HARBOR COURT BUILDING

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The Harbor Court building is located in downtown Honolulu across from the Aloha Tower. It was designed by architect Norman Lacayo and was completed in 1994. It is a high-profile mixed use building, intended to be a showcase project as the “Gateway to downtown”. The harbor Court building consists of 120 luxury residential condominium apartments. It is a 44 stories tower, of which 18 floors are dedicated to commercial office space. There are several restaurants and retail spaces located on the ground floor plaza, as well as the mezzanine and second floor. It is also home of Honolulu’s largest covered parking garage, with 1,046 parking spaces.

The architect, Norman Jose Lacayo is a California born architect with a Hispanic background. He established his company, Lacayo Group AIA, Inc. in 1969. It began as a-man-show, where his wife was in charge of the interior design of his architectural projects. By the 1970’s his firm already employed 7 men, and continued to grow. They specialized in high-end, custom residential and interior design. They continuously strived to create magical places with a sense of romance. They prided themselves of designing from the inside out,
thus promoting the users of the building. As the size of his company grew, so did the complexity of the projects he commissioned. By the 1990’s, Lacayo Group AIA reached its climax, operating with 75 designers.

Unfortunately, The Harbor Court building was their last project. Lacayo Group closed down in 1996 due to economic pressure. During the 1990’s, the Hawaii economy was heavily dependent on the Japanese’s’ local investments. When the Japan economy took a down turn during this time, Hawaii was negatively and directly impacted. The harbor Court Project was estimated at 110 million dollars- a high-end project with high-value condominiums for high-income professionals. Due to economic hardship, Japanese investors and lenders decided to pull out on their investments. In turn, the prices of the housing market cannot be maintained. The value of a typical unit had decreased up to 30%. This took a heavy toll on the firm and the architect himself, which eventually resulted in the discontinuation of Lacayo Group AIA, Inc. However, it is commonly agreed upon that the Harbor Court Project was a perfect and elegant ending to what most would consider a rather tragic down turn to the firm.

Norman Lacayo worked hard to make sure that his last project would not be a disappointment; that it would live up to its expectations, and it did. The project began approximately in the year 1989. Lacayo and
his team envisioned an Egyptian motif for this project; and they actually traveled to Egypt together in search of inspirations. There are in fact, many Egyptian influences to be found in and around the building. Its scale is monumental; its décor crisp and celestial. The building also holds a strong sense of arrival for its visitors.

Their second major inspiration was the organic elements that can be found in Hawaii. The grand columns are meant to remind users not of man made mass, but rather the power of Mother Nature. There are water features such as fountains and ponds scattered around the building’s ground floor. The water features not only served a decorative purpose, they also were used as an element to suggest movement (a popular design focus of Norman Lacayo, as we will see later).
The Lacayo Group also used various design concepts habitually. They are not project specific; can be adjusted to suit different climates and locations; most of all, they gave the Lacayo group a rather recognizable quality. Norman Lacayo frequently used Mediterranean elements in his Hawaii based projects. However he liked to refer to it as “sun oriented” design; given that these projects are not actually located in the Mediterranean. He paid a lot of attention to the use of light, both natural and powered, and how it enters and changes a space. The attention to lighting often deliberately resulted in some very interesting shadows on the building façades. In the case of the Harbor Court building, such graphical yet subtle texture is amplified with the use of massive walls and columns. Norman Lacayo strongly believed in delivering the experience of his architecture to the users through the use of architectural details. This is also evident in the Harbor Court. Yet, the most distinctive and successful design element of Harbor Court is the implementation of movement through spaces. The water features around the building suggest movement in a decorative and less interactive manner. Norman Lacayo repeatedly used angular
spaces to encourage interactive movement in the public area. It could be found on the ground floor and is echoed in the floor plans of the condominiums. He skillfully weaved the public (pedestrian walkways, plaza) and semi-private spaces (restaurants, offices) together so that when a pedestrian walk by this building, there is almost a magical force inviting him to walk through it.

The original site of the building holds some interesting tales. The site was a municipal parking structure prior to undergoing construction for the Harbor Court project. In order to make the new Harbor court building a reality, Lacayo Group had to promise that majority of the existing parking spaces will be incorporated into the building design, and remain available for public use. It was designed strategically to the downtown city skyline, blending in with its surroundings. Downtown city planning requires a certain number of buildings to be of mixed-use. The buildings need to serve multiple purposes to allow for a
Honolulu. The district where the Harbor Court building sits holds tremendous potential for the future. As Kaka’ako continues to grow, and businesses around the neighborhood continue to thrive, the Harbor Court continue to live up to its title- The Beacon of the Harbor of Honolulu.
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