The Ilikai: An Image of Statehood in the International Style

The Ilikai Hotel stands on the Ewa end of Waikiki near the Waikiki Yacht Harbor. Ground was broken for the building in 1961 and the structure had a dramatic impact on the skyline of Waikiki during a time when very few structures stood as high as the Ilikai. The building was important for a number of reasons. The structure was one of the first international style buildings in Hawaii, and it was a dramatic change from other hotels such as the Royal Hawaiian and the Moana, which were the most prominent hotels in Waikiki. The buildings three-winged design and turquoise and white façade stood out. The structure was a symbol of statehood; it almost seemed to serve as a connection between Hawaii and the mainland. Once the structure was featured in the popular television show Hawaii 50 people on the mainland saw the Ilikai as a symbol of Hawaii and Hawaii’s new position as the fiftieth state.

The Ilikai was built in a region of Hawaii called Kalia, which was once dominated by massive fishponds and taro fields. Hawaiians first settled in this region between the 12th and 14th centuries. Here they drained wetlands and
built walls and irrigation channels turning the area into massive groups of fishponds and pathways to better suit their needs. In the 1450's the Chief of Oahu, Mailikukahi, established Waikiki as the royal capital of the islands. The area was perfect for harvesting seaweed as well as for both reed and deep-sea fishing. In the 20th century Americans moved into the region along side the Hawaiians and started to impress their own ideas for the region upon the native people. The first families to settle in Kalia, including the Hobrons, the Cassidys, and the Bickertons, moved in and built Victorian Mansions along the coast. This was around the time that the first real influx of vacationers traveled to the Hawaiian Islands. During this time vacationers, mostly from California, came to Hawaii on cruise ships. This created a need to find some place for these visitors to stay during their approximately five day visits to the island, so small hotels and guesthouses began to open up in Waikiki. Shortly after the tourists began to come, the wetlands, fish ponds, and taro fields that the native Hawaiians depended on for their livelihood were drained and removed to make way for the more profitable industry of tourism that would soon conquer Waikiki and the Kalia area. With the arrival of commercial jets travel to the islands became easier and easier, and visitors began to come in larger numbers than they did on the cruise ships.\(^1\) The large volume of visitors created a need for larger hotels and Waikiki continued to evolve into a

\(^1\) www.ilikaihotel.com
mecca for tourists from around the world. The Hawaiians that lived in this region either has to move to other regions of the island, or most probably sought employment in the tourism industry.

The Ilikai emerged just as the big tourist boom was starting to get huge. In the early 1960's a self made man by the name of Chinn Ho had his dream realized when the Ilikai Hotel was built. Chinn Ho was born in 1903 and spent his youth working for his family in the rice fields, and earning very little money. His entrepreneurial skills were evident early on. He was always interested in business and finding new ventures that he could get into. Chinn Ho made his fortune during a time when Asians were excluded from management positions. Chinn Ho became a banker and then a stockbroker. He served as the president of Capital Investment Corporation and became the first Asian-American president of the Honolulu Stock Exchange. He was the first Asian American to sit on the board of one of Hawaii's "Big Five" corporations. This was quite an accomplishment, and Chinn Ho was obviously a man with a great deal of talent and determination. Chinn Ho was also the President of The Bishop Museum Association in 1958 and the first Asian to be named as trustee of one of Hawaii's landed estates, the Robinson Estate. Upon his
death in 1987 Time Magazine described Ho’s real estate accomplishments as an empire stretching from California to Hong Kong.  

Chinn Ho made great contributions to Hawaii and did much for Asian Americans in Hawaii. Just after statehood the Ilikai opened its doors. Chinn Ho, along with his life long friend Duke Kahanamoku planted a Banyan tree together at the Ilikai that still stands today as a symbol of the hard work and commitment it took for Chinn Ho to open the Ilikai in 1964.

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Architect John Graham, who also designed the famous Space Needle in Seattle, designed the Ilikai. John Graham was born in Liverpool, England and was educated on the Isle of Mann. He first visited Seattle in 1896. He immigrated to Seattle in 1900 where he started practicing architecture. He was the architect for Ford Motor Company and designed more than 30 plants for them. Graham's son, John Graham Jr., joined his father's company as well. His company was renamed John Graham and Associates after World War II and is no longer in existence as it merged with DLR Group in May of 1986.3 The space needle is now a symbol that has a great association with the young, modern feeling of Seattle. Graham achieved a similar effect with the Ilikai in that it represents Waikiki as the gateway to Hawaii. He used the Ilikai as a symbol to connect that gateway to the rest of the United States. The Ilikai is a landmark in Waikiki, standing 30 stories high with 1,050 guest rooms and condominium apartments. The Ilikai became the first luxury hotel in the state. Chinn Ho raised twenty-seven million dollars for this enormous project. It boasted the first glass elevator in the state, which was also one of the highest reaching in the world. The strong horizontal lines, use of pre-cast, pre-stressed concrete, and turquoise and white design as well as the unique fenestration set it apart from other structures of the time. These elements showed that Hawaii could compete with architecture on the mainland and that

3 www.emporis.com/en/cd/cm/?id=100150
it could produce innovative and unique designs. Creating the first high rise luxury hotel just after Hawaii gained its statehood served to create a place for tourists from the mainland United States, and show that the Hawaiians were willing to welcome visitors to come and see the islands, and they built new and innovative buildings in which they could stay.

