

ART

by Jean Charlot



Blueprints and photographs

Shown currently in the Garden Court of the State Library is an important exhibit of blueprints and photographs of old buildings, "Hawaii's Historic Architecture." The display summarizes the work done up to now in our State by the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Already this nation-wide organization has recorded in drawings and photographs thousands of historical structures throughout the United States. This year was the first one in which Hawaii was included in the survey.

Architectural blueprints make thorough sense for the trained architect only. Factually measured and ruled, elevations and ground plans are not apt to stir at first sight the art lover.

No clouds, no trees

Not one of the tricks that are the stock in trade of the architect wooing a potential client are here in sight. Not a single cloud. Not a single palm tree. Perspective renderings, another visual trap for the unwary, are omitted.

To enliven this strictly professional approach, photographs are an important part of the show. Most of them are proofs made from 19th century negatives kept in our State Archives.

Emphasizing light and shade as the blueprints do not, the photographs add to the old buildings men who were their contemporaries, and who took pride in their newness.

The house is still there

Detailed renderings of Chamberlain's House, built in 1830, remind us that, from the Library that houses the display, a short walk will take us to the original building.

It is one of the group of mission houses close by Kawaiahao Church, also singled out in this show for its historical importance.

So oblivious are Honoluluans of everyday sights that such a reminder is needed to realize anew the beauty of this early architectural complex. To look at the original buildings helps us put flesh on the skeletal blueprints, and add color to the old photographs.

Respect for early builders

This show instills in us respect for our early builders. The difference between modern functional architecture and this group of frame houses is one of size and of materials. The approach is similar. A Mies van der Rohe would approve of Chamberlain's House.

On Maui, a similar building, Ka Hale Pa'i o Lahainaluna, also achieves beauty through functional simplicity.

This early phase of 19th century American architecture had its counterpart on the Mainland. Only when confronted by the purity of buildings of that period did Frank Lloyd Wright admit he had met his match.

Admiration for other men's work did not come to him easily. Viewing the Old State Capitol built ca. 1840 in Iowa City, he dismissed the beautiful building with a shrug.

Said he, "The builders worked under such economic hardships that no money was left to render it ugly."

A reflection of personality

Hawaiian missionary architecture was put together with very little money. But that is not the sole reason for its sober beauty. Architecture is an art. The artist, be he painter, sculptor or architect, projects in his work his personality.

To understand what kind of men were these early missionaries, it is not enough to look at their portraits. Too often do their beards and mustaches get in the way. Architecture affords another, an inner approach.

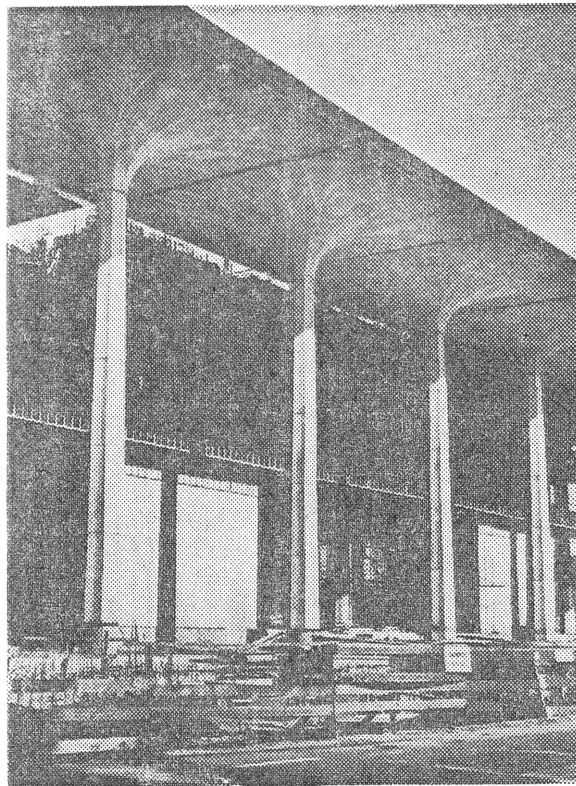
Mission houses are invested with balance, dignity, grace, in the material as well as in the spiritual sense. These buildings reflect their makers. Chance is that Michener's "Hawaii" fails to tell the whole story.

