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Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association

Title

The Collection: Curated Architecture and Design in Kaka'ako, Hawai'i

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4xh173jc>

Journal

Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association, 22(1)

ISSN

1018-4252

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Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/PC222156850

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Peer reviewed

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The Collection: Curated Architecture and Design in Kaka‘ako, Hawai‘i

Abstract

*This Research Note investigates *The Collection* (2016), a residential development in Kaka‘ako, Hawai‘i. *The Collection* is part of *Our Kaka‘ako*, an urban revitalization project on land administered by the Kamehameha Schools. *The Collection* initiates critical conversations about the fraught relationship between contemporary architecture, urban planning, and Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) futures in the settler state of Hawai‘i. While *The Collection* is steeped in neoliberal and capitalist discourses, its monumental presence also enables an interrogation of future possibilities of Honolulu as a just urban society—a place where everyone has a home and Kānaka Maoli can maintain and restore relationships informed by the ‘āina (land; that which feeds).*

Keywords: *contemporary architecture, urban planning, urban design, street art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i*

Our Kaka‘ako is an ongoing urban revitalization project located on twenty-nine acres of land wedged between downtown Honolulu and Ward Village on O‘ahu’s southeastern shore. The land that the project is on is administered by the Kamehameha Schools, the mission of which is to impart “smart, progressive, and culturally appropriate stewardship of lands endowed by Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop.”¹ Supporters of Our Kaka‘ako maintain that this mission is met by garnering revenue from residential and commercial investment in the property. The money generated from diversified enterprises throughout Our Kaka‘ako is used to support the education of Hawaiian children.² Local shops abut corporate chains, and pedestrian walkways intersect with outdoor eateries and public seating in the district. Multiple constituencies, from families and professionals to locals and visitors, are drawn in by the community’s “live, work, play” ethos.³



Figure 1. Design Partners Incorporated and Pappageorge Haymes, The Collection, Tower, 2016. Our Kaka'ako, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of the author

My current research focuses on the liberatory possibilities of practicing and communicating culturally responsive architectural histories. In part, I am analyzing The Collection (2016), a residential project in Our Kaka'ako developed by Alexander & Baldwin (A&B) Properties, Inc. on the corner of Keawe Street and Ala Moana Boulevard (Fig. 1).⁴ The Collection is a mixed-use complex with commercial spaces, a six-story parking structure, and three residential spaces that are in stark visual contrast with one another. A forty-three-story central tower with 397 condominiums soars into the sky. Its façade is punctuated with equidistantly spaced balconies at every level, wrapping around the entirety of the structure. Low-e glass projects a crisp, silver-blue hue from a building that captures the sky's color and the city's ambient environment. The Lofts—fifty-four condo units in a four-story building—functions as a transition point between the tower and the townhomes; the white, gray, and burgundy mid-rise building features large windows

divided into variously arranged sections, adding visual dimension and artistry to the exterior. These windows give the impression of wide-open interior spaces and high ceilings, architectural features usually associated with lofts and former industrial centers (Fig. 2). The fourteen four-story townhomes offer ample square footage and access to private rooftop decks (Fig. 3). Deep burgundy panels outline their white façades, while tall vertical windows visually extend the height of the building and lush foliage lines the sidewalk and entryway of each home.



Figure 2. Design Partners Incorporated and Pappageorge Haymes, The Collection, The Lofts, 2016. Our Kaka'ako, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of Douglas Peebles Photography



Figure 3. Design Partners Incorporated and Pappageorge Haymes, The Collection, Townhomes, 2016. Our Kaka'ako, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of Douglas Peebles Photography



Figure 4. Philpotts Interiors, The Collection, lobby, 2016. Our Kaka'ako, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of Douglas Peebles Photography

The public face of The Collection is a two-story glass-enclosed lobby, which reflects an urban aesthetic of contemporary materiality. The color palette, furniture, and materials are intended to be in conversation with well-known wall murals located directly across Keawe Street at SALT. The Collection manifests an art experience, a stripped-down version of Kaka'ako's street aesthetic (Fig. 4). Philpotts Interiors, the Honolulu-based firm charged with coordinating the design approach, was explicit in its vision for The Collection:

