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Vladimir Ossipoff: Hawaii's modern architect revisited

By Jon Letman | Published 12/27/2007 | [Designer Profile](#) | Unrated

Hawaii's Modern Architect Revisited



When the Honolulu Academy of Arts opened the exhibition *Hawaiian Modern: The Art of the Islands* last November, it coincided with the centennial of the birth of one of the most influential architects.

Vladimir Ossipoff, born in 1907 in Vladivostok, the son of a Russian military attaché in Tokyo where he attended western schools until he was 16. Following the devastating Kanto Earthquake of 1923, the Ossipoff family immigrated to the United States. Mir



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the voyage, Ossipoff's ship docked in Honolulu where he spent a night in Waikiki before heading on to California.

Eight years later, after graduating from the University of California Berkeley School of Architecture in 1931, Ossipoff returned to Hawai'i. There he embarked on a career that lasted 60 years, designing over 1,000 public and private projects, and ushering in the age of modern architecture in Hawai'i.



Hawaiian Modern, the first to reveal Ossipoff's extraordinary and prolific career, was the brainchild of curator and designer, Honolulu architect Dean Sakamoto. Dean Sakamoto is a faculty member at the Yale School of Architecture and principal of Dean Sakamoto Architects, LLC.

Sakamoto came up with the idea for an exhaustive study of Ossipoff's comprehensive research, exhibition and publication project which he

proposed to the Honolulu Academy of Arts in 2001.

Stephen Little recalled being contacted by Sakamoto in 2002 when he took over as the director of the Honolulu Academy of Arts. "Recognizing that Ossipoff was the greatest architect of the 20th century, I was astonished that there was no book or serious study of his contribution to architecture." Little immediately backed the idea of an Ossipoff exhibition, what he called his "elegant design, great attention to detail and materials and, above all, sensitivity to the environment." Little explained: "This exhibition is important not only as a study of Vladimir Ossipoff's life and career, but to hopefully stimulate a broad dialogue about modern architecture in Hawai'i."

Over the next six years Sakamoto pursued the project which would bring him back to Hawai'i multiple times to examine Ossipoff through files, documents, drawings, oral histories, photographs and the buildings themselves. Together with art photographer Victoria Sambunaris, Sakamoto visited countless Ossipoff buildings, documenting over 50 structures for a book that completes the Ossipoff project.



Interviewing Ossipoff's wife, family and some 60 others, Sakamoto gained access to his personal and professional files, records and original drawings through Ossipoff's for

Sidney Snyder, Jr., president of Ossipoff, Snyder & Rowland Architects, Inc. Meticu notes were combined with archival photographs by renowned photographer Robert shine a beacon onto Ossipoff's remarkable legacy.



"Ossipoff wasn't localized; he was a very aware of what was happening a world," Sakamoto said. "He read into journals, he traveled and he was eag incorporate the contemporary."

Today the Hawaiian Islands are pepp landmark buildings bearing Ossipoff: the Honolulu International Airport (1962), the Outrigger Canoe Club in Waikiki (1964), chapels, academies, banks and libra state. But it is the Ossipoff home wh guiding principles are best observed.

Hawaiian Modern, the exhibit, seeks five primary Ossipoff design themes: the Site; Hawaiian and Modern; Dark Native Materials and Modern Tectoni

Living Lānai. Sakamoto explained: "Take Modern Tectonics. Ossipoff believed that c incorporate native materials and modern technology. Ossipoff was not just a design how to make things look nice; he knew how to structure and using the latest techn important to him."

Ossipoff buildings like the Diamond Head apartments (1958) and the IBM Building i very advanced for their time, reflecting Ossipoff's interest in new technology, but w possible he used native Hawaiian materials like lava stone, ohia and koa wood and from Waianae. According to Sakamoto, the IBM building within Ward Centers in Ho illustrates how Ossipoff blended modernity with traditional Hawaiian motifs. He con story building to a museum piece, today surrounded by towering high-rise, dark gla condominiums.

"The geometric patterns on the sun screen around the IBM building are like a tapa combined with the aesthetic of the keypunch card which, in 1962, was how comput driven," Sakamoto said.

In preparation for the exhibit, Sakamoto and his staff created detailed analytical ba models as a means of assessing 15 of the 30 Ossipoff projects presented in the ext representations include the Liljstrand, Pauling and Blanche Hill residences and Ossi Kuli'ou'ou home near Koko Head where he lived from 1958-1988. Built to scale, the not merely representations of the buildings, but designed to examine thematic asp structure. For example, the Pauling residence reveals the site, atop a hill, illustratin Ossipoff fit the house to its unique location.

"I think first and foremost was Ossipoff's awareness of his surroundings," Sakamot

"Buildings need to comply to their environment and most of Ossipoff's work falls into category of compliance. He was a master in his ability to be modest and restrained environment to dominate yet produced a design and experience which was always

Sakamoto called Ossipoff buildings, in particular the residences, structures of integrity were part of a larger whole. He said Ossipoff was a critical thinker who understood building impacts the overall environment just as Ossipoff's buildings reflect how the impacts every building.

The success of Ossipoff's architecture was based on principles, not just appearance homes addressed key environmental conditions—wind direction, the location of sun sunset, the site's topography and whether the home was makai (by the sea), mauka (mountains) or elsewhere. The elements dictated the pitch of the roof, the depth of and selection of materials. Climate influenced the location of the entry and how to windows.

Describing what Sakamoto called Ossipoff's comfort strategies, he said, "Ossipoff recognized the key to comfort in design in the islands was not just letting the sun in, but keeping the sun out. Also, letting the wind in, but knowing that with the trade winds come rain. Wherever you live in Hawai'i, you get morning and afternoon sprinkles, so Ossipoff developed strategies of deep shade coupled with views. Open spaces had to be protected from the rain while maintaining openness."

It was what Sakamoto dubbed the "living lānai" that he calls Ossipoff's greatest contribution to architecture in Hawai'i. He considers the Blanche Hill house the best example of a lānai residence. "Blanche Hill was basically all open except for the master bedroom. Everything else was exposed to the elements. In the case of the lānai building, Sakamoto said, "it's really not about rather what's around the building."



Other lānai-type Ossipoff buildings include the Honolulu Airport and Outrigger Canc Waikīkī, a significant portion of which is covered by an arbor and open to the beach called it "the lānai perfected." When Ossipoff designed the modernization/expansion Honolulu International Airport, he took what he learned designing the Blanche Hill l Outrigger and increased the scale to create a modern, open structure with limited conditioning as a grand manifestation of the lānai.

Sidney Snyder explained that his former partner liked to simplify designs, yet often magic and mystery into how a building was entered or the sequence of views a visitor experience. Ossipoff was concerned with how people moved from the point of arrival home, which, for him, was a stage for living. He wanted to give people an experiential

Ossipoff entry was never a straight shot, nor was a view set dead ahead.

"Val was quick," said Snyder. "In a few minutes a project could be turned from ordinary special with something as simple as color and texture."

The Ossipoff house had an openness of light, the element of surprise, and above all integrated with its setting. In Hawaiian Modern, this integration and Ossipoff's ability rapport with clients is also revealed. Ossipoff's wife said that he always built a home for the owner. When a concerned client questioned the quick-witted architect, he would answer, "Don't worry, you'll like it when you see it."

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