

Scott P. Bogle

Keeping Kaimukī

Making Main Street Work

1930s and 40s commercial buildings, Kaimukī. Photos by William Chapman.

The urban fabric of Hawai'i's Territorial era, woven before the onset of the high-rise hotel and the freeway, becomes harder to find in a size larger than a swatch with each passing year. By some accounts, Honolulu retains only two or three relatively intact districts representative of the city's commercial development in the first half of the century, prior to the development of tourism as the state's main industry. Preserving the historic character and revitalizing the economy of one of these districts, known as Kaimukī, has been the goal of a series of initiatives by the City and County of Honolulu, the University of Hawai'i Historic Preservation Program, and the Kaimukī business and residential community during the past three years. The progress of these efforts provides an interesting look at the challenges of urban revitalization and historic preservation in Honolulu.

Situated atop a hill in East Honolulu, Kaimukī was founded in 1898 as what some have referred to as Hawai'i's first sub-division. Kaimukī's development began in earnest following a major fire in Honolulu's Chinatown district in 1900, as families and businesses sought out inexpensive land in the newly developing district. In addition to residential construction, the early 1900s saw the district grow with the establishment of a hospital, several schools, and an extension of the Honolulu trolley line.

The main thoroughfare through Kaimukī, Wai'ālae Avenue, was also the primary road leading to developing sections of East O'ahu. With the growing residential population and heavy through-traffic, it was an ideal location for businesses, and during the 1920s-1950s Kaimukī developed into one of the primary commercial districts for the city.

The 1950s saw construction of a shopping mall in the Wai'ālae-Kahala district abutting Kaimukī in the east, as well as the mammoth Ala Moana Center in Waikīkī. Added to the impact of this new retail competition was the extension of the Lunalilo freeway through Kaimukī, bypassing the main downtown commercial area. As with so many small towns on the U.S. mainland, mall development and extension of the interstate highway system bypassing the town center marked the beginning of a long period of decline for Kaimukī.



As has also been the case for many other towns though, several decades of slow economy have resulted in the preservation of a remarkable number of 1930s and 1940s buildings in Kaimukī's commercial center. Primarily one- and two-story concrete structures, the buildings show two main stylistic influences. The more common of these is a stripped down local interpretation of Art Moderne, with broad flat awnings sheltering the sidewalk, narrower overhangs cantilevered over second story windows, and additional architectural detailing emphasizing the horizontal line. Also prominent is a Spanish Colonial Revival influence, with stucco walls, arched door and window openings, and hipped terra cotta tile roofs. While this style is most common among civic buildings in the area, it can also be seen in a number of the commercial structures.

Interest in preserving this historic fabric and revitalizing the district's economy has spurred a number of studies and assessments of the community over the past several years. These have included two urban design studies commissioned by the City and County of Honolulu during 1991-1993, and a community preservation study conducted by a class from the University of Hawai'i in the spring of 1994. Recommendations included a variety of streetscape beautification projects; adoption of voluntary design guidelines to ensure sympathetic infill projects and building restorations; pursuit of National Register District designation; and, finally, establishment of a Main Street program to implement these objectives.

In the fall of 1994, a pilot Main Street program was established by the Kaimukī Business and Professional Association and members of the local community. The fledgling organization undertook a number of small projects during late 1994 and early 1995, but then budget cuts eliminated state funding for Main Street and a split among board members led to the dissolution of the group in August 1995.

In the spring of 1996, the Kaimukī Main Street Association was reactivated by remaining board members, and is presently working on a number of projects to raise community awareness of the value of their historic architectural

resources, and build support among the business community for storefront rehabilitation and economic revitalization efforts.

A major boost in this effort came from the University of Hawai'i Historic Preservation Program, which held its Pacific Preservation Field School in Kaimukī in the summer of 1996. Students in the program updated an existing inventory of buildings in the commercial district and began an inventory of residential areas of the community; prepared measured drawings of several domestic and commercial structures; and created designs for infill buildings along Wai'ālae Avenue consistent with the architectural character of the district.

While the time is ripe for moving ahead with preservation and revitalization efforts, the Main Street project in Kaimukī faces a number of challenges in building an effective program. First among these is raising awareness of the value of the historic resources in the community. While there are few if any architectural masterworks in the neighborhood, the district's buildings are exemplary of Honolulu's commercial architecture during the 1930s and 1940s. More than just a scattering of old buildings, though, Kaimukī continues to function as a pedestrian-friendly neighborhood business district, providing an increasingly rare glimpse of Honolulu in an earlier era.

Following on the task of fostering appreciation for the neighborhood's character is the challenge of preserving and perpetuating the architectural elements which give the district that character: in particular an unbroken sidewalk frontage and broad awnings overhanging the sidewalk and protecting shoppers and passersby from the subtropical sun. At present, these elements which help define the district are not permitted by local building codes, which mandate a four foot setback, and prohibit awnings extending over the public space of the sidewalk. Recent infill buildings have attempted to address this with set back pedestrian arcades, but the separation from the sidewalk traffic has limited the success of the designs. At present the Main Street group's Design/Structure committee is working with the municipal Department of Land Utilization to explore zoning options that would allow for these elements to be included on new construction in the district, as well as repaired and replaced in kind as needed on historic properties.

Demonstrating to the district's building owners the economic benefits of this sort of rehabilitation is another critical task. While a number of building owners are already involved with the Main Street group, others fail to see the historical or potential economic value of maintaining and improving their old structures. In most parts of the

state, and definitely in urban Honolulu, the value of most real estate is in the land rather than in the building stock. Thus the temptation to demolish and redevelop is always great. Examples of returns on investment in facade rehabilitation realized by building owners in other Main Street towns, provided by the National Main Street Center, will be a useful tool.

Even in the instance where the building owner is convinced of the value of rehabilitation, local business owners, few of whom own their spaces, are wary of improvements of this sort for fear of increased rents. This perceived difference of interests among building owners, as well as residents, will need to be carefully addressed with each of the groups involved.

Along similar lines, while promoting economic growth in the community, the program will need to take care that "revitalization" doesn't come at the expense of small 'mom and pop' establishments which have been the backbone of the district for decades. One of Kaimukī's many strengths has always been the broad array of goods and services offered, and replacing this with a collection of upscale boutiques such as are found in many a festival marketplace or gentrified historic district is not likely to meet the needs of the community.

Perhaps the greatest challenge, and one of the keys to establishing all the other tasks described above, will be fostering communication and bringing together the diverse interests in the community. Not an easy task in any community, in Kaimukī this is made more difficult by the fact that the designated Main Street project area is split among three separate Neighborhood Boards. At the same time the district comprises only a small part of urban Honolulu, and is but one of many concerns for the Mayor and City Council. Kaimukī benefits from an active and committed Business and Professional Association promoting local business, and the aforementioned Neighborhood Boards designed to address the concerns of local residents, but communication between these entities has historically been limited.

Drawing support from all of these diverse interests, the role of Main Street in Kaimukī must be one of mediator, bringing the groups together through cooperative projects and community planning efforts to find common ground and work jointly to preserve and enhance the historic fabric and economic vitality of the neighborhood we all share. Through such an effort perhaps we can avoid the fate of becoming a city of swatches.

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