

It takes restraint to create a structure so great it's not even noticeable

Below_ Ossipoff's own house from 1958. Right_ The IBM Building in Honolulu, built in 1962



EXHIBITION /
Hawaiian Modern:
The Architecture
of Vladimir Ossipoff
Deutsches
Architekturmuseum,
Frankfurt, Germany,
until 14 June
www.dam-online.de

From the late 1940s, Punahou School in Hawaii – which boasts Barack Obama as one of its alumnus – was shaped by Vladimir Ossipoff, the state's leading modernist. He designed a series of mono-pitched classroom pavilions and his Thurston Memorial Chapel (completed in 1966), forms a campus focal point. Apparently, Obama loved his time at Punahou – though whether that was down to the buildings is not clear. What is certain is that for over 60 years, architecture in Hawaii was dominated by Ossipoff.

Chance brought Ossipoff to the Pacific Islands. His father worked as military attaché in the

Russian tsar's Tokyo embassy and the young Vladimir had a cosmopolitan childhood. His family emigrated to the USA in 1923 but his father, who had stayed in Japan, died soon after in an accident. Ossipoff studied architecture at Berkeley, qualifying just as the Great Depression wiped out jobs in the construction industry. He left for Hawaii in 1931, never returning to work on the US mainland.

'We have a much more casual way of being formal than you do on the mainland,' he once said. In the 1960s he maintained that he was fighting a war on ugliness. During his long career, he completed over 1,000 private houses, from luxury villas to family homes. He designed the University of Hawaii Administration building and Honolulu Airport terminal. Clubhouses such as the Pacific Club and Outrigger Canoe Club also owe their ambience to Ossipoff's particular style of modernism. But despite his



influence, his legacy has not always fared so well. His IBM Building, with its honeycomb facade modelled on a computer punch card, is a clear case for conservation, yet is not listed and now faces possible demolition.

Dean Sakamoto, who organised the original exhibition, thinks Ossipoff's Japanese background taught him the understated aesthetic of *shibui*, which resonates with the Hawaiian philosophy of *lanai*. 'Ossipoff once said that the ideal house in Hawaii is an umbrella ... a non-building, and it takes restraint to create ... a structure so great it's not even noticeable.' With their open plans to accommodate multigenerational families, minimal decorative elements and natural colours and materials, Ossipoff's buildings are consistently underscored by Hawaii's

indigenous traditions. Within this ferment of influences from Japan, Europe and America brought together in a hot, tropical climate, Ossipoff's architecture developed along distinctive lines. His buildings are characterised by strong roof profiles, deep overhangs, local stone, dark native timbers and natural ventilation.

Belatedly, in the last year of his life, Ossipoff was awarded the first Medal of Honor by the Hawaiian chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Over a decade after his death, his office (renamed Ossipoff Snyder & Rowland in 1973), still gets requests for 'Ossipoff homes' and those he built now command high premiums.

This retrospective exhibition was first shown at the Honolulu Academy of Arts and last year at Yale University. It is thanks to curator Hester Robinson that Ossipoff's Hawaiian modernist oeuvre is now being shown for the first time in Europe.

LAYLA DAWSON

+ Unearths a regional modernist master for a European audience
— Doesn't come with a free ticket to Hawaii