PRESERVING 'IOLANI PALACE

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Honolulu, Hawaii has been known for its magnificent buildings and structures that were created for the Kings and Queens of the islands. One of the most incredible structures that were built in Hawaii during the early 1900’s was the Iolani palace. But in order for people to understand the significance of the building we must first look at the past history and how this building came about. Iolani Palace was built by King Kalakaua in the late 1800’s on the site of an earlier wooden residence. “The original building was made up of plastered brick, with “American Italianate” towers at each corner and at the center of the Mauka and Makai elevations.” On its grounds are the Iolani Barracks, originally built in 1871 to house the royal guards, and the Coronation Pavilion, which Kalakaua built in 1883 and moved it to its current location later that year. “The Palace is surrounded by a coral-block wall topped by an iron fence.” Iolani Palace became the governmental headquarters for the Provisional Government, Republic, Territory, and State of Hawaii during WWII. Electricity and telephones were installed several years before the White House did. Used for nearly three-quarters of a century as a government capitol building, the Palace had fallen into disrepair after years of abuse and neglect.

The Queen, imprisoned in the Palace for eight months in 1895 by the unlawful Provisional Government, was charged with misprision of treason for attempting to restore Hawaii’s sovereignty. After the overthrow of the monarchy, the government took control of the Palace. Government officials later, carefully inventoried all of its contents in the building and sold whatever furniture and furnishings that were not useful for government operations at public auctions. Since then, the restoration of the Iolani palace has been a everlasting project as architects, and contractors and historians, sponsors, federal funding
and so on try to find the best possible way to keep the building unique and authentic as much as possible.

Government offices vacated the Palace in 1969 and moved the palace to a newly constructed capitol building on land adjacent to the Palace grounds in preparation for restoration by the Junior League of Honolulu. The Junior League of Honolulu is an organization of women committed to promoting voluntarism, developing the potential of women and improving communities through the effective action and leadership of trained volunteers. The league funded and staffed an extensive historical research project. Researchers uncovered clues about construction, furnishings, and palace lifestyle in nineteenth-century newspapers, photographs and manuscripts found in various archives and libraries.

Also helping with the preservation of the Palace are a group called the Friends of Iolani who continue with restoration efforts. It is now a museum under the direction of Friends of Iolani Palace. The Friends of Iolani Palace, founded by Mrs. Liliuokalani Kahanamoku Morris, the grandniece of Queen Kapiolani continues to manage the Palace as an historic house museum and to share the history of the Hawaiian monarchy throughout the world. The Palace was listed on the National Register in 1966, and in 1969, the Friends of Iolani Palace monitored the restoration of the Palace to its 1886-1893 appearance. It was then opened to the public in 1978 after structural restoration of the building was completed. Through the dedicated efforts of acquisitions researchers and professional museum staff, and the generosity of individuals, families and organizations, many original Palace objects have been returned. The Friends of Iolani Palace, a nonprofit citizen's organization, was established in 1966 to encourage the preservation
and restoration of Iolani Palace. For over 30 years, The Friends has provided sustained action, guidance, and support for this important endeavor.

Another organization that needs to be recognized has been funded through the efforts of the Pulama Ia program, which is also called the cherished object program. Any interested individual or organization may sponsor the restoration of a specific object in the Palace collection. Restoration and preservation continues, and, as a result, today's visitors to this National Historic Landmark in downtown Honolulu enjoy one of the most precise historic restorations and learn much about Hawaiian history and heritage. Two portraits of King Kamehameha II and Queen Kamamalu, discovered in Ireland, were also restored through the Pulama Ia program. The restoration of the paintings cost between $1,500 and $1,800 each. There are other paintings, chairs and tables now in storage that need donations to be restored.

In 1975, while working for another firm, a man by the name of Glenn Mason working for Mason Architects was charged with reconstruction of the Palace Barracks. Originally moved from the site now occupied by the Capitol, the Barracks coral blocks had been turned to rubble due to years and years of wear and tear. “Working from old photographs, Mason rebuilt the Barracks walls from the rubble, and then plastered them in a pattern to match the original.” Since 1980, Mason Architects, working closely with the Palace curator, has conducted twelve major phases of restoration work. That work has included the restoration of the Coronation Pavilion, which had been moved, rebuilt in 1910, and set upon a concrete base in 1920. The restoration of the original entrance pillars and gates and refinishing of the 20,000 linear feet of perimeter walls and fences, Improvements to the roofing as well as security systems of the Palace, Installation of
lighting and walkways, and Restoration of the Old Archives Building constructed in 1906. Much of the work involves diagnosing problems that arise as the buildings have continued to age. Work done in the 1970s is now being repaired again, sometimes with systems or materials not available 30 years ago.

Funding from government grants and private donations for conservation treatment and painstaking reproduction of original fabrics and finishes have been a key effort to the reconstruction of the building, resulting in the restoration of Palace rooms to their monarchy era appearance. Many of the original objects sold and dispersed that were once a part of the palace have been sold at public auctions and have been recovered from many different parts of the world. Glassware found in Australia, and a table in the Governor’s mansion in Iowa, to a chair in a local thrift store. “The quest to find original Palace furnishings and artifacts still continues today.” But still, many of the Palace’s artifacts remain in storage because of a lack of available conservation funds for repair and restoration.