Much of the design is tied to the history of the land, drawing inspiration from the fishponds and salt pans of a bygone era. In the lobby, porcelain tile reminiscent of basalt lines the floor while the reflection of marble finishes evoke the shimmering surface of the fishponds. Behind the concierge desk, an articulated wood wall with deep, earthy tones draws inspiration from the color of the earth found around the ponds, and from the shape of salt crystals. Large-scale pendant lights above the lobby seating area are shaped like fishing baskets and antique fishing baskets are used as decorative items.⁵

Philpotts Interiors's adoption of material metaphors—fishponds and pa'akai (salt)—to define its design premise is a common approach among architectural projects in the district. Yet, for individuals unfamiliar with these Hawaiian cultural

associations, abstracted and modified in their presentation, The Collection could be anywhere in the world. The structure's interior and exterior visualities are divorced from Indigenous knowledge about space and place that is storied, rooted, and routed in storytelling, memories, and movement.

Replicating Hawai'i's lands and its history in modern architecture is not a new practice. Western architects working in early twentieth-century Honolulu incorporated abstract figurations of Hawaiian motifs in their designs to position the islands within Euro-American imaginations about Asia and the Pacific. For example, the corporate headquarters of Hawai'i's major sugar conglomerate and the progenitor of A&B Properties, Inc. (developer of The Collection), is housed in the 1929 Alexander and Baldwin Building, an iconic structure in Honolulu's Central Business District (Fig. 5). Architect Charles Dickey designed the building as a synthesis of East and West, adding allusions to Peking's (Beijing's) Forbidden City onto the concrete and glass steel structure capped with a "Dickey-style" peaked roof. The gables and wide overhangs were inspired by Hawaiian hale (houses), edifices designed by Kānaka Maoli using wooden ridge posts and rafters to create elongated facades constructed of coconut bark, pili grass, and woven lashings. The Alexander and Baldwin Building came to define the Hawaiian Regional Style.⁶ As I have argued elsewhere, architects and patrons developed the Hawaiian Regional Style to make Honolulu—for better or worse—visually legible as a modern locale to people in the contiguous United States.⁷



Figure 5. Charles Dickey, Alexander and Baldwin Building, Honolulu, Hawai'i, 1929. Photograph courtesy of the author

Today, A&B Properties, Inc. is one of the largest landowners in Hawai’i.⁸ They have amassed over 89,000 acres of land and 5 million square feet of leasable space. The company positions itself as a “local company for local people.” At the time of completion in 2016, units within The Collection ranged in price from the mid–\$300,000s to the low \$600,000s.⁹ Today, the low-end prices have nearly doubled and the higher-end prices more than tripled. In contrast, the median household income in Hawai’i from 2016 to 2020 only rose from \$72,133 to \$80,729—an increase of less than 12%.¹⁰



Figure 6. The Polynesian Voyaging Society and 808 Urban, *Hōkūle’ā Mālama Honua*, 2018. Ground mural, The Flats at Pu’unui, Our Kaka’ako, Honolulu, Hawai’i. Photograph courtesy of the author

For many locals and tourists, Our Kaka’ako and the entire Kaka’ako district bounded by Ala Moana Boulevard and Piikoi, King, and Punchbowl Streets are synonymous with Hawai’i’s public art scene.¹¹ The streets and buildings are emblazoned with vibrant visualities. Public art commissioned by the City and County of Honolulu, pop-up art installations supported by local businesses and corporations, and ephemeral projects initiated by community members have made Kaka’ako into a constantly evolving, immersive, and interactive urban experience. *Hōkūle’ā Mālama Honua* (2018) is an iconic image in Our Kaka’ako. Creatives from The Polynesian Voyaging Society and 808 Urban collaborated with community members on this ground mural in front of The Flats at Pu’unui (2016), a yellow and green seven-story, mixed-use structure across from The Collection on the corner of Keawe and Pohukaina Streets (Fig. 6). The mural’s electric hues depict Polynesian voyaging canoes in the night sky amid vast land, sea, and plant life. The work is a testament to the legacy of wayfinding as a scientific and artistic endeavor, one

with contemporary implications about fostering community and reciprocal care for Hawaiian ecologies.¹² *Hōkūle'a Mālama Honua* is more than paint on concrete. It provides a space to contemplate the reciprocal care between human and non-human beings. Its location in a park-like setting with grass and outdoor seating near a water feature is a welcoming space to foster community activity within the dense urban enclave.



