The Aloha Tower
A Historic Symbol Amidst Futuristic Plans

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Since its creation, the Aloha Tower has been a symbol of Hawai‘i’s loving nature to arriving and departing guests alike. Today, though the tower has been dwarfed by the office buildings of Downtown Honolulu, its historical significance remains. The Tower is known globally as the highlight of Honolulu’s skyline, despite the illusion of its shrinking size. This new technological and extensively commercial age is not detracting from the historic building, but is actually giving the Aloha Tower a renewed significance. Once a beacon to the Harbor’s commercial ocean liners, the Tower now calls out to hopeful shoppers, real-estate developers, and retail owners, beckoning from its central perch in the middle of the Aloha Tower Marketplace.

Honolulu Harbor has held a critical place in Hawai‘i’s economy since its establishment as a commercial port in 1850, when King Kamehameha declared Honolulu the official capital of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i. Due to this proclamation, Honolulu Harbor became a major port through which the whaling, fur, and sandalwood industries of the day administered their thriving businesses. The foreign vessels docked in the Harbor at that time “poured vast amounts of wealth” into the Kingdom (Honolulu Harbor). Thanks to the generation of this newfound capitalist economy, the City and County of Honolulu developed radially from the Harbor. During the 20th century, it was concluded that this important harbor needed an iconic structure to leave a lasting impression on guests both arriving and departing, so that they would always remember Hawai‘i’s “Aloha spirit.” To meet this end, the Aloha Tower, designed by architect Arthur Reynolds, was completed in September of 1926.

The Tower, which measures 184 feet and 2 inches tall, was constructed on Pier 9 of Honolulu Harbor by C.W. Winstedt and the National Construction Co. (Fig. 1). For
the next four decades, it remained the tallest building in all of Hawai‘i. It is a slender, square shaped, concrete reinforced tower, capped by a convexly rounded pyramidal dome (Fig. 2). A large clock is a distinguishing feature of the Tower. It is located under the dome, with two faces, one on the makai, and one on the mauka side of the structure (Fig. 3). When it was installed, this clock was the largest in Hawai‘i, and even one of the largest on the mainland. It was designed by the E. Howard Clock Co. of Boston. Under each of the four balconies is the word “ALOHA.” Further topping the Tower is a 40 foot mast with a cross arm and cables (Fig. 4).

The Tower, though constructed during the Territorial Period of 1893 to 1941, was created using both Late Gothic Style, according to the National Register of Historic Places, and art-deco. It “steps-back,” its base wider than its peak, a concept most noted in the Chrysler Building, built but two years later, in 1928, in New York City. The Aloha Tower’s white stucco is reminiscent of other Hawaiian buildings created in the Territorial Period, which used Mediterranean influence in the development of a truly Hawaiian vernacular (Fig. xx). This language of architecture ignored strict boundaries of indoor and outdoor spaces, which was perfect for Hawai‘i’s climate. This can be seen in the Tower’s base, which has four open entryways that make walking into the Tower like walking under a canopy, in contrast to walking inward through the clearly defined entrance of the Richard Hood’s New York City Daily News Building, for example.

Though the Tower was designed as a symbol, it held practical functions as well. Its first occupants were local artist James A. Wilder and the Tower’s architect, Arthur Reynolds. On the first level were customs offices; on the second, arrival and departure space for steamships; on the third, space for the master and his staff; and on the fourth,
space for Harbor pilots. Floors 5 through 9 were planned for office rental. Next in order
is the massive clock, followed by an observatory and balconies used by tourists and
professionals alike as a lookout. Because the observation deck provides such impressive
views of the harbor, it was used as a maritime communications and harbor control center.
The flags atop the mast were also used for navigational purposes. The Tower itself is
also useful as a navigation landmark, as it can be seen from 15 miles at sea (Annual
Report 2005, 8).

