

## Waikīkī—Where the Past Collides with the Future

*Waikīkī skyline.  
Photo by David  
Franzen.*

The resort area of Waikīkī presents a visual challenge for historic preservationists and cultural resource managers. Unlike famous historic resorts on the mainland U.S., Waikīkī has experienced no true hiatus in its development. In fact, change and development have occurred at a relatively regular pace since Waikīkī's sudden boom in the late 1950s and early 1960s at the time of Hawai'i's statehood. Waikīkī is not, then, a stagnant backwater waiting to be rediscovered by preservationists, but an ongoing development phenomenon.

Since the introduction of jet service to Hawai'i in 1959, the visitor industry in Hawai'i overall has moved forward and not looked back. By 1967 its earnings had surpassed those of sugar and pineapple combined, and since 1972, when visitor spending overtook defense spending in the Islands, the visitor industry has been Hawai'i's number one generator of revenues. In advancing to the top of the economic ladder, the industry has literally obliterated Waikīkī's past. The older, court type hotels, smaller bungalows, and low-rise apartment complexes dating principally from the 1920s through the 1940s were demolished to make way for new development; many 1950s and 1960s buildings, in turn, have either been swept away or adapted and "modernized" to keep pace with newer hotel and commercial changes.

The general public hardly considers the range of 1950s and 1960s, and especially 1970s, highrise buildings for their historic value. Their significance, moreover, is as yet far from understood. They are obviously significant, and perhaps exceptionally significant, for their role in Hawai'i's recent history. But is this sufficient reason for considering their preservation, or must they be significant beyond this major, albeit limited, context? And though preservationists and historians might recognize significance in building of this period—and even in some cases "project" significance into the future—does this mean that the public, and its representatives in the political arena, are ready to accept these judgments as well?

The State of Hawai'i's Historic Preservation Division, in cooperation with the Historic Preservation Program at the University of Hawai'i, has begun the process of developing a set of contexts with which to better evaluate buildings and other items of significance in the Waikīkī area. This follows upon earlier, less systematic attention to the



area by the state office, which included a number of National Register nominations of both individual properties and more encompassing thematic nominations.

At this point, the "context" project is in many ways an academic exercise, both figuratively and literally. The nationally developed context or theme-based format for understanding and evaluating resources, in fact, has proved useful in placing properties together and giving cohesion to an often seemingly disparate set of properties. Overall, the contexts are local (or state-wide) ones, although there are some properties with obvious links to national contexts, such as the several military properties in the Waikīkī area or Buckminster Fuller's aluminum geodesic dome (1957) at the then Kaiser Hawaiian Village Hotel. Although there will be obvious limits to what can be done with the list once it is completed—many of the properties, for example, will be considered too recent in date to nominate even with a liberal interpretation of the criteria considerations—nonetheless, with completion of the contexts and compilation of a complete inventory, we will at least know what still exists and what is likely to be considered important in the not-too-distant future. What we will not have, at least at this point, is a strategy in place for preservation of these identified resources.

To develop any sort of preservation strategy, those involved with the preservation of Waikīkī must move beyond merely identifying significant properties. Again, the recent history of Waikīkī has centered on change. There is no reason to think that this trend will abate. To be effective, preservationists will need to know where and when to fight their battles. A system is needed not only to evaluate significance, but more importantly, what has been labeled "high preservation value."

Waikīkī's history helps to illustrate the problems at hand. Waikīkī has undergone what might be considered as five major transformations in the last two centuries. It served as a traditional seat of power for the island of O'ahu from the mid-1400s until 1809, when Kamehameha I moved his court to Honolulu, a natural deep draft harbor that provided a haven for western ships. This move, coupled with a precipitous decline in the Hawaiian population,

led to Waikīkī becoming a backwash of civilization, or to use Twain's words, "historic Waikīkī." From the 1860s onward the district emerged as a popular ocean-side retreat, a day use recreational area that existed side by side with the revival of wetland agriculture by the Chinese. With the completion of the trolley line to the beach in 1904 and the destruction of the wetland agricultural fields in the 1920s, Waikīkī became an increasingly resort-oriented, suburban residential area. From the mid-1950s onward it has developed into an urban resort that now attracts more than six million visitors a year.

