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The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Waikiki's International Marketplace

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Vendors must clear out by the end of the year.

PHOTOS: OLIVIER KONING

The end is near for the International Market Place, that decaying maze of open-air souvenir stands and faded Polynesian pop-era grandeur in the heart of Waikiki.

After 56 years, visits by millions upon millions of tourists, and a long slide into ruin, the landmark shopping bazaar will close at the end of the month. In its place will go a high-end retail, dining and entertainment complex, three stories tall on Kalakaua Avenue, and seven along Kuhio Avenue. In other words, a big, glitzy new mall, anchored by Saks Fifth Avenue.

Only two things from the original International Market Place will remain: the name and a few trees, including—thankfully—the venerable old Indian banyan tree.

For most Honolulu residents, the International Market Place lost whatever appeal it might have had decades ago—along with the parking. Still, its closing represents the end of an era, which makes this a good time to rummage through the Market's kitschy past, ponder its upscale future, and check in on the gigantic banyan tree at the center of it all.



Some of the original tikis still stand.

Shabby wreck or working class refuge?

It's at the Banyan that I meet Zabia Dolle, the International Market Place's preeminent palm reader, tarot card dealer, astrologer and psychic. Her business, the Enchanted Banyan, operates out of a tiny bamboo booth nestled against the tree's trunk. She and the tree have been close like this for many years.

Dolle has listened to the tree, she says, and it is not happy that Saks Fifth Avenue is coming. In fact, she says, "It's bummed out, shocked and pissed off."

She feels the same way herself. For her, the International Market Place is Waikiki's last refuge for the working class. As Kalakaua Avenue has been increasingly dominated by the Yves Saint Laurents, the Tiffany & Cos., the Coaches and all the other pricey retailers, the Market has remained a place where budget travelers still feel comfortable shopping. For small-business owners of modest means, it has been the one place in Waikiki where they might have a shot.

"Now it's just going to be another fancy, shiny, brand-new shopping center, and there's not going to be any soft, gentle, aloha-y place left for a certain type of people who come to Hawaii," she says. "The tourists are devastated. They're crying, they're so sad."

As strange as it might sound to those who get hung up on the shabby exterior, the Market Place has a lot of fans. More than 2,500 of them signed an online petition to "Stop the development of Saks Fifth Ave. at the International Market Place."

But the greatest tribute to the International Market Place in its current condition has to be its Las Vegas impersonator, the Hawaiian Marketplace. Located on the Las Vegas Strip, between the Aladdin and the MGM Grand hotels, the Hawaiian Marketplace is a forlorn little shopping mall and food court shamelessly modeled after the original. Souvenir kiosks with funny roofs? Yep. An assortment of affordable ethnic eateries? Yep. Polynesian dancers? Two shows a day. Live parrots? It's got animatronic ones. Enormous Indian banyan tree, planted circa 1850, offering shade, soul and the occasional bird dropping? It's got fake trees that look more like redwoods, but close enough.

Yelp reviewers describe the Hawaiian Marketplace as "trashy," "dirty and rundown" and "definitely grungy and not the cleanest place on the Strