

Long, Hard Journey: From the Pen Of Frank Lloyd Wright to Hawaii

By BRETT CAMPBELL

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One day in 1957, Frank Lloyd Wright heard the doorbell ring at his suite in New York's Plaza Hotel and found Marilyn Monroe standing in the doorway. She and her new bridegroom, the playwright Arthur Miller, wanted the architect to build them a bucolic haven as shelter from the cyclone of celebrity.

As it happened, Wright already had just the ticket: a luxury manor he'd designed eight years earlier for a wealthy Texas couple but that never was built. Three years later, he proposed it to a Mexican government official who'd asked for a house on the cliffs above Acapulco -- and, again, it fizzled. Finally, for the glamorous couple, Wright hauled out his twice-stymied plans, and added a movie theater, swimming pool and nursery to produce a design for a 14,000-square-foot house near Roxbury, Conn.



Tony Roberts/CORBIS

This clubhouse was based on a design for a home Frank Lloyd Wright was going to build for Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller.

But the Monroe-Miller marriage collapsed a few months later, Wright died shortly after that, and the blueprints wound up in an archive at Taliesin West, Wright's Arizona winter retreat and school. Eventually, however, Wright's creation did get built -- on the Hawaiian island of Maui. And it has just been reincarnated as a home for Hawaiian art as well as golf.

In 1986, Tonia Baney, a portrait artist who'd co-founded a Maui advertising agency, was having lunch with a Honolulu ad agency owner, Sandy Sims, and the conversation turned to a shared passion: the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. Mr. Sims had obtained a license from the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation to construct a collection of unbuilt Wright designs on the big island of Hawaii. "Why not build them on Maui?" Ms. Baney said.

A distant relative of Wright's who'd grown up near his Wisconsin hometown, she had been involved in the island's arts scene for years, including the creation of the Maui Arts and Cultural Center. Its major patron was Masaru "Pundy" Yokouchi, a baker-turned-realtor whose investing in commercial property brought him an immense fortune and political clout. Yokouchi, who died last November at age 81, chaired the state arts and culture foundation for a dozen years and headed other arts and business groups. Ms. Baney asked him if he knew anyone who might be interested in bringing an unbuilt Wright creation to Maui.

Of course he did. The Japanese had a special fondness for Wright's work, which was heavily influenced by Asian art and architecture. (His celebrated Imperial Hotel was the only major building to survive the big Tokyo quake of 1923; alas, it was demolished in 1968.) Yokouchi was a partner with some Japanese investors who were scouting Maui for a golf property. They flew to Taliesin West to see what drawings might be suitable.

Taliesin's John Rattenbury suggested the Miller-Monroe manse, and a deal was soon struck. But obstacles loomed. The golf club would need five times more space than the original plan provided. And how could a building first designed for the Texas prairie, then the Mexican coast, and finally rural Connecticut fit a Hawaiian

mountainside?

Mr. Rattenbury, the architect of record, solved the first problem by placing two-thirds of the 75,000-square-foot structure underground, while preserving Wright's original proportions above. And the desert-rose-painted concrete building's graceful curves somehow nestle comfortably amid the rolling fairways and against the scalloped mountainous backdrop.

Granted a bottomless budget and a mandate for authenticity, Mr. Rattenbury brought in craftsmen with experience in Wright projects. He also designed the interior adornments, including art glass features, incorporating Wright's abstract geometric patterns. The 4,300-square-foot main dining room offers a 270-degree view and is capped by a 100-foot dome with a 25-foot skylight. The curving interior walls, wide porthole windows and other details contribute to the soft, organic feeling throughout, and the clubhouse evokes the simultaneous sensation of spaciousness and intimacy that characterizes Wright's best work.

After the original investors spent more than \$100 million to develop the clubhouse and two golf courses, the club opened in May 1993. Its \$35 million clubhouse boasted an expansive pro shop, banquet meeting rooms, and, in the men's locker room, a Japanese furo bath with soaking pool and seated showers. Offering spectacular views of Ho'okipa Bay on the left and Ma'aleaea Bay to the right, and facing the Haleakela volcano that dominates the horizon, the club seemed to have at last fulfilled Wright's vision.

