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Features

Revising the CZC 11
by Michael M. McElroy
Director, Department of Land Utilization
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Number One—Bar None! 22
by Morris Schecter, AIA

Departments

Headlines The "Sub-Urbanization" of Downtown Honolulu 4
by Lewis Ingleson
President, Hawaii Society/AIA

News Announcing the First Annual Hawaii 7
Architect Yearbook

Archi Fest 1983 8

Awards HS/AIA 1983 Design Awards 12
Award for Excellence in Architecture
Norman Lacayo, AIA, Inc.

Architectural Keelikolani Hale State Office Building II 16
Review by Alfred Preis, FAIA/ME

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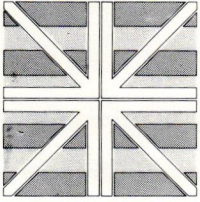
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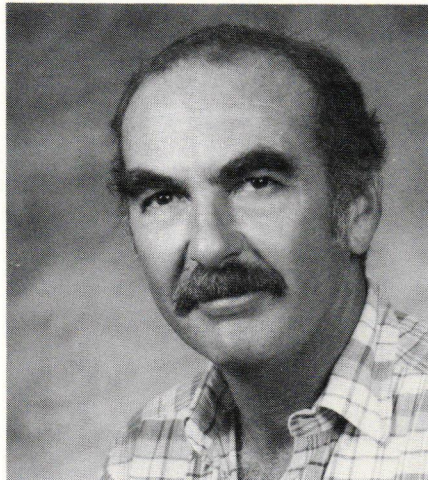
The "Sub-Urbanization" of Downtown Honolulu

by Lewis Ingleson
President, Hawaii Society/AIA

In my 25 years in Honolulu, vast changes have occurred in our urban environment. This is particularly true of downtown Honolulu, which is certainly more beautiful but not nearly as interesting as a quarter century ago. I am disturbed by what I call the "sub-urbanization" of the central business district which is manifested by an overabundance of open space, too many blank walls, and too few retail shops fronting the sidewalk. Comparison to the typical suburban shopping mall is all too obvious. The end result of this "sub-urbanization" is that downtown Honolulu is becoming bland, anonymous, and uninteresting. It will no longer be a people place, a place to shop, browse, and meet friends.

Downtown should be the most urban environment on the island. It should be the most densely built and intensely developed. There should be open spaces, of course. However, these open spaces should enhance rather than detract from the urban qualities of the district. They should be spaces that are scaled for the pedestrian. They should be interconnected, so that as one moves through downtown, one becomes aware of the dynamics of a network of separate yet interrelated spaces; narrow alleys that lead to small plazas that relate to a street that in turn opens into a larger plaza, all designed to reinforce the impact of these varying spaces.

It is the relationship of these spaces to each other, both as to size and location, that will give downtown visual interest. One



major plaza adjacent to or across the street from another, and yet another, will become boring, as will one narrow alley adjacent to another. It is not enough that every new major project built downtown have a vast, paved plaza fronting it, no matter how well designed. We need to find the methods by which open spaces downtown will relate to create a more interesting and exciting urban environment.

William Whyte, one of the nation's foremost commentators on the design of urban America, at the recent AIA Convention in New Orleans, graphically illustrated what he calls the "Blank-Wall-with-Sapling" phenomenon, numerous examples of which can be found in downtown Honolulu. As we all know, a blank wall can be beautiful, but is all the more so in contrast to other architectural elements that have a great deal of texture or other visual restlessness. Too many blank walls, like too many vast open spaces, become boring and uninteresting. The

blank wall is really the vocabulary of the suburban shopping center, e.g. Pearlridge. It should not be the vocabulary of the urban center, if downtown is to be the unique place we want it to be.

Related to the blank wall syndrome in downtown is the loss of more and more retail shops that open to the sidewalk. In almost every city in the world, it is the small storefront shops that generate visual interest. The rhythm and texture of the urban street scene is enhanced and reinforced by the 20-foot module of interesting specialty shops. In downtown Honolulu, many of our new projects present blank faces to the street. Or at best, we find one financial institution after another, which while necessary is not particularly interesting to look at.

It is time that the planners of the future of downtown Honolulu, both public and private, become aware of what they are creating. It is to be hoped that those responsible for the development of new projects will give consideration to the inclusion of retail shops in their projects. Let's hope the architects responsible for these projects will fully consider the impact of the blank wall, and use it judiciously. And finally, government planners, in their revisions to the CZC, need to fully understand the potential results of granting large floor area bonuses for the inclusion of open space in new projects. All must work together in making downtown Honolulu an exciting, interesting, and inviting people place, rather than a beautiful, but sterile, landscape. HA