Board of Water Supply Public Service Building

The Board of Water Supply Public Service Building, located on 630 South Beretania Street in downtown Honolulu, has served as the "nerve center for Honolulu's artesian well water pressure system" (Paradise of the Pacific, 1958) for the past 47 years. Since its construction in the late 1950's, the Board of Water Supply Public Service Building has become known not only for its architectural beauty and utilitarian function, but its historical significance as well. The overall structure provides the public with a source of aesthetics and education that celebrates water as the key source to life in Honolulu.

Historically, the Board of Water Supply sees its beginnings in the 1800's well before the Public Service Building was erected. In 1837, cattle rancher James Campbell acquired a well driller in hopes of discovering a source of water throughout the plains of Ewa. After drilling a several hundred feet below the surface Campbell discovered a vast underground source of water. Within ten years of Campbell's discovery, numerous
artesian wells were drilled within the Honolulu city limits. By 1888, artesian wells were supplying the majority of Honolulu’s water needs.

This led to the water boom on Oahu as ranchers and plantation developers began to drill in an attempt to tap into the same source. By the 1890’s, due to the absence of any type of regulations or standards many wells were neglected, wasting millions of gallons of water causing levels to drop dramatically. Lack of rain throughout the years following the water boom led to drought in 1891 and again in 1894. In an effort to stabilize water levels, the Beretania Pumping Station was erected.

After the fall of the Hawaiian Monarchy in 1893, the Minister of the Interior of Hawaii was responsible for Honolulu’s Water Works, which was then passed on to the Superintendent of Public Works after Hawaii became a Territory. In 1913, the Department of Public Works, under the Mayor and Board of Supervisors, took charge of water distribution in Honolulu, creating the Honolulu Water Commission four years later. The duty of the Commission was to investigate and report on the water system of Honolulu in order to protect and preserve it for future use.

During the 1920’s Honolulu was on the verge of a water crisis once again. The original water system in use in Honolulu was no longer meeting the demands of the growing population throughout the city. By 1925, the legislature responded to the city’s worsening condition by appointing five members to the Honolulu Sewer and Water Commission. The goal of the Commission was to “expedite and complete the sewer and water systems and to insure its adequacy and to safeguard the watersheds and artesian base of Honolulu” (Honolulu Board of Water Supply website). During the four years that the Commission was in charge, water shortages still continued to plague the city.
Due to the ongoing issues concerning water shortages in Honolulu, local citizens and experts recommended that management of the water works be removed from political control. Therefore, in 1929, under Act 96, the Honolulu Sewer and Water Commission was dissolved, leading to the creation of the Board of Water Supply. The Board of Water Supply assumed the powers of the Commission taking full control of the Honolulu Water Works.

Under Fred Ohrt, the first Board manager, the water system was modernized allowing for the first truly effective water system to be put into use in Honolulu. The Board started by repairing leaky wells and capping off unused, wasteful artesian wells. And for the first time in Hawai‘i’s history water meters were installed putting a fixed rate on consumers’ water usage. As a result of Ohrt and the Board of Water Supply’s efforts, the water table stabilized, allowing Honolulu’s water crisis to be alleviated. In 1958, the Board of Water Supply Public Service Building was constructed to house its operations in order to continue the maintenance of Hawai‘i’s water system.

The design of the Public Service Building was put in the hands of the firm of Wood, Weed, and Kubala, sometimes known as Wood, Weed, and Associates, a locally renown firm that designed numerous structures around Honolulu. In 1958, the firm won the American Institute of Architects Design Award for the Tract House in Orchid Hills, Aiea. During World War II Wood, Weed, and Kubala was only one of two firms in operation designing non-military structures in Honolulu.

Wood, otherwise known as Hart Wood, was a renowned Honolulu architect in his own right designing many buildings around Honolulu. The bulk of his work was done during the 1920’s including the original Kapiolani Bandstand (1926), Spalding House
(1925), and the First Church of Christ Scientist (1922). Wood frequently partnered with other well-known Honolulu architect, C.W. "Pop" Dickey. Together they made popular what came to be known as "Hawaiian" and "Dickey" style architecture. This is mainly seen in their 1929 design for the Alexander and Baldwin building in downtown Honolulu. Some design features of the Hawaiian style, which combines contemporary American and Asian style, is evident in the design for the Board of Water Supply Public Service Building.

The construction of the Board of Water Supply Public Service Building was completed in 1958, one year before Statehood. In its completion the building measured 211 ft. long by 54 ft. deep. The original proposal for the building in 1955 was set at $850,000. Final building costs though rose to $1,250,000 almost a half million dollars more than the original cost. The building is architecturally significant to Honolulu because it was one of the first non-military buildings constructed following the Great Depression and World War II, which kept Honolulu architecturally dormant for almost two decades before the 1950's. Built entirely of reinforced concrete the building is strengthened by steel mesh and rebar that has been embedded into the poured concrete structure preventing stress fractures.

The interior of the building consists of three floors, a basement, and provision for five additional floors for future expansion. The lobby contains a fresco, titled *Pure Water-Man's Greatest Need*, painted by renowned local artist Juliette May Fraser. The painting combines legend and fact in six dramatic scenes, depicting the usage of water throughout Hawaii's history. Another interesting detail of the lobby is the gigantic six-foot aquarium built into the ewa wall.
The exterior of the building features colorful plants and trees in a landscape design by landscape architect Catherine Jones Thompson, who also designed the landscapes seen at other Board of Water Supply structures including the pumping stations around Oahu. Also featured on the exterior of the building is a drive-in cashier window and 24-hour depository for consumers to pay their water bills.

The most notable features of the exterior are the facade and water fountain facing South Beretania Street. Also built of reinforced concrete the façade boasts an intricately designed system of louvers that exhibit an influence of the Hawaiian style architecture. The louvers not only provide a sense of aesthetics, but also function as a shield protecting the building’s workers from glare and the blinding rays of the morning and afternoon sun. Throughout the day louvers are a source of interesting lighting effects, casting an array of shadows depending on the positioning of the sun.

![South Beretania façade (left), detail of louver system (right)](image)

The bubbling water fountain is the centerpiece of the South Beretania exterior. The back wall of the fountain features a Hawaiian phrase cast in stone *Uwe Ka Lani Ola Ka Honu*, meaning, *When the heavens weep, the earth lives*, which is the motto of the Board of Water Supply. At night, the fountain is lit by numerous colored lights, which attract the eyes of passing motorists.
The east end of the Public Service Building features a footbridge that spans Libson Street. Workers use the footbridge to commute from the upper floors of the Public Service Building to the neighboring Engineering Building and Beretania Pumping Station. Details of the louver system are continued throughout the footbridge seen in the supporting pillar and handrails.

The neighboring Engineering Building and Beretania Pumping Station were both built before the Public Service Building, the Beretania Pumping Station in 1894, and the Engineering Building in 1926. The Engineering Building houses the men and women responsible for planning and engineering all the water system facilities. Although the
Pumping Station was built over 100 years ago it still maintains the same look it did when it was first constructed. It is now 1 of 22 pumping stations on the island of Oahu.

The Board of Water Supply Public Service Building for the past 47 years has been a landmark in downtown Honolulu. Throughout its years in existence, the Public Service Building has not only served as a place of business, but it also as a symbol to Honolulu’s long standing relationship with water as the lifeline to the growth of the city. Much of Hawaii’s history is preserved in its design as well as its function making it one of the most architecturally and historically significant buildings in Honolulu.
Bibliography


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