NAURU TOWER: A TROPICAL TRIPODAL TALE

B. Sue Chang
AMST 423/ ARCH 473
Prof. William Chapman
M-W-F 9:30-10-20
Nauru Tower is more than just another Honolulu condominium steeped in hype and promotion as the address many people aspire to call their home. It certainly would not exist today if two other pivotal events had not occurred earlier; a move by state legislators to re-zone a light-industrial area in the urban core of Honolulu and the gradual disappearance of bird guano on a small island in the Pacific. First we will look at the design and construction of Nauru Tower and the amenities it offers the residents.

The Tower sits on an eighteen-acre parcel of prime urban land and bounded by Piikoi and Waimanu streets and Ala Moana Boulevard. It was built in 1990 at a cost of ninety million dollars and has 44 stories, 314 units and 8 elevators. There are eight units per floor ranging from 1,312 to 1,585 square feet for two bedrooms and 2,380 to 3,660 square feet for three bedrooms.

It does not lack in amenities for the discerning occupants featuring a 14,000 foot, 52,000 gallon swimming pool with two heated Jacuzzis, a full-sized tennis court, a landscaped garden deck with barbecues and most importantly (personal opinion) an ATM in the lobby area.

International Style architecture has easily identified components: a radical
simplification of form, the use of glass, steel and concrete as the preferred materials, a rejection of ornament, transparency of buildings, and acceptance of industrialized mass-production techniques.

Viewed from Ala Moana Nauru Tower appears to have the elements of the International Style: steel, white concrete and all aquatinted glass but with an organic twist, a graceful concave contoured high-rise. Viewed from the sides and back, one discovers the top twelve floors are cantilevered. These floors are 290 feet above ground and represent an engineering challenge that must have been daunting.

A new construction technique had been developed allowing for light weight aluminum wall forming systems plus rapid pour down method to allow for casting of concrete walls and slabs at the same time. What otherwise would have required weeks of onsite concrete pouring was quickly accomplished in just four days. Nauru Tower at 418 feet now enjoys the distinction of being the tallest concrete building in Honolulu.

There are several reasons why Martin & Chock selected using site-cast concrete for Nauru Tower. Compounded with the tensile strength of steel the concrete can be poured to any shape needed to distribute loads. It can also be designed to be lightweight to reduce dead load and sculpted to any shape the architects desired. It is also economical and fire-resistant.

Nauru Tower or any major building construction is a collaborative effort on the part of an architectural firm, structural engineering, contractors and a developer. It is analogous to a Japanese woodblock print where you have an artist, printer and a publisher all working together to create a wonderful piece of art. Architects Hawaii, Ltd., a full service firm worked with Martin and Chock, engineers, the Fletcher Pacific Construction
Company and the Nauru Phosphate Royalties Development Inc. to erect Nauru. Barry Pattern of Curnow Freiverts Glover and Pattern was the design architect and Charles K.Y. Chan, of Architects Hawaii, Ltd was the project architect. Along the way, some Awards were picked up: National Honor Award from the American Consulting Engineers Council, the consulting Engineers Council of Hawaii, 1993. The Institute of Real Estate Management (IREM) and the Chapter #34 Accredited Residential Managers Committee also selected it as the Condominium of the Year 2000. The criteria for the selection included: Management and building operation, administration, financial management, budgets, tenant relations, energy conservation, security, landscaping, community involvement and an on site inspection.

The Awards are not surprising when one considers the depth of experience Architects Hawaii, Ltd has locally. Projects like the Waikiki Landmark, Laulima O’Hawaii Kai, retail stores such as COMPUSA, Outlets at the Dole Cannery, and Healthcare institutions such as Queen’s Medical Center and the John A. Burns School of Medicine shows great diversity in vision and talent.

Architects Hawaii, Ltd was founded originally as Lemmon, Freeth and Haines in 1946. Just as Hewlett-Packard started out in a California garage, Cyril Lemmon started up his company in the renovated garage behind his home on Saratoga Road, Waikiki, thus the sixty years of experience.

The Republic of Nauru aka Nauru Phosphate Royalties Development, Inc. is the collective identity of a nation; its populace on a small, eight-square mile South Pacific Island near, as the seagull flies, New Zealand and Australia. The Trust is based in Melbourne, Australia. The residents of Nauru are primarily of Micronesian and
Polynesian descent. Nauru achieved independence from a United Nations trusteeship in 1968 and had the foresight to establish the Nauru Royalties Trust for the sole purpose of investing some of the money received from the phosphate mining for the future benefit of the citizens of Nauru. Selling phosphates, which are used as fertilizer, had made billions of dollars for Nauru and for a while, every citizen received $35,000 annually but that amount has since declined to $5,000 per individual. Everything has to be imported so the standard of living has declined while the cost of living has soared. There is no other industry on the island and several generations of Nauru’s citizens have been living off just the royalties. It has been a long economic slide since that time as Nauru is basically a phosphate rock island. Since 1907 it’s economic base has been the export of phosphate mined from the island, which turns out to not be an inexhaustible supply. The island’s environment has been severely degraded through mining and in recent years the nation has searched various avenues for income enhancement. In the 1990s, Nauru became a tax haven and offered passports to foreign nationals at a price. It also became a favorite spot for the Russian mafia’s money laundry operations. The inter-governmental agency, Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering took a dim view of this activity and Nauru introduced legislation in 2003 to curtail if not stop this activity. Unfortunately, Nauru has alienated most of the nations it now depends upon for help due to its governments dabbling in some nefarious money-laundering schemes. Nauru has asked Australia for asylum for the entire population of 12,000 before the Pacific Ocean reclaims what is left of their island.

It was not until November 1984 that the Nauru Trust purchased the large parcel in the Kakaako District. The Trust paid $43 million to Dillingham Corporation for the acreage.
The Republic got in on the ground floor considering how Kakaako at that time was still zoned a light industrial area chock full of assorted and sundry small businesses including but not limited to noodle shops, plate lunch wagons, plumbing suppliers, auto repair shops, hostess bars and Lex Brodie’s. The 1976 Hawaii State Legislature had created the Hawaii Community Development Authority, HCDA, to plan and revitalize this prime urban area. Kakaako was determined to be underused and deteriorating quickly but had such great potential to be much more. In point of fact, seven hundred acres more make it slightly larger area than Waikiki at six hundred and forty acres.

HCDA states its mission is to establish Kakaako as the most desirable urban place in Hawaii where people can work, live, visit, learn and play. It appears HCDA has a great deal of power over -seeing the development. The board serves as an infrastructure developer, landowner, city planner, regulator and property manager. That is a lot of irons in the fire.

The district is situated between Downtown Honolulu to the west, Ala Moana Center and Waikiki to the east, the waterfront area from Kewalo Basin to Pier 4 to the south, and King Street at it’s northern boundary. This is a second chance to prevent repeating the mistakes made in over developing Waikiki. Hopefully Kakaako will have controlled growth! Kamehameha Schools owns sixty-five acres in Kakaako on the makai and mauka sides of Ala Moana and spokesman Stanford Murata projects it will take twenty to twenty-five years to achieve the vision for Kakaako. Murata’s vision includes pedestrian-friendly streets and developments in small blocks. The district is well on the way to becoming a new urban village with retail stores such as Borders, Pier One and various restaurants, the John A. Burns Medical School, a theater complex, several condominiums,
a Children’s’ Museum, a waterfront park and some industrial space.

This November I checked real estate ads in the newspapers for listings of any unit for sale in Nauru Tower and found none however there are currently three listings of two bedroom units for rent. One unit listed for $3,100, a second unit at $3,200 and the third unit did not list a rental rate. The average rental listing in Honolulu is up 2% from last year to $1,628 a month. This indicates to me the owner-occupancy rate is most likely on the low side and there are probably quite a few investors in the building.

From a distance I appreciate the beauty of the Tower but when I walked around the grounds I found the building intimidating and not really pedestrian oriented. I observed security cameras strategically stationed around the building and the approach from the sidewalk is really unappealing and foreboding.

Mike Leidemann wrote a column for the Honolulu Advertiser May 25, 2000 and stated how he thought Nauru Tower and Waikiki Landmark were among the two worst buildings in Hawaii. A reader responded allowing how the “gouged and geeky Nauru Tower has more flaws than a train wreck. Equally as appalling is the Waikiki Landmark, which looks like two stacks of flapjacks on acid.” (Letters to the Editor)

The letter writer fails to understand the one of the strengths of International Style is the indifference to location, site and climate. It makes no reference to local history or national vernacular. Nauru Tower could just as easily have been built in Brussels, Belgium or Chicago, Illinois but it wasn’t. It is very much a part of the greater Kakaako landscape for better or worse.
NAURU TOWER: A TROPICAL TRIPODAL TALE
View of Nauru Tower from Ala Moana Beach Park.

Ewa side of Nauru looking towards Ala Moana Center.
The lobby at Nauru Tower not only has an ATM but features a beautiful ebony baby grand piano. (not shown)
Swimming pool: 14,000 foot, 52,000 gallon with three tile turtles installed at bottom. Pool deck also features two heated Jacuzzis.
Tennis court with adjacent barbeque area and landscaped deck on seventh floor.