The recently rehabilitated Moana Hotel (1901) stands as the oldest building in Waikīkī. Built on the heels of the United States' annexation of Hawai'i as a territory, it was Waikīkī's first successful hotel endeavor, and the third attempt at establishing a seaside hotel at the beach. Today it is dwarfed by the successful visitor industry it anticipated.

Other turn-of-the-century Waikīkī hotels such as the Seaside, the Waikīkī Inn, and later the popular Halekulani Hotel (1917), were characterized by a cottage atmosphere. These have either disappeared with time or were consumed by more ambitious hotel projects during the 1920s and 1930s. Despite a seeming boom in hotel openings in Waikīkī during the first decade of the 20th century, the 300-room Alexander Young Hotel (1903), situated in downtown Honolulu, boasted more hotel rooms than all of Waikīkī.

The construction of the Ala Wai canal in the 1920s presaged a dramatic shift in the Waikīkī landscape. The canal diverted the three major streams that ran through the district. In turn, this led to the demise of the wetland agriculture and duck farming that dominated the area, and banished the voracious mosquito from the ocean front.

The subdivision and suburbanization of Waikīkī followed, and Hawai'i's first world class hotel, the Royal Hawaiian (1927) appeared on the scene. The construction of the hotel coupled with the introduction by Matson Navigation Company of new ocean liners, including the Malolo, the world's fastest at the time, and the improvement of Honolulu Harbor, including the erection of Aloha Tower, led the *Honolulu Advertiser* to declare by 1938 that Waikīkī had made the "transition from a once rural community into a smart center visited and enjoyed by the great and near great of the world."

Establishments supporting the "glamour" of the district included Gump's (1929), a branch of the San Francisco store, which specialized in *objets d'art* from East and West, and the beautiful tropical-deco Waikīkī Theatre (1936), with its lush landscaped courtyard and fountain and an interior decorated with artificial foliage and a "rainbow" proscenium. These still remain along Kalākaua Avenue, but in transmogrified forms. The interior of the latter was gutted following the Hawai'i Historic Places Review Board's 1979 rejection of its nomination on the grounds that the building was "neither over 50 years old nor of exceptional significance."

World War II brought thousands of servicemen to the islands, and they returned to the mainland with glowing tales of paradise. Visitation to the islands increased after the war and by the mid-1950s hovered around the 100,000 mark. In 1955 the Waikīkī Biltmore Hotel, Rosalei Apartments and Princess Kaiulani Hotel succeeded each other as the tallest buildings in the territory in a matter of less than six months, marking the commencement of Waikīkī as an urban resort.

The impetus for new development was accelerated in 1959 when the jet airplane reduced the flight time from the west coast from an uncomfort-

## Buckminster Fuller Dome

The Hilton Dome Auditorium in Waikīkī, a geodesic dome designed by R. Buckminster Fuller, who pioneered the exploration of lightweight architectural design and materials, passed its life expectancy of 40 years in January of 1998. Erected in 22 hours building time in 1957, the 145-foot diameter aluminum dome remains a direct link between today



View of the R. Buckminster Fuller-designed Hilton Dome Auditorium, Waikīkī. Used with permission of R. Buckminster Fuller, Carbondale, IL., and supplied by Leco Photo Service, New York, NY.

and Fuller's groundbreaking engineering and design methods of the 1950s, which introduced architects to sophisticated geometric concepts and innovations in construction. The Hilton Dome Auditorium is the first production of Hawai'i developer Henry Kaiser's license to mass produce Fuller's design at his Oakland, California aluminum works. Fuller's lightweight, low-cost dome in Waikīkī was the first of many prefab Kaiser domes and has proven to be durable for today's development climate. As with many other buildings of the "recent past," this structure is threatened presently by new development plans.

