La Pietra
The Former Walter DillingHam Residence

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LA PIETRA/WALTER DILLINGHAM RESIDENCE

Following the marriage of Walter and Louise Dillingham, the two set off back to Hawai‘i in 1910, to find a site for their future home. After an ongoing search for a suitable site, they finally purchased five acres of land below Diamond Head. The Dillingham’s contracted David Adler to design an Italian villa that had similar features of four different villas in Florence Italy, Villa Medici, Villa Gambreain, Villa Aretino, and La Pietra, where the two were married.

At the cost of $400,000, the hand-cut lava rock and sandstone residence was finally completed in 1922. La Pietra became the social gathering place for the high elite class that resided in Honolulu. The Dillingham’s played host to many people who had a major influence during their time, such as Presidents Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt, foreign royalty, Nelson Rockefeller, General George Patton and many other notables.

THE ARCHITECT: DAVID ADLER

David Adler was born in Milwaukee Illinois on January 3, 1882, and received his preparatory education at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. In 1900, he enrolled at Princeton University, and four years later he graduated in architecture. Following his commencement, Adler continued his studies for an additional five years at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.
After, Paris Adler opened up his own practice in Chicago where he devoted his attention to residence work. Here he designed many private homes and apartment houses in the city’s suburbs, predominantly on the North Shore. Other examples of Adler’s work are also known on both the east and west coasts of the States, and in Honolulu.

One of Adler’s outstanding achievements in Chicago was the row of houses that faced Lincoln Park, which is south of Elks Memorial. Here Adler demonstrated his success in dealing with traditional styles and conventional forms.

Throughout most of Adler’s career, he worked alone. The only partner he was associated with was Robert Work, which lasted eleven years between 1917 and 1928.

**LA PIETRA: THE GEM**

Mr. Dillingham and Adler did not work together in person. At the time Adler was designing another residence in New York. So Mr. Dillingham sent Mr. Adler detailed measurements and contour maps of the site, and photographs showing the setting in which the villa would stand. The only alteration found to be necessary was a change of the base line level from S5 to S3 feet above the sea.

What the architect has done is to work these preferences in their relation to the fixed requirements of the terrain, and the possibilities of the setting into a harmonious whole. Adler’s detail was subdued, but perfect.

Door knobs, latches, locks, balusters, sconces, brackets, are hand wrought black iron that was made locally; however some of the work was imported down here by a Chinese blacksmith. Most of the details in the house such as, the tiling of the gallery floor, the use of the coral flagging, Waianae sand stone for post and lintels and trims were suggestions of the owners.
FOUR FASHIONS OF MASONRY

When the walls of La Pietra were being made, a number of different materials were used: Rough hewn field stones that were yellowed by the weather and laid dry; quarried lava rock, pointed with cement; quarried lava rock unpointed but washed with cement to soften the setting of the house; and quarried lava coated with a rough cast, which gives the house an overall dull, pale pink distemper.

As for the roof, modified tiles were used to create an Italian ambiance and speckled with red, purplish, burnt browns and yellow low dabs.

The four fashions of masonry for the retaining walls that uphold the driveway were the weathered field stone, dry laid and upointed; for the twin garages and the servant quarters, rough blocks were used in a angularity way that was to accent the building; for the retaining walls of the outer area and the terrace of the loggia, rough stone again, but softened in the molding by the caste that hides the seams; for the main body of the house, still stone, but plastered flat with a sand surface stucco.

For the servant's quarters, rough masonry suggesting the stone cottage of a peasant village.

For the retaining walls, massive blocks embody the feeling of strength, but softer in finish. Not to clash with the smooth surfaces that surmount them. Bare planes would serve for the house itself, built up, as it is, exclusively of unembellished, rectangular
spaces that rely for their appeal to the eye on nothing more pretentious than the harmony of their proportions. Too tall or too wide a door, too narrow a window, too much or not enough space between windows, or between the windows and the eaves, can spoil the entire façade of such a house. Who deals with simplicity must practice perfection.

**THE INTERIOR**

Walk through the front door—a beautiful door rich brown Italian walnut, enclosed in a severely simple sandstone arch. Groined ceilings and sand colored plaster walls in the natural finish of the plaster; a floor paved with square red tiles of shifting spades very little furniture; a few Italian paintings for decoration, which add color to the room.

**THE LAY OF THE LAND**

Three members compose the central structure. One facing the northward toward the Koolau range, one westward to the Waianae range, and one southward to the sea. All three face inward on a flagged courtyard surrounded by a pillared arcade. In the center of the courtyard is an Italianate fountain, which was used to cool the building when the breeze swept through the structure.

The main façade looks in the eye of the setting sun, out over walled terrace, over the treetops below over the city, between the twin craters of Red Hill, across Pearl Harbor and the upland plain of Leilehua, to the Waianae range.

At night, the Barbers point light can be seen on the far horizon.

The North façade opens on a walled loggia 150 feet long and designed in time to become a formal sunken garden. On the Waianae side of the loggia for the length of the
retaining wall, is erected by arched iron standards lined with banyan trees. A plastered wall cemented with conventional decorative patterns done in burnt amber bound the Leahi side.

LA PIETRA TODAY

La Pietra today remains as a monument to the early efforts of Hawai‘i’s historic preservationists. A home, which almost fell pray to the wrecking ball of realtors who wanted to turn the five-acre estate into a site for condominiums was saved in 1968 by Hawai‘i School for Girls who pleaded the school’s case. After fundraising $1 million to make their dream of a small secondary school for girls in a beautiful environment come true.