

# Incorporating the Plantation into 21st Century Hawai'i

Plantation agriculture in Hawai'i over the past 120 years laid much of the foundation for the state's current multicultural society. Plantation agriculture shaped patterns of land ownership, the economy, social relations, local cuisine, pidgin language, and humor. Landowners and plantation managers brought in waves of Chinese, Japanese, Okinawan, Portuguese, Puerto Rican, Korean, and Filipino immigrants to work in the fields and mills. These workers transformed the land, economy and culture of Hawai'i through their labor.

Plantation managers needed to attract and keep immigrant plantation workers under difficult working conditions of industrialized agriculture. In the first half of the 20th century, plantation managers built communities with houses, stores, schools, churches and recreational facilities around the mills. As the plantations are closed today for economic reasons, these existing communities of workers and retirees lose their basis for existence. Workers are laid off with varied prospects for re-employment. Lands are returned to the original lessor or sold in bulk. Continued life in the plantation camps is problematic. Community facilities and employee rental housing are often deteriorated; and the plantation systems for water, sewer, drainage, electricity, and roads do not meet local government health and safety standards.

Many aspects of local culture emerged from plantation communities, but the opportunity for preservation of the physical framework of the plantation is rare. The City and County of Honolulu's `Ewa Villages Revitalization Project is a unique attempt to preserve many parts of a plantation and to build a renewed community around it.

The `Ewa Plantation Company leased land some 20 miles from Honolulu and began operations on the `Ewa Plain of O'ahu in January, 1890; initially, the workers were transient contract laborers. In the first half of the 20th century, housing and community facilities were built to retain the work force. By the late 1920s, some 5,000 people lived on the plantation. On its leased land, `Ewa Plantation built and maintained more than 600 homes for workers, skilled employees, and supervisors in numerous camps, some of which exist today and are called "Ewa Villages." `Ewa Plantation also built athletic and recreational facilities, social

clubs, a community store, a health center, a hospital, and an administration building.

Declining profits in the 1950s and 1960s caused `Ewa Plantation to sell to another sugar company, O'ahu Sugar, in the early 1970s. Sugar mill operations were shifted to the O'ahu Sugar mill. The employee housing continued to be used, but much of the physical plant declined. The community had been built solely on sugar cultivation and processing. Individuals had small cottage industries, but no economic activities developed that could carry the community beyond the demise of sugar.

Anticipating the 1995 expiration of the sugar company's land lease, the City and County of Honolulu began planning for the future of `Ewa Villages in the 1970s. The `Ewa region was slated for development of a "Second City" and significant suburban expansion. Fernandez Village, a plantation camp constructed in the 1950s, was out of the flood zone and near a major road and modern infrastructure system. In the 1980s, lots were subdivided and sold to the plantation workers with minimal design control over rebuilding and renovation work by the new homeowners. Ten years later, Fernandez Village shows little evidence of its origin as a plantation camp.

Advocacy from the historic preservation community and community groups led the City and County of Honolulu to modify its plans for the remaining plantation camps. The current 620-acre `Ewa Villages Revitalization Project has four mandates: to provide affordable housing opportunities and a continued sense of community for the current residents (250 families) and other island families, to preserve the historic character of the plantation villages, to develop a drainage program to remove the villages from the flood zone, and to break even financially. A historic core of some 140 acres is designated that includes the entrance to the community and the community buildings, the remaining buildings in the mill area, and the three existing plantation villages.

The entrance to the plantation is maintained as a banyan-lined road with the re-use of the administration building, community store, mill area, post office, and large houses for the manager and supervisors. The community buildings are being used for school, childcare, and youth facili-



Typical c. 1937 workers' houses, 'Ewa Plantation before (above) and after rehabilitation (right). Photos by William Chapman.

ties. A neighborhood commercial area and a district park are planned for the old mill area and are expected to incorporate some of the remaining mill structures. The Manager's House is slated to become a community interpretive center. The three supervisors' houses will be used for special needs housing. A Bachelors' Quarters for skilled employees will be renovated into rental housing for current residents.

Rehabilitating and re-using the existing housing and community facilities pose major engineering challenges. The three remaining plantation camps were in a flood plain. Construction of a public golf course contained and directed the sheet flow from the fields and removed the area from the flood zone. New water, sewer and drainage lines are being built while the substandard plantation system is maintained to service current residents until switchover. New roads are constructed to meet health and safety standards while retaining some of the old plantation characteristics, such as the narrower width and absence of curbing and side drainage. New overhead utilities are being installed, and the area is being subdivided to permit the sale of homes.

Almost 280 workers' and skilled employees' houses remain in the three villages. The 'Ewa Villages Nonprofit Development Corporation was established as a nonprofit construction firm to lower the costs of renovation and to implement historic preservation standards. The renovated houses and newly subdivided lots will be sold to current residents and to the general public.



Rental housing will be built for current residents who do not purchase homes.

The project would not be financially feasible without the concurrent development and sale or rental of approximately 1,300 new housing units over roughly a 10-year period. Approximately 300 houses will be built as infill structures in the existing villages; these infill homes are designed with compatible post and pier construction, dimensions, rooflines, and setbacks. The other new homes are being built in eight new villages.

A community association, the 'Ewa Villages Owners' Association, is being established. It will have the responsibility to enforce design guidelines developed to maintain 'Ewa Villages' historic sense of place. Exterior changes by owners within the historic core will also be subject to review by the State Historic Preservation Office.

Economic shifts are erasing plantation agriculture in Hawai'i. In the face of plantation closure and job loss, deteriorated housing, substandard infrastructure, and rural isolation, the opportunity to preserve the plantation community is rare. Nevertheless, the state's recent plantation history shaped much of present-day Hawai'i; and the challenge of the 'Ewa Villages Revitalization Project is to incorporate the physical structures of that past into a new community.

#### References

Davich, Doug. "'Ewa Plantation: Infusing the Future with Flavor of the Past." *Historic Hawai'i*. January/February 1994.

*Jeanne Hamilton is a project officer at the Department of Housing and Community Development in Honolulu, Hawai'i. She previously worked with housing and rehabilitation programs on the mainland U.S., most recently in the city of Baltimore.*