The status of the Ilikai as a landmark on the landscape of Waikiki was further brought into prominence by its portrayal in the opening sequence of Hawaii Five-O. During this opening sequence Jack Lord as Steve McGarrett stands on the penthouse balcony surveying the beautiful landscape of
Waikiki. This scene and this show really served to put Hawaii on the map as part of the United States, for the viewers throughout the mainland.

Interestingly, the show featured a character based on Chinn Ho, by the same name, which served as a nice tribute to such an accomplished man. Magnum P.I., Raven, and Jake and the Fatman also shot episodes of their shows at the Ilikai. Numerous stars have stayed at the Ilikai over the years including Henry Winkler, Dolly Parton, Mickey Mantle, Elvis Presley, and Lucille Ball.

Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Gerald Ford have been guests at the Ilikai as well.

In the 1960's the rates for the hotel were twelve dollars for a mountain-view room and ranged up to twenty-seven dollars a night for an ocean view room. One and two bedroom suites range from thirty-five dollars to one hundred dollars per night. There were four restaurants in the hotel. The most famous, The Top of the I, which is now Sorrento's, offered sweeping views from Diamond Head to the Wai'anae Mountain Range. The hotel had great success, and soon plans were made for a ten million dollar expansion. In this expansion the Pacific Ballroom was added on. In 1974 Chinn Ho sold the hotel for thirty-four million dollars. The Hotel came into the control of Westin Hotels International Inc., who owned the hotel until 1987. In this year Westin sold the hotel to Heller-White Hotels Inc. The Bank of Japan financed this fifty-five million dollar purchase in March of 1987, and bought it for themselves
in September of that year. The Industrial Bank of Japan spent sixty-nine million dollars for the luxury hotel and then proceeded to put another forty-nine million dollars into renovations. This renovation occurred in 1990. Improvements were made to the lobby and reception areas, as well as the elevators and ground floor common areas. The pool and bar area was enhanced with the addition of a new water feature, and landscaping improvements were also made. In 2000 the hotel was purchased by FIT Investment Company and was renamed The Renaissance Ilikai Waikiki Hotel, a franchise of Marriott.\(^4\)

Twenty-seven million dollars were again put into the building in 2002, the same amount of money it originally cost Chinn Ho to construct the entire building. The remodeling included a complete refurbishment of all 783 guest

\(^4\) starbulletin.com/1999/08/10/business/story1.html
rooms and meeting space, which includes 23 meeting rooms that total more than 25,000 square feet. New function area additions include a 4,420-square-foot roof deck above the largest ballroom that is 15,340 and an indoor entertainment suite for meetings. U.S. Pacific did the work, and the architect for the renovation was Wimberly Allison Tong and Goo. The project was officially completed in March of 2002 where the entranceway whale sculpture called "Three in the Sea" was unveiled. According to project manager Jim Cook "In the public areas we completely demolished and rebuilt the front entry to restore the grand staircase that was original to the Ilikai. Water ponds and waterfalls flank the new staircase. At the top of this stairway is the Wyland Sculpture." According to Cook the main lobby is now more contemporary and open. New lighting, millwork, and marble floors were added and walls were removed to create a more open space that portrayed the Ilikai as it originally appeared in Chinn Ho's vision.
The Hotel currently boasts numerous restaurants including Sorrento’s, Canoe’s, Paddle’s Bar, Paddle’s Lounge, and Tanaka’s of Toyko. The room rates have certainly increased significantly since the hotel opened its doors in 1964. The lowest rate for a Mountain View room is one hundred and forty-five dollars per night ranging up to four hundred and fifty dollars for a ocean view two-room suite. The hotel has a Nightly torch lighting ceremony that has been a tradition for thirty-five years. The hotel even has the first laser tag game facility in Hawaii called Ultrazone: The Ultimate Laser Adventure. It has
its own medical clinic; on site Dollar rental Car Company, and over fifteen boutiques and gift shops. Eighty percent of the rooms in the hotel have ocean views and many have their own lanais. Two hundred and fifty of the rooms have full kitchens. There is a state of the art fitness center, one tennis court and two outdoor swimming pools.\(^5\)

The Ilikai is an icon in the skyline of Waikiki. Although it is now somewhat overshadowed by many somewhat taller buildings, it still stands as an image of statehood and the emergence of a new International Style in Hawaii. Being built by such a renowned architect, as well as its fame after being featured in Hawaii Five-O made the Ilikai an important and special part of Waikiki. Chinn Ho’s prominence as one of the first important Asian American figures in the island and his relationship to the building also adds to its legacy in Hawaii.

\(^5\) www.ilikaihotel.com
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