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able 12 hours to just 5. That year also saw Hawai'i admitted as the 50th state, the publication of James Michener's *Hawai'i*, and tourism jump to a quarter of a million people.

In 1955, the *Honolulu Advertiser*, on the opening of the 350-unit, 10-story Reef Hotel, had speculated that someday Waikiki might be able to support a 700-room hotel. By 1962, the construction of the Reef Tower and its addition expanded the capacity of the Reef alone to 883 rooms. By 1986, the 50 square blocks of Waikiki included five hotels with inventories in excess of 1,100 rooms, with the Hilton Hawaiian Village offering 2,612 rooms. Later development would surpass even these figures. The resulting optimism for the future has resulted in Waikiki shedding its past just as a lizard sheds its skin. The district exists for today, a totally modern, upbeat urban center in the mainstream of contemporary excitement and trends.

Here the 1950s is ancient history, much of it already destroyed, most recently the Waikikian Hotel (1956) with its hyperbolic paraboloid roof and open-air Tahitian Lanai Restaurant, and the impending demolition of Canlis Restaurant (1953) with its striking architecture and "modern" tropical ambiance, and Buckminster Fuller's geodesic aluminum dome (1957). The few remaining 1950s and earlier buildings are nostalgically clutched at as reminders of a gentler time. Citizens groups have proposed registration of these structures for they know they may not be long for the fast-changing resort area.

How we are to sort through this complex array of buildings, building remnants and other features to pick out those properties that **must** be preserved remains another problem. What has been utilized is a system for evaluation, with some elements borrowed from the existing structure of the National Register program and its guidelines, and other elements tailored for local application in Hawai'i and Waikiki.

Overall, there are six areas of consideration: integrity, uniqueness, rarity, a work by an outstanding designer, condition, and the existing level of public recognition. Several other areas may be considered including innovative technology or materials, and a site of an important event or place associated with a significant figure.

- **Integrity** is well defined by the National Register program, although elements within what are considered the various aspects of integrity, such as "feeling" and "association," remain somewhat unclear, especially to the lay person.

- **Uniqueness** is a concept most members of the public can be brought to understand. The only building in Waikiki designed by locally-prominent architect C.W. Dickey, for example; the only hotel from the 1920s period.

- **Rarity**, like uniqueness, enjoys a broad level of public recognition and acceptance as important to the value of a property. A rare example of a 1920s bungalow, for example. Rarity is seen as a key element for promotion of value to the public.

- **Name recognition value**, or work by outstanding designers, both Hawaiian architects, as well as Mainland architects practicing in Hawai'i, seen as a valuable "asset." Support from professional organizations can be expected, as this aspect recognizes the value of their professions.

- **Condition**, often confused with integrity, is the realistic potential of a property for preservation. Condition has wide acceptance as an element in "value" and as a yardstick for assessment. A property in poor condition, for example, might justifiably be demolished, while one in excellent condition could be less easily dismissed.

- **Innovative technology or materials** in buildings can generally be understood by the public, as with "rarity" or "the work of an outstanding designer." What better thing to be recognized in Waikiki than buildings or other features exemplifying the resort area.

The category of "important events or places associated with important people" can best be used to reinforce another point of significance. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel, for example, is significant for its architecture, its architects and its high level of public recognition, as well as for its association with important visitors.

Many cultural features associated with native Hawaiians are now highly valued by the general public. Justifying the value of the historic grove of royal palms near the Royal Hawaiian Hotel is relatively easy due to the growing recognition of the importance of Hawaiian history.

These six key and two auxiliary factors provide at least an outline for the assessment of "cultural value" for particular properties in Waikiki and elsewhere in the state. They lift the criteria for the assessment of historical significance out of a strictly intellectual realm into the more practical domain of preservation, and provide the state with a method for making decisions about protection, or at least about which properties to support, as well as a rationale for gaining favorable public opinion.

Waikiki is a place of the present, and, in an important sense, of the future. As preservationists, we are concerned that elements of the area's development be preserved as a record and to ensure variety and contrast, if nothing else. What the future will bode, of course, remains unknown.

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