standard set of housing plans was developed by HSPA beginning in 1919. By the mid-1930s, a number of individual companies had developed their own plans in addition to those of the HSPA, all with the intention of improving the overall living conditions of workers. Although many of the plantations in Hawai'i are no longer producing sugar, the housing specifically developed for the



Barbershop and Okinawan House at Hawai'i's Plantation Village. Photo by Augie Salbosa.

immigrant workers still remains in many clusters of plantation camps. However, hundreds of such structures are now under threat, as agribusinesses increasingly divest themselves of their holdings and company housing is privatized. Efforts to preserve what remains are becoming increasingly critical.

Over the last 10 years, there have been a number of innovative approaches to re-use of these significant remnants of small-scale buildings of both the sugar and pineapple industries. A small village on Kaua'i has been restored to house employees. On O'ahu, a large concentration of nearly 300 individual houses is being renovated for affordable housing. Also on O'ahu, a living history museum has been created using restored and replicated structures. Each of these efforts to preserve the plantation era architecture has supported a step toward the recognition and interpretation of the culture and society of the plantation era. Each is significant in its own way.

The first large scale effort to maintain plantation houses for continued use was initiated by Grove Farm Museum on the island of Kaua'i. The workers' camp, which lines the edge of the historic plantation homestead, was restored in the 1980s as an essential element in preserving the story of the Wilcox family, who were important in the early history of sugar on the island of Kaua'i. Although one house is used as a living history exhibit because of its proximity to the main museum structure, the other houses are still lived in by the workers. Nevertheless, these properties too are tied to the mission of the Grove Farm Museum, an educational institution devoted to the interpretation of both the Wilcox family and plantation life in the Hawaiian islands. The scale and ambiance of this original community aids the interpretation of the museum and protects it from encroaching development. Following further threats to resources of this kind, guidelines for the rehabilitation of Kaua'i's

plantation housing stock were developed in 1988 based directly on the experience of the renovation work at the Grove Farm camp. These were printed by the Community Housing Resource Board of Kaua'i for distribution throughout the islands and have done much to inform individual owners of what is significant about their homes and how to maintain them.

The 'Ewa Village project on O'ahu presented a different level of intervention and interpretation. 'Ewa was an entire company town planned, constructed, and maintained by 'Ewa Sugar Company to house more than a thousand workers. Although half of the camps in 'Ewa Village have been demolished in the last 10 years, three of the major housing clusters still remain in this central O'ahu community. When 600 acres of land were condemned as a part of a new master planned community, nearly 300 homes became the property of the City and County of Honolulu. A non-profit development corporation comprised of leaders in the preservation community and representatives of the land owners was selected to act as the general contractor for the restoration of the houses. The project, for the initial village of approximately 150 houses, was to be completed in 1996. The work has been under the direction of Executive Director Doug Davich, a preservation contractor.

The aim of the other rehabilitation projects within the 'Ewa Village scheme is to allow for the continued existence of the cohesive 'Ewa community; to assure this, a complex program of subsidized finance and resale has been introduced to allow the sugar workers to gain ownership of their own homes. Multiple funding sources from federal and city loan programs have made the projects a reality. Nearly 50 men in carpentry, plumbing, and electrical crews are working to complete all of the restoration work by late 1998. As homes are repaired, they are sold back to the existing tenants or other families from the original community. Restrictive covenants protect the area from future incompatible development.

In the area of education, a private organization has taken the initiative to "tell the plantation story." Also on O'ahu, Hawai'i's Plantation Village is also a concentration of plantation homes on the site of a former rice plantation, adjacent, however, to one of the largest sugar mills as well. Operated as a living history museum, this education facility is devoted to telling the story of Hawai'i's immigrant plantation workers through, in part, a presentation of their housing. The physical context of the museum was developed after extensive research of plantation housing on all the islands. The development of the museum involved restoration of two National Register properties on the site, the Inari Shrine and the Chinese cook-house. It



Worker's Cottage at Grove Farm Museum. Photo by William Chapman.

also included construction of replica buildings and preservation of existing taro fields. The decision to replicate buildings rather than move original threatened properties to the site was a carefully considered choice. The Design and Development Committee members felt that to wrest historic properties from their original context would not be a good preservation alternative and would set a bad precedent.

With the cooperation of local ethnic and civic organizations, each major group is represented by a prototypical house, outbuildings, and demonstration gardens. Original construction techniques—techniques that evolved during several periods in plantation history—were carefully preserved or demonstrated in each of the 31 wood buildings, grouped into what appears as a cohesive village community.

In order to construct the Plantation Village, extensive research of plantation architecture was undertaken at libraries, archives, museums, and sugar companies to determine the development of plantation architecture over time. Hundreds of hours were spent examining microfilm records or covered in protective suits—centipedes are a significant hazard on abandoned plantation building sites—to study the framing of early plantation structures. The buildings serve as a physical record of the range of architectural types, construction materials, and techniques used in the plantation camps. The development of “single wall construction,” in which only the exterior sheathing boards are used in bearing to support the roof, can be clearly traced in the structures of the village.

These three projects only touch upon the demands still fac-

ing those concerned with the preservation of the plantation housing legacy. Thousands of plantation houses in many areas once devoted to sugar still exist. On the Hamakua coastline of the Big Island of Hawai`i, where sugar production has recently ended, literally hundreds of houses are under direct and immediate threat. The Hamakua coastline in particular is a remarkably scenic area and the temptation to convert the area to resort development is extremely high. Since the area is economically depressed due to the lack of agricultural production, the future of these communities is even more fragile. It would be unfortunate, however, if the main examples of plantation housing were to be found only in a few protected communities and museums.

The negative impact of the demise of sugar is not easy to resolve. Although sensitive zoning and creative economic supports are part of the solution, it appears that sugar, even in its demise, will change the face of Hawai`i once again.

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Deteriorating building at `Ewa plantation site. Photo by William Chapman.

