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PARADISE'S LAST HOPE

Hawaiian Modern: The Architecture of Vladimir Ossipoff
Honolulu Academy of Arts, 900 South Beretania St., Honolulu
Through January 27

For a moment in 1958, it seemed as if the architecture world's attention was riveted by the nascent modernism of the Hawaiian Islands. On the cover of *House Beautiful* that July was the 1952 Liljestrand House, named Pace Setter house of the year. Fifty-three pages of the magazine displayed its angular redwood and glass, open to the elements, perched high above Honolulu. At the heart of this iconic residence was an architect named Vladimir Ossipoff and a movement to redefine Hawaiian regionalism.

Yet only a year later, two major factors forever tainted Ossipoff's optimism. Hawaii became a state, which brought the inevitable mainland influences on its culture; and jetliners began depositing numbers of tourists that Hawaii's easygoing development culture couldn't accommodate. Honolulu became a sea of generic white condo towers of uniform height, descended from questionable Spanish-style ancestors, with Asian embellishments sprinkled over for good measure.

The traveling exhibition *Hawaiian Modern: The Architecture of Vladimir Ossipoff*, currently at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, shows what might have been. This retrospective of the man who trans-

formed Hawaiian architecture delivers lessons for place-sensitive development to any city that must resolve similar issues between the past and future. The exhibition will travel to Yale University's School and then to Frankfurt, Germany's Deutsches Architekturmuseum in February 2009.

Although barely on the radar of architects from the contiguous 48, Ossipoff is a household name for many Hawaii residents. Born in Russia, Ossipoff was raised in Tokyo and Berkeley, where he studied architecture at the University of California. He made an auspicious move to Hawaii at the behest of a classmate in 1931, and island life agreed with him: He founded his firm in 1936, which still bears his name—Ossipoff Snyder & Rowland Architects—became a civic leader, and completed more than a thousand projects, all in Hawaii. Although he was best known for his monumental residential projects, his works for institutions and industry are landmarks of an emerging modern age.

Architect and Hawaii native Dean Sakamoto grew up with Ossipoff's work (and even approached him for a job; Ossipoff wasn't hiring). In his current roles as director of exhibitions at the Yale School

of Architecture and principal of his own firm in New Haven, he approached the Honolulu Academy of Arts with the idea to curate an exhibition to coincide with the centennial of Ossipoff's birth in November 1907. Sakamoto's firm also designed the exhibition, which divides Ossipoff's work into five themes: Revealing the Site; Hawaiian and Modern; Darkness and Air; Native Materials and Modern Tectonics; and The Living Lanai. Perhaps the most signature element of Hawaiian modernism, the lanai is a traditional Hawaiian open-air shelter that was modernized into an indoor-outdoor living area.

The exhibition is laid out like an Ossipoff residence, transitioning between small, narrow corridors and larger, more dramatic spaces. The exhibition relies heavily on historic black-and-white photographs, with drawings, ephemera, and press clippings. Additional contemporary color photography by Victoria Sambunaris was also commissioned for the exhibition.

The 14 tabletop maquettes built by Sakamoto's office are especially effective for explaining Ossipoff's unconventional use of site, as at the Robert H. Shipman Thurston, Jr. Memorial Chapel at the Punahou School (1967), which incorporated a sacred natural spring as a design element. A scale model also reproduces Ossipoff's most remarkable structural detail, the sunscreen on the IBM Building (Honolulu, 1962) whose steep curve doesn't let grime accumulate.

The most representative and intriguing element of Ossipoff's philosophy manifested itself not in a structure but in a scathing cultural commentary: As AIA Hawaii chapter

president in 1964, Ossipoff declared a "War on Ugliness" (though Ossipoff built one of the first of a wave of generic white towers, the Diamond Head Apartments, in 1958.) This direct attack on rampant overdevelopment, culturally insensitive design, irresponsible building practices, and lack of urban planning was widely reported in the media. One look at Waikiki Beach, and it appears to have been lost.

However outspoken in his expectations for Hawaii's future, Ossipoff was not one to reflect upon his own work. He reportedly shrugged off any comparisons to other architects, and the exhibition is forced to do the same. A timeline, which cross-references Ossipoff's life with Hawaiian politics, world events, and architectural milestones, further highlights these glaring questions about how (or if) Ossipoff connected to the architecture world at large. Although there are hints at influences—Frank Lloyd Wright is an obvious one—Ossipoff appeared to operate independently from their inspiration, or pretended he did. He attended a reputable Beaux Arts school, worked in the office of noted territorial Hawaiian architect Charles W. Dickey, but there are no mentions of mentors, nor are there apprentices who faithfully carried on his legacy. What is covered in depth is Ossipoff's brusque, at times abrasive personality and his oft-silent demeanor.

The exhibition does not explain whether this isolationist tendency was self-imposed or could be blamed on Hawaii's remote location. Did the architect not receive commissions outside of Hawaii, or did he choose not to accept them? What prevented him from achieving



Top: Honolulu International Airport, 1978; Left: Pauling Residence, Oahu, 1957; Above: Ossipoff in 1975.

fame outside the state? Was it his choice to perfect a kind of regionalism because of his love for Hawaii, or did it arise from desire to be the most celebrated architect in a small community?

Toward the end of the exhibition, Ossipoff's last major project is given significant real estate. Almost every visitor to Honolulu experiences the delight of stepping off the plane and right back outdoors into the soaring lanais and palm groves of the Honolulu International Airport, which Ossipoff modernized in 1972. His eloquent embrace of the jetliner is endangered: A new masterplan for the airport might eradicate Ossipoff's contributions. If that happens, the high visibility of this exhibition is perfectly timed. At best, it will convince another generation of planners and architects that the War on Ugliness is even more relevant than it was when first declared, and—for Honolulu at least—it's not too late.

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