Restoring the outside of a building as well the inside of a building is equally important in getting the original structure as authentic as possible. Attempts have been made to restore these items once auction to the public but managed to find their way back to Hawaii. Much is accomplished through strategic efforts and sometimes just plain luck. For example, the repair of a valuable Victorian table from King Kalakaua’s bedroom at Iolani Place are one of the many original pieces found in the palace before the military took over. “The 32-inch-high, 19-inch-diameter table which sat at the foot of Kalakaua’s coffin had been stored out of public view. The three-leg, gold leaf wood table with a circular onyx top was owned by a Hawaii cabinetmaker named James Armstrong who
arrived here in 1894 three years after Kalakaua's death.” The restoration of Kapiolani's table took about a month. A broken leg needed to be repaired, the surface needed cleaning, and bronze paint was removed to reveal the original gilding on the piece.

The staff members of the Palace do not know how Armstrong obtained the table. The piece was discovered when a former curator spotted it while looking at other artifacts the family was considering donating. See what I mean about luck. “Some wood attachments on the Kalakaua table leg had to be reset, supports re-glued, and pieces containing minor termite damage also had to be replaced.” A major problem during the time of repair was the table's original gold leaf. Cracks in the wood, however, were not considered to be repaired because these represent the history and life story of the Hawaiian past. The conservation of the Kalakaua table was one of the first of palace-owned pieces. A year earlier, the Liliuokalani quilt was restored at the Textile Conservation Center in Massachusetts for over 10,000 dollars funded by GTE.

The 300-year-old Kamehameha I feather cape another piece of artifact restored to the Palace donated from the Bishop Museum represented the palace's last major conservation expense, costing just about $25,000 in 2000. The work needed to be done before it could be displayed. In today’s world, no attempt is made to completely repair a historical piece to an as new condition because we tend to keep the old look as much as possible to try to keep it authentic. “We treat the object knowing we’re not going to be the last one to work on it, so we thoroughly document everything that’s done so people farther down the line can work from that information.”

The palace's annual $1.4 million state budget is strictly to be used for restoration on the building's physical structure and does not cover any interior items, staff salaries or
operating expenses, including a ridiculous electrical bill. These funds come from grants, tour revenues, and shop sales but, there is no conservation budget.

Some of the most recent phase of restoration work at the palace included the restoration or repair of wrought-iron work, plaster work and floors, and the installation of hurricane window paneling and security equipment. The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, an organization of women descended from leaders of the 13 original American colonies, donated the money for the restoration. A gilded pedestal table was restored by an anonymous donor at a cost of $6,500 earlier in the year.

“After Queen Kapiolani left Iolani Palace, the table was sold at public auction to Dr. William C. Hobdy, a physician at Straub Clinic. Hobdy moved to San Francisco in 1920 and took the table with him. The table returned to Hawaii in the 1930s with William Warner Hobdy, one of Dr. Hobdy's sons. William W. Hobdy's widow, Ruth, donated it to the palace in 1987.” The table went on public display at a reception for the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America. It was placed in Kapiolani's bedroom, which is one of the rooms open for public tours of the palace. Returning a piece to public display always feels like a present to all the volunteers, staff and the public. “The mission of Iolani Palace is to preserve, restore, interpret, share and celebrate the unique cultural, historical and spiritual qualities of Iolani Palace and its grounds for the benefit of native Hawaiians, the people of Hawaii and the world.”

Visitors to the Iolani Palace are guided through the building and its history by the dozens of the Palace. These knowledgeable individuals, members of the Friends of the Iolani Palace, Pulama Ia, Mason Architects and volunteers are responsible for the restoration and ongoing preservation methods of this historic landmark have provided.
people from all over the world with the opportunity to learn from ancient Hawaii and its past. The Iolani Palace has given people the educational value of what Hawaii once was. Through the efforts of organizations and with the help of a little elbow grease, the Iolani Palace has proven itself to be one of a kind. The first floor of the palace provides visitors with the view of the Hawaiian Monarchy. “Their fondness for entertaining visiting dignitaries with music and state dinners is reflected in the elegantly decorated reception blue room and adjoining dining room. Across the wide hall, with its massive hand-carved wooden staircase, the throne room is restored to its original state with crystal chandeliers and traditional Kahili as befitting the royal balls and receptions that were held here.” Later this same room was the setting for Queen Liliuokalani’s treason trial and finally the House of Representative for the State of Hawaii. Upstairs is where people would see the more personal side to the Hawaiian rulers. The King’s interest not just in Hawaiian and European culture, but the technological advances of the day. The innovative disappearing shutters in the bedrooms, the telephone to his chamberlain in the Palace basement and the electric lighting that the King had installed in 1887, making the Iolani Palace the first royal residence to enjoy this modern convenience. Today Iolani Palace is a popular tourist attraction and point of pride for indigenous Hawaiian. Iolani Palace continues to be a focal point in efforts to restore Hawaii’s sovereignty and independence.
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