Hawaii's royal palaces

Our Hawaiian past also produced formal architecture, royal palaces, seats of government. In spite of recent diggings, we do not know what the earliest of these, the fabled brick house of Kamehameha I built in 1800 on Maui looked like.

But from mid-century we have a lithograph depicting the palace of King Kamehameha III.

The building is little more than an ample private



The new Capitol

house, cooled off by generous eaves and topped by a modest gazebo. Its royal status is underlined unostentatiously by the high flagpole and the eight steps needed to reach the front door.

Here, in 1848, did the King receive the newly arrived French consul, Dillon, to accept from his hand with much fanfare—a whole brass band debarked from the corvette La Sarcelle—the portrait of King Louis-Philippe that today adorns Iolani palace.

This mid-century royal habitation does not exist anymore. Iolani Palace is still with us and is quite fully described in the present show.

Beautiful—in different ways

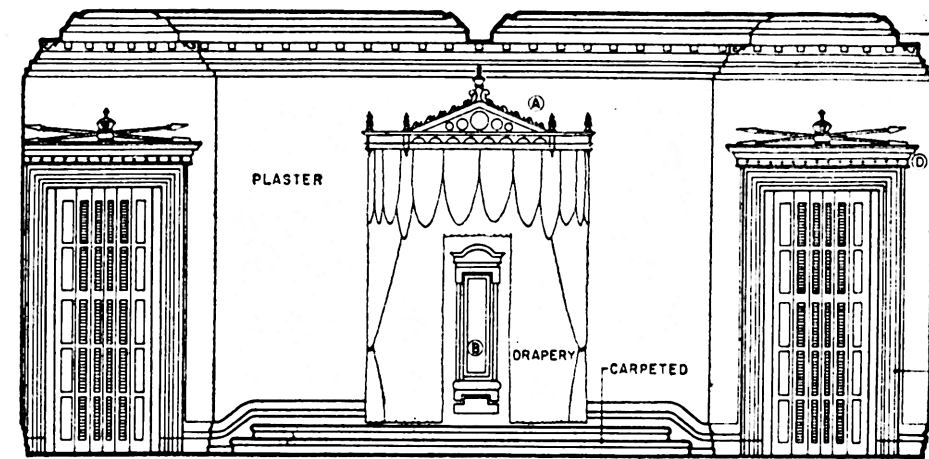
Missionary architecture is beautiful because it is functional. Iolani Palace is equally beautiful, but for the opposite reason.

Twenty years ago, most architects would have gladly dismissed it as a gingerbread anomaly. As do styles in painting, styles in architecture change. The non-functional again tugs at the hearts of creative architects.

Quite a number of our new buildings wear decorative false facades that unashamedly mask their inner structure.

Shyly, slyly, the scales fall from our eyes as we compare Iolani Palace with buildings after the new fashion. Only yesterday, the palace could have been bypassed as architecturally anodyne. Today it finds itself in the vanguard of the most advanced taste!

The surveyors, most of them young architects, seem to have had a good time of



Throne Canopy

deur, someone wrote with pride that the new Capitol already dwarfed Iolani Palace. It does nothing of the kind. Compared with the young giant, the older building acquires an added coziness.

Iolani was built to the scale of man. In the old photographs now on display, one sees what a fitting background the curlicues carved in wood or cast in plaster were for the benedicted and bearded courtiers.

The curves of stairs and balustrades flatter in turn the curves of their ladies, gowned in silk, dark skinned, and wearing white gloves.

Once completed, what sort of a frame will the new building prove to be for our present and future rulers?

A newly appointed judge entering Washington's Supreme Court Building complained that it made him feel like a dung beetle lost in an Egyptian temple hall.

Unfinished, it's a puzzle

At this stage at least, our Capitol is visually puzzling. It looks like an eccentric ante bellum facade in search of its pediment. Each one of its columns opens its stiff parasol of fronds under the delusion that it is a palm tree.

Maybe Frank Lloyd Wright, linking ample budgets and architectural imbalance, made a telling point. Will the mana, the spiritual aura that insistently haunts the old frame buildings, ever learn to dwell inside this gigantic cement grove?

Confusing scale with gran-