Figure 7. The Barn at SALT (foreground) and The Collection (tower in the background), 2016–18. Our Kaka'ako, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 8. Kahiau Beamer, *Bernice Pauahi Bishop*, 2016. Mural, SALT courtyard adjacent to The Barn, Our Kaka'ako, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 9a (top) and 9b (bottom). Kamea Hader, *Naupaka and Kauai*, 2016. Mural on the SALT parking structure adjacent to The Barn, Our Kaka'ako, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of the author

The cornerstone of Our Kaka'ako's master plan is, arguably, SALT—an 85,000-square-foot space for retail businesses, restaurants, and events. The Barn at SALT is the primary communal gathering space (Fig. 7). It is an open-air event venue made from a refurbished warehouse. It is framed with concrete blocks and

exposed orange scaffolding, allowing for uninterrupted floor space. The parking garage and retail structure adjacent to The Barn has iconic large-scale murals by Kahiau Beamer (*Bernice Pauahi Bishop*, 2017) and Kamea Hader (*Naupaka Murals*, 2017) (Figs. 8–9).¹³ Beamer and Hader's work at The Barn are explicit in showcasing Hawai'i's ali'i (chiefly leadership) and deities, ecologies, and creation narratives—a sharp contrast to The Collection's design aesthetic of abstract and modified figurations of Hawai'i. Both projects were created during *Pow! Wow!* in 2016.

Pow! Wow! has been the catalyst for the creative explosion in (Our) Kaka'ako. The non-profit organization hosts an annual event in the district that “brings over a hundred international and local artists together to create murals and other forms of art.”¹⁴ Artists and community members have gathered every February since 2010 to participate in workshops, listen to live music, and attend artist talks.



Figure 10. Detail of exhibition *Pow! Wow! The First Decade: From Hawai'i to the World*, Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i, May 15–September 19, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author

In 2021, the Bishop Museum in Honolulu mounted an exhibition marking the tenth anniversary of *Pow! Wow!*. Visitors entering the museum's Castle Memorial Building were immersed in a fictionalized Kaka'ako street scene. Signage indicated that the visitor was at the corner of Lana Lane and Queen Street/The

Alley. A tagged car was parked outside a Mini Mart (Fig. 10), and a tattoo parlor called Iron Gall and The Groove record store was across the “street” (Fig. 11). The Groove’s window was adorned with album covers of bands from several genres, from the Bee Gees and ABBA to The Supremes and Kool and the Gang—with an acknowledgement on a tag that “. . . we all related to music in some way or another.” A motorcycle was parked in a no-parking zone, and an empty bench below Iron Gall’s moniker beckoned the visitor to sit and watch passersby encounter a barrage of colors, scaffoldings, and construction materials within a reconstructed island urban center.

The gallery’s atmosphere compelled the visitor (me) to think critically about the centuries-long transformation of Kaka’ako’s cityscapes, streetscapes, and landscapes. Kānaka Maoli cultivated Kaka’ako’s rich wetlands, fishponds, and salt ponds as part of ahupua’a, wedge-shaped self-sustaining land units that traverse the mountains, extend down the valley ridges, and reach out to the sea. Kānaka Maoli expertly crafted an ecological ethic of land and system design. As architect Sean Connelly describes, “Poetically, ahupua’a is architecture—producing some of the most amazing living buildings imaginable . . .”¹⁵ The shift to industry and manufacturing during the twentieth century filled Kaka’ako with industrial warehouses, a visuality replicated at The Barn. Contemporary architecture with clean lines and modern materials throughout Kaka’ako embraces a global aesthetic, one that minimally asserts a cultural responsiveness and is divorced from a genealogical context that connects contemporary practice to ancestral design knowledge about hale and ahupua’a.

