Research:
First Hawaiian Center

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First Hawaiian Center, rising to nearly 429 feet, is the tallest building in the City and County of Honolulu and the State of Hawaii. It is the world corporate headquarters of First Hawaiian Bank, Hawaii’s oldest and largest financial institution established by Charles Reed Bishop in 1858. First Hawaiian Bank, the bank that says, “Yes!” provides commercial and consumer banking services, engages in equipment and vehicle leasing, and offers trust, investment, and insurance products. Today, First Hawaiian Bank has 56 branches throughout Hawaii, three in Guam and two in Saipan. Their assets valued at over $10 billion. In addition, the building houses the downtown gallery of The Contemporary Museum, a showplace to feature exclusive art work from local artists. First Hawaiian Center, one of the most distinctive structures built in Hawaii, is both a symbolic and state-of-the-art center of Honolulu’s business community.

First Hawaiian Center is located at 999 Bishop Street in downtown Honolulu, near Bishop Park. Bishop Street is defined by nearly a century of buildings. Before the first block of Bishop Street was created in 1900, Honolulu was a mixture of low buildings, of which few have survived today. The street went through two distinct phases. The first phase began immediately after the United States annexed Hawai‘i, in 1898 and continued until about 1930. Until the late nineteenth century, Honolulu streets were dirt. However by 1904, asphalt over a concrete base was the standard pavement set to bring new order and cleanliness in the city. The first phase of Bishop Street was
paved in 1918. The second phase began in the 1960s, when Bishop Street began building vertically to better express the increasing prominence held by Hawai‘i in international commerce. Today, Bishop Street is the heart of Honolulu’s business district, a center of commerce, a home to the most important corporations in Hawaii, like First Hawaiian Bank.

First Hawaiian Center is the most recent building to rise on Bishop Street. The building rises above the old Damon Building. In the back of the old Damon Building was the old eighteen story high First Hawaiian Bank office tower, which at one time was known as the First National Bank of Hawaii. In 1988, when Walter A. Dods Jr. became the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of First Hawaiian Bank, the bank facilities had become inadequate. Therefore, Myers Corporation, headed by Jack E. Meyers was hired to conduct project feasibility, development, and site analysis for what would become known as First Hawaiian Center. After additional financial feasibility studies and models were completed, Kohn Pedersen Fox (KPF) headed by William Pederson was hired to design the building. KPF was appointed to do the job because they were known to have a good reputation for working closely with their clients, even over long distances. KPF is also known for their innovative and influential approach to high-rise buildings that are different from other firms. While modern tall buildings aimed at simplicity and uniformity, KPF stresses complexity and diversity.

With KPF on board, design development began on how to use the site. During the process, a major question was brought up on what to do with the Damon Building because it was
one of the only three remaining original structures on Bishop Street. Hence, Dods wanted to incorporate the Damon Building into the new design. However, KPF and Myers found the old building to be badly deteriorated and the cost to remodel the interior to be too high and inefficient. Therefore, in the end, on January 9, 1994, an implosion was made. The entire eighteen-story administrative headquarters of First Hawaiian Bank and the neighboring Damon Building were removed. However, with the cooperation of the Historic Hawai‘i Foundation and the State Historic Preservation Office, Dods and Myers were able to provide actual pieces of the building, a comprehensive photographic record documenting the existing Damon Building and photographs from the bank’s archives. In order to contribute to downtown Honolulu for the loss of the Damon Building, an art gallery was incorporated into the design of the new building.

Meanwhile, the First Hawaiian Center planning also met with controversy as Hawaii residents became concerned about the effect of skyscrapers would have on the natural beauty of the Hawaiian landscape. Therefore, architects compromised the use of Hawaiian architectural principles into the design. Metaphoric designs were used in reference to natural phenomena found in Hawai‘i. The tower’s design strongly acknowledges the mountains and seas. As a result two distinct architectural forms resulted in the compromise. For the makai side facing the ocean, horizontally louvered windows framed the views of the sea and the horizon. For the mauka side facing the mountains, vertically proportioned windows faced the mountains. The
vertical stone piers and glass of the King Street (mauka) elevation also recall the color and physical influences of the Ko’olau mountain range. The Bishop Street elevation expands as it moves upward, generating a sense of visual movement, creating a prow-like form reminiscent of a ship. Then along the Merchant Street (makai) elevation, horizontal stone and glass elements complement the ocean with the prow-like form to provide a visual metaphor for sailing. A great deal of light was also made to incorporate as much natural light into the building interiors as a respect to the natural beauty of Hawaii.

In the process of design development, First Hawaiian Center also succeeded in revising the 350 feet height codes for buildings in downtown Honolulu. Honolulu’s Planning Department had attempted to raise downtown height limits many times, but did not succeed. Dods and Myers wanted to raise the building above the height limit because they want to generate a more interesting cityscape and stand out from the crowd of buildings around it. So Dods, Myers, and Colleges gathered community support for the project and started a grassroots effort to relieve the concerns about tall buildings. Finally, with the cooperation of city planners and the Honolulu City Council, they succeeded in changing the height codes. First Hawaiian Center was the first building to be built under the new regulation.

First Hawaiian Center was finally completed in 1996. There are a total of 30 floor counts with 5 basement floors. Three floors are also devoted to the Contemporary Museum for an art
gallery of local Hawaiian works. With over 645,834 square feet of space, a height of 429 feet, and 10 elevators, the building cost over $175 million to construct. The building is mainly used for offices and is considered a high-rise structure. Architecturally, it is regarded as a late modernist style. Unlike most high-rises, the shape of the First Hawaiian Center is complex and dynamic.

Although situated on a conventional grid, the building is formed by two interlocking triangular units. These forms break the traditional rectangular urban shapes. It also maximizes the views of the city and its surroundings from within.

The structure of the building is even more complicated than its form. First Hawaiian Center is based on a steel rigid frame structural system. It uses semi-rigid frames on a mat settlement foundation that allow a dependable and predictable moment-resisting capacity that can be used to stabilize the building. The building maintains its load carrying capacity up to wind speed of 140 mph. At the very top of the building, it is expected to sway approximately 4 inches during 50 mph wind and about 15 inches in 100 mph wind. In addition, the floors are welded to the vertical steel columns. Horizontal beams are over 24 inches in depth to accommodate the main air conditioning duct loop. The diagonal braces are used to transfer the lateral forces to act along the direction of their longitudinal axis. A rigid core was also used to stabilize the building and to utilize triplet columns laced together by short concentric bracing in an opposing configuration, connected with the girder to form a large steel frame acting as a shear wall.
Internally, the building is very open and elegant. The teller station areas on the ground floor immediately open to the atrium, which functions as a modern art museum available to the public. Along with the main banking hall, the gallery is a major component of the building podium and it continues on the second floor. In the offices for the First Hawaiian Bank, the custom workstations paid very close attention to detail in the mean time meets the specific needs of the bank program and staff. Anigre and pear wood veneers, stainless steel and translucent glass continue from open work areas into private executive offices on the second floor. All furniture, lighting and wool carpeting are custom designed. In addition, the interiors also include a hair salon and a health club of which are located in the third below-grade level of the building.

The exterior of the building is beautifully designed by Walters Kimura Motoda. The King Street side of the building is set far back from the street to allow an open plaza with greenery, water features, and scating. A total of 43% of the block, 24,000 square feet of space is open plazas, landscaping, and water features. Blocks of Jet Mist granite and hand split front surfaces and polished sides were used to compose the design of the fountains. From the exterior, one can also see the row of elevators moving up and down on the makai side of the building, facing the ocean.
The building’s attention to materials and textures, from both the inside and outside is remarkably detailed. James Carpenter-designed art glass wall illuminates ceremonial stairs along Bishop Street side, in the three-story banking hall. The wall is constructed of two layers of glass: transparent, low-E glass for the outer skin and diffused glass panels on the inside held in place by aluminum clips and extruded aluminum mullions. Inside glazed assembly is supported by pairs of ¾-inch-thick beveled glass prisms that refract sunlight entering the atrium. These vertical blades of clear glass create sharp highlights in the translucent wall.

First Hawaiian Center is certainly one of the most distinctive buildings in the State of Hawaii. Although contemporary in form, the building responds sensitively to the cultural and climatic conditions in Hawai‘i and the history of the street. The building also reconfigured the environment, enriched the Hawaii’s skyline, and forever changes the perception of Honolulu and Bishop Street. Buildings of Hawaii in the near future should really take in consideration of the natural beauty of the Hawaiian landscape like the First Hawaiian Center.
Bibliography


