

Sent 12 May 71

WAIKIKI: THE COMPUTER PLANNED ESCAPE MACHINE

If it had just one good building I could love Waikiki more, but even so it is fascinating in its unordered consistency. It works.

It works because of the thought put into the comfort of guests, because of the impeccable housekeeping of the whole area, but mainly because of the standards accepted by everyone concerned - buyer and seller, guest and hotelier and waitress and billhop. These standards are as fixed as religious dogma. They are American middle-class vacation standards, frozen in unwritten law. They recognize as part of the fun almost any atmospheric trickery, but no compromises on comfort.

Waikiki of course has long enjoyed a happy reputation for a frankly phoney glamour. Nostalgia fans of the current 1930's Revival will recall Al Bowlly singing of the joys of Making Wicki-Wacky Down in Waikiki. Later, dozens of popular singers, wanting to go back in their fish and poi or their little brown gals in little grass skirts, kept the myths warm.

In those days there were few hotels, centred on a wide stretch of beach dominated by the Royal Hawaiian. Today that proud pink palace is still in command, by tradition; but during the last ten years it has been hemmed in on every side except the beach with as many tall buildings as have been built in the same time in Sydney and Melbourne combined - about 50 Wentworths and 40 Southern Crosses - and many smaller ones besides.

See the transient inmates of the super hotels emerge hesitantly from the beach-front open lanai lounges and restaurants, gingerly disturbing the sand about mid-morning: enormous elderly American ladies bulging out of bright bathers. They come in groups of eight, or if separate on arrival soon gravitate to groups of eight. "Look who's here!" - loud greetings across the sand and another group links up. Some of the large American ladies have thinner husbands in tow. These couples are dressed in unisex, Hawaiian style, muus and shirts respectively.

There are more Japanese than ever: young married couples getting cautiously into the swing with toned-down Hawaiian-style clothes, and batches of black-suited businessmen walking the concrete path at the safe edge of the beach.

In a good year a million visitors flood through Waikiki, but the last year of American recession has not been a good one for vacation spending and very many rooms were vacant through the height of the season. Still the building goes on - if with less of the usual air of emergency.

Twenty or thirty storeys up in the tropical air, a visitor from the mainland may start her day stepping out on to her lanai (balcony). She sees the heads of the coconut palms waving far below and, in a vista between nearby skyscrapers, young pink ants sporting on the yellow beach, which was raked and replenished overnight.

At 9 A.M. or so she will descend, trailing her husband (if he be still with us) or meeting by appointment the other seven of her crowd, and will breakfast on a lanai open wide to the pool terrace. She will take her communal hula class at 10, and the ukelele lesson at 11. Tonight there will be a luau, for a dead pig, gutted and sliced, is being carried through the grounds of the hotel by a solemn procession of grass-skirted Hawaiian students, working their way through college, to a slow beat on a skin drum. A day of this sort of life costs about \$70.

Yet a Waikiki holiday need not be expensive. There are small hotels with room rates of a single figure, cheap self-service cafes even in the best hotels, and all the free entertainments of the beach. The only person for whom Waikiki must be a misery is the impecunious drinking man. The Mai Tais and other local floral rum concoctions cost five dollars or so and even a plain whisky may cost two dollars.

It is easy to laugh at the fat and frail guests of Waikiki, at its desperate myth-keeping and commercial exploitation of every great natural quality with which the islands were blessed. Yet such laughter from an Australian must quickly turn hollow. Who of us, for instance, can laugh long at the artificial beaches? The imported sand is infinitely cleaner than that of any used Australian beach.

Why I love Waikiki is because it is spontaneous. It is not planned by planners. The architecture is at best secondrate Californian (which is where most of it was in fact designed) and some of it, like the Hilton Rainbow Towers, is catastrophic. The city was built by tourist trade developers who were not over-fussy in their selection of architects but whose computers told them what the public wants.

I am not talking of the fine, isolated holiday resorts that are growing rapidly on other islands of the Hawaiian group, nor of the more luxurious hotels around the point of Diamond Head. They are almost a different world again, where millionaires relax, and others pretend to.

I am talking of noisy, bustling, colour-crammed Waikiki, with its artificial sand and stuck-in palm trees and plastic leis and floodlighted surf: a popular, comparatively cheap dream city created primarily for the great anonymous American middle-aged middle-class. It is a mass-produced, computer-planned, escape machine.

I am well aware that anyone confessing a love for Honolulu, Hawaii, is condemning himself, by ancient rules of Good Taste, to disdain in the eyes of those who proudly possess that quality. What's more, by the new code of Pop Environment he is also condemning himself in many much younger eyes.

For Honolulu is unique: neither one thing nor the other. It is far too exuberant and colour ful and occasionally outlandish to be in Good Taste; yet it has too many trees - mainly coconut palms crowding between the buildings and beckoning to the beach - and lower planting so green and luxuriant that nearly every little shop or cafe is transformed into a botanical experience and it has no roadside advertising. All this removes it far from the company of the Pop false-front glamour of Las Vegas and Miami which so thrills Mod architectural writers, especially some English ones, who have not seen even imitations of such things at home.

Accepted standards mean that everyone knows what they are getting. "Fresh orange juice" on a menu, for instance, means just that, and not yellow acid from a can. "Swimming Pool" means just that, rather than a vertical dip.

With accepted standards controls are almost redundant. Waikiki grows with minimum direction in a more orderly way than Moscow does.

At this stage in Australia we have no commonly agreed standards, of
course. ^{Excellence and shoddiness live side by side. Lack of standards}
~~That~~ [^] is why no Australian resort, no matter how desperately
it tries to copy Honolulu or how much it is controlled and directed
and cajoled, has a hope of producing the uniform air of confidence
which is Honolulu's strength, or of attracting American tourists in
any significant number.

CAPTION: Hilton's Rainbow Towers with its artificial beach apron.