Architects including Connelly and James Miller (Kānaka Maoli) have proposed community organized design solutions. Connelly and his collaborators have written about land reparations and material innovation. Miller advocates for land-based ethical frameworks rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems including, but not limited to, mo’olelo (story, tale, history), mo’okū ‘auhau (genealogy), and huaka’i (a physical, spiritual, and intellectual journey).¹⁶ Thus, to my mind, the exhibition’s graffiti is a metaphorical marking out, or erasure, of the rapidly growing, sterile architecture developments in Kaka’ako. Graffiti metaphorically functions as a revelatory practice encouraging us to consider a reimagined Kaka’ako—one that utilizes Kānaka building methods and intellectual frameworks to sustainably address the housing shortage and societal needs of the island community.



Figure 11. Detail of exhibition *Pow! Wow! The First Decade: From Hawai'i to the World*, Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i, May 15–September 19, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author

Tina Grandinetti argues that Kaka'ako exemplifies a neoliberal agenda. The convergence of capital accumulation—from state and private enterprises—has resulted in a building boom in Kaka'ako that has, simultaneously, exacerbated housing inequalities.¹⁷ In addition to Kamehameha Schools, the Howard Hughes Corporation and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) own property in Kaka'ako. Both

organizations have made clear their intentions to use the land to generate revenue. Howard Hughes's master plan for Ward Village—like Our Kaka'ako—incorporates reserved housing units; still, its luxury condominiums and national corporate chains have adversely altered the familial character of the community.¹⁸ Meanwhile, OHA's residential plans for its thirty acres of land in Kaka'ako Makai have been stalled for years because state law prohibits housing construction on the waterfront. Kaka'ako, ultimately, is a microcosm of the perils associated with urban development and gentrification. Non-resident acquisition of investment properties have spurred a housing crisis resulting in reduced availability and increased costs; the unhoused and the unsheltered have been “cleared” and displaced from the street; and sea level rise on the flat terrain makes the district and its architecture especially vulnerable to climatic change.

Kanaka Maoli artists confront many of these same issues on the streets of Kaka'ako and in the Bishop Museum exhibition. They make their own visual interventions, using site-specific surfaces to render the 'āina storied, and solidifying Hawaiian futurities within, around, and throughout the archipelago. Monumental works by Carl Pao, Cory Kamehanaokalā Holt Taum, and Solomon Robert Nui Enos construct journeys through the abstract and conceptual; they stitch together the time–space continuum in which Kanaka epistemologies are in conversation with legacies of self-determination, (settler) colonialism, and neoliberalism in Kaka'ako.

Enos's fantastical works reflect his commitment to island geologies and geographies. He makes explicit his desire to “restore Hawaiian cultural sites” through the cultivation of plants and foodstuffs on Hawaiian land.¹⁹ His oversize figures surrounded by large geometric shapes and earthly forms jump out past the wall to grab the viewer, shaking them from their malaise and inviting them to participate in planetary futures (Fig. 12). Taum's bold panel patterns seamlessly merge with Hawaiian ecologies and objects. Wai (water, streams) and wa'a (canoes), birds, and gourds harken to the (un)availability of the earth's natural resources. His works often reference the Hawaiian ahupua'a system of land organization, “encourag[ing] the viewer to question the current state of urbanization in Hawai'i.”²⁰ Meanwhile, Pao challenges viewers to consider the seen and unseen. He compels people to acknowledge their positionality in relation to negotiations between kaona and wā, defined by Pao as “veiled layers of knowledge” and the “space between,” respectively.²¹ Pao's collaboration with other artists (like Taum) and with art students from Hawai'i to Aotearoa engenders an openness to ideas and a diversity of interpretations that are—unapologetically—Indigenous (Fig. 13).



Figure 12. Solomon Robert Nui Enos, Mural, *Pow! Wow! The First Decade: From Hawai'i to the World*, Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i, May 15–September 19, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author

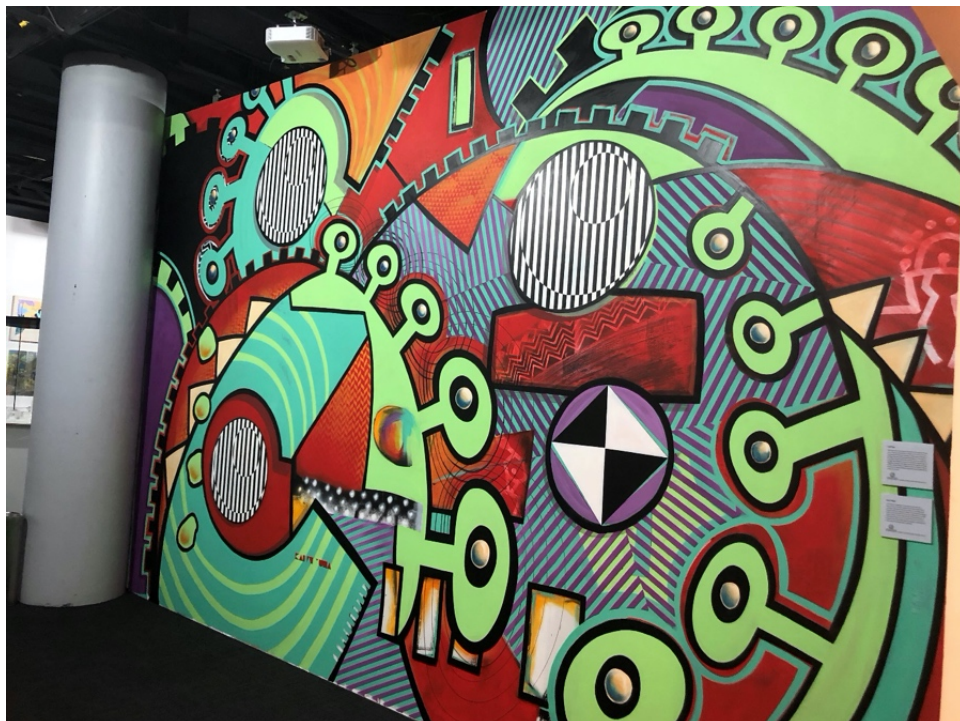


Figure 13. Carl Pao and Cory Taum, Mural, *Pow! Wow! The First Decade: From Hawai'i to the World*, Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i, May 15–September 19, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author

Kaka'ako is a curated urban destination both in the district and in the museum. For over a decade, Hawaiian artists have used Kaka'ako's streets and *Pow! Wow!* as venues to engage urbanism's impact on Kanaka Maoli lifeways and the local community. As part of this urban enterprise, The Collection in Our Kaka'ako allows for critical conversations about the fraught relationship between contemporary architecture, urban planning, and Kanaka Maoli futures in the settler state of Hawai'i. The Collection is steeped in neoliberal and capitalist discourses, but its monumental presence also allows artists, designers, and architects to propose plans for the future possibilities of Honolulu as a just urban society: a place where everyone has a home and Kānaka Maoli can maintain and restore relationships informed by the 'āina.

Kelema Lee Moses is an assistant professor of urban studies and planning at the University of California, San Diego. Her teaching and research combine historical perspectives with discussions about critical contemporary issues related to the built environment of the United States and the Pacific.

Notes

¹ "SALT at Our Kaka'ako," accessed February 20, 2022, <https://saltat-kakaako.com/about/neighborhood/>

² Our Kaka'ako has met with significant public resistance. The development has been mired with questions about the neighborhood's affordability and its ability to fulfill the Kamehameha Schools mission given the effects of gentrification. See Kaka'ako Ūnited, <https://kakaakounited.org>.

³ "Our Kaka'ako: Master Plan," accessed February 20, 2022, <https://ourka-kaako.com/master-plan/>

⁴ Two firms, Design Partners Incorporated (Honolulu) and Pappageorge Haymes (Chicago), planned The Collection's architecture.

⁵ "The Collection, Honolulu, O'ahu, HI," Philpotts Interiors, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.philpotts.net/portfolio/the-collection/>.

⁶ Kelema Lee Moses, "Kingdom, Territory, State: An Architectural Narrative of Honolulu, Hawai'i, 1882–1994" (PhD diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 2015), 61–2.

⁷ Moses, "Kingdom, Territory, State, 61–2. See also Kelema Lee Moses, "Almost, But Not Quite: Architecture and the Reconstruction of Space in the Territory of Hawaii," in *Colonial Frames/Nationalist Histories: Imperial Legacies, Architecture*

and Modernity, eds. Madhuri Desai and Mrinalini Rajagopalan (Surrey, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, July 2012), 161–84.

⁸ The Collection is the continuation of an almost century-long attempt by A&B Properties, Inc. to align the commercialization of the islands with housing and development (a contested term within architectural modernism). For example, The Kahului Development Co., Ltd, a predecessor to A&B Properties, envisioned the master planned town of “Dream City” for Maui during the mid-twentieth century. Wylan Marquez, “Hawai’i Plantation Village Design Concepts: Subdivisions to Villages in Hāwī, North Kohala” (PhD diss., University of Hawai’i, 2012), 47–9.

⁹ “A&B Properties, Inc. Completes Kaka ‘ako Land Purchase,” Alexander & Baldwin, News Release, October 6, 2014, <https://investors.alexanderbaldwin.com/2014-10-06-A-B-Properties-Inc-Completes-Kakaako-Land-Purchase>.

¹⁰ “Median household income in Hawaii from 1990 to 2020,” Statista (website), accessed October 5, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/205811/median-household-income-in-hawaii/>. See also, United States Census Bureau, “2019 Median Household Income in the United States,” accessed October 8, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/2019-median-household-income.html>. Local groups, such as Kaka’ako Ūnited, have protested large-scale development in the district, including petitioning the Hawaii Community Development Authority (HCDA) to bar construction of The Collection. Kaka’ako Ūnited advocates for urban imperatives that serve the needs of the most vulnerable: affordable, low-cost housing; open space and parks; and protecting the “historic sense of place” with mauka (mountain) and makai (sea) views. See Kaka’ako Ūnited, <https://kakaakounited.org/vision>.

¹¹ Hawai’i’s art community extends far beyond the narrow parameters of this essay’s focus on Kaka’ako. Hawaiian and/or Hawai’i-based artists such as Joy Enomoto, Dr. Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio, and Kamakakēhau, to name but a few, are committed to art practices that are deeply tied to the ‘āina (land; that which feeds) and lāhui (nation; peoplehood).

¹² “Our Kaka’ako: Hōkūle’a “Mālama Honua,” accessed February 25, 2022, <https://ourkakaako.com/blog/malama-honua/>. See also <https://www.808uban.org/pages/murals> and <https://www.hokulea.com/>.

¹³ For additional SALT murals see <https://saltatkakaako.com/art/>, accessed February 22, 2022.

¹⁴ POW! WOW! HAWAII 2020, accessed February 25, 2022, <http://www.powwow-worldwide.com/festival/pow-wow-hawaii-2020>.

¹⁵ Sean Connelly, “Our City as Ahupua’a: For Justice-Advancing Futures” in *The Value of Hawai’i 3*, eds. Noelani Goodyear-Ka’ōpua, Craig Howes, Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo’ole Osorio, and Aiko Yamashiro (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press and the Center for Biographical Research, 2020), 235.

¹⁶ See Hawai’i Non-Linear, “Learning From Lē’ahi,” exhibition brochure, Koa Gallery, Kapi’olani Community College (September 23–December 21, 2021). See also, James Miller (and Kelema Lee Moses), “Troubling Housing: Process & Pedagogy in

Oceania,” design@large, public lecture, University of California, San Diego, February 23, 2022.

¹⁷ Tina Grandinetti, “Urban Aloha ‘Āina: Kaka’ako and a Decolonized Right to the City,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 9, no. 2 (2019): 227–46.

¹⁸ The HCDA Reserved Housing program allows buyers earning between 80–140% of the median household income to purchase homes below market rates.

¹⁹ Bishop Museum, Solomon Enos placard, *Pow! Wow! The First Decade: From Hawai‘i to the World*, May 15–September 19, 2021, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

²⁰ Bishop Museum, Carl Pao and Cory Taum placard, *Pow! Wow! The First Decade: From Hawai‘i to the World*, May 15–September 19, 2021, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

²¹ Melehina Groves, “Pao, Carl (on native art),” *Ka’iwakīloumoku: Pacific Indigenous Institute*, January 2007, <https://kaiwakiloumoku.ksbe.edu/article/kanaka-insights-pao-carl-on-native-art>.