Spreading from the base of the tower were the docks, warehouses, and passenger-
handling facilities of Piers 8, 9, 10, and 11, which at the time were the core of Honolulu's
commercial activity. These Piers were packed with people during the Boat Days of the
1920s and 30s, which celebrated the arrival of passenger ships like Matson's Lurline and
the S.S. Monterey. These events were festive community celebrations that featured hula
dancers, performances from the Royal Hawaiian Band, and the fresh leis that have come
to be the worldwide image of Hawai‘i (Annual Report 2005, 8).

During WWII, Boat Days were halted, as, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the
Tower, seen as a potential target, was completely camouflaged. Patrols by army sentries
didn’t end until the disguise was sandblasted in off in 1947. The building was reopened
to the public in 1948. Even after the re-opening of the Tower, its Boat Days came to a
quiet end as airliners surpassed ocean liners. The Aloha Tower seemed in danger of
slipping into a state of neglect, as it was no longer needed.

However, it was still loved, and, to avoid such a tragedy, in 1981, the Aloha Tower
Development Corporation was established to oversee the redevelopment of state land
around the Tower. The Corporation is governed by a seven member Board of Directors,
including 3 ex-officio state members from the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, the Department of Land and Natural Resources, and the Department of Transportation, the Mayor of the City and County of Honolulu or his representative, and three citizens from the community. In order to increase economic activity on these lands, this Corporation developed four pillars upon which to focus their energy: a. “balancing community and tourism development,” b. “enhancing the beauty of the waterfront,” c. “better serving the maritime users,” and d. “providing public access to the ocean, and therefore transforming the area into a ‘people place (Aloha Tower Development Corporation).”

To achieve these ends, the Corporation established an extensive plan for the development of what is known as the Aloha Tower Complex. Construction of this complex began with a ceremonial event in July of 1994, when the thirty-foot wall that had previously connected the Tower to the Pier 10 terminal was torn down, and the landmark stood on its own for the first time. At this time, the Tower itself was also refurbished. Ground broke for the Aloha Tower Marketplace, the first component of the Complex, at around the same time. This Marketplace is currently a two story, multimillion dollar retail and entertainment complex. Completed in 1995, it houses over 70 merchants and 10 restaurants. Its centerpiece is, of course the Tower, which, along with the Marketplace, is open to the public 7 days a week. The architecture of the Marketplace was carefully designed to complement its location in the Harbor, as seen in the specially shaded green roof tiling (Fig. 5). Its two-tiered food court is designed to look like a ship’s deck, complemented by colorful flying fish that hang from the rafters (Fig. 6). Other features include arches, canopies, recessed lanai, and rich paving
In April of 2005, the Marketplace emerged from a three-year bankruptcy with the sale of its assets to AHI Aloha Associates for twenty-five million dollars. AHI assumed the ground leases and made payment to creditors holding approximately $380,000 in claims. The Marketplace continues to be managed by MMI Realty Services, which aggressively promotes its events, including revitalized Boat Days (Annual Report 2005, 10).

Plans for the creation of the rest of the complex have just recently been furthered, as the ATDC Board has approved plans for a residential-retail project at Piers 5 and 6 that will include a one hundred thirty foot tower with more than two hundred fifty residential units and a four level parking garage. Such additional parking is considered critical for the success of the Complex. Even this is massive project is only the first step in the grand scheme of the Hughes Development Firm, which is in charge of the project. The firm has plans to include condos, hotel rooms, a new cruise ship terminal, parks, and even more retail developments over piers eight through fourteen. Once can foresee community objection so this overhaul, tentatively known by developers as “Pacific Quay.”

Clearly, Aloha Tower remains an influential piece of Hawaiian architecture. Its vernacular vocabulary and attractive intention made it impressive in its heyday, and today make it all the more intriguing amidst the modern, steel-frame and glass filled jungle backdrop of Downtown. The Boat Days of the 1920s that festively surrounded the Tower remain there in spirit. The fragrant leis and smiling hula girls, remain to this day the global symbol of Hawai‘i. The Aloha Tower’s historical significance complements its
Current role as the headpiece of the new commercial center of Honolulu, targeted at the tourists of today, arriving by the hundreds in Honolulu International Airport by the day.
Works Cited