But Japan's economic slide quickly took its toll. The original owners sold the country club six months after it opened, and the course closed in 1999.

Enter another Tokyo tycoon -- golf lover and part-time Maui resident Makoto Kaneko. Every time he'd fly over the defunct 150-acre course and country club, the engineering magnate fumed; what a shame to let such a beautiful place lie fallow. In 2004, Mr. Kaneko's MMK Maui company bought the property for \$12.5 million and embarked on a \$40 million overhaul of the clubhouse and courses. He also renamed the club after King Kamehameha, who united the islands in the mid-1700s.

Mr. Kaneko insisted that he wanted to honor traditional Hawaiian culture, but attaching the name of one of Hawaii's most venerated monarchs to an enclave mostly used by wealthy white and Japanese golfers infuriated many native Hawaiians. "I applaud his desire to honor Kamehameha, but in traditional culture we do not put our names on buildings. That's another culture's concept imposed upon the native Hawaiian culture," says Hokulani Holt-Padilla, cultural programs director at the MACC. Moreover, Kamehameha wasn't from Maui, which he conquered in his campaign to rule all of Hawaii.

To ensure cultural authenticity, Mr. Kaneko's company hired Clifford Nae'ole as a cultural liaison. One of Mr. Nae'ole's ancestors had saved the infant Kamehameha from assassination, and Mr. Nae'ole assured concerned native Hawaiians that he would likewise protect the king's legacy.

Mr. Nae'ole says that Mr. Kaneko displayed deep respect for Hawaiian traditions. First, he created an ahu, an altar at the crossroads between the two courses visible to everyone who drives up to the courthouse. Native Hawaiians can use it as a place to honor their ancestors and practice their religion. The club's managers participated in its blessing ceremony, drinking kava made from coconuts grown in a sacred part of Maui, and pledging to respect and honor all things Hawaiian. Mr. Nae'ole also devised a course in Hawaiian culture and history for all employees.

"He was able to bring a level of Hawaiian culture to the golf course, and that's good," Ms. Holt-Padilla says. "But that doesn't absolve them of the presumptuousness of taking the chief's name." She's happier that the new owners commissioned work from some of Hawaii's finest artists. Except for Ms. Baney's striking portrait of Wright, which now sits above the main staircase, the club's previous incarnation was distinguished by lots of photos of Monroe.

Now, the entry gallery is dominated by painter Herb Kawainui Kane's colorful 15-by-7 foot mural depicting a gathering of Maui's legendary chiefs, resplendent in red and gold feather capes; a multicolored feathered cape by Jo-Anne Kahanamoku Sterling hangs nearby. Dale Zerrella sculpted three koa wood and two bronze statues, including a figure of a traditional healer surrounded by Hawaiian medicinal plants. Fiber artist Puani van Dorpe created a series of exquisite mulberry-paper baby blankets; her interpretations were based on patterns specific to each of the king's 10 predecessors, much like a Scottish tartan. Framed in native koa wood, the kapa moe are accompanied by a genealogy chart and explanation of each chief's historical

significance.

Outside, a yellow traffic sign depicting a mama bird and goslings cautions drivers to yield to Nene geese (Hawaii's state bird). A rock garden features boulders arranged to resemble the Hawaiian islands seen from the air. A spiral outdoor staircase surmounts a water feature with four descending streams merging into a fountain, representing the four valleys the area is named after, and their unification by the club's namesake.

Mr. Kaneko dropped the price of memberships to a little over a tenth of the \$250,000 the previous owners charged, hoping to attract as many locals as second-homers; Alice Cooper and Dennis Hopper visited during my tour. Mr. Nae'ole says that he intends to conduct cultural programs for the public. The clubhouse's main level is available to the public for weddings, meetings and banquets, and the club's director of golf operations and memberships, Rick Castillo, says the club may host scheduled tours when demand warrants; he's already explained Wright's legacy and Hawaiian art and culture to a group of schoolchildren and their parents.

"They have a national treasure there, and it's in a dream setting," Taliesen's Mr. Rattenbury says. "It would be wonderful if they can make it available to anyone who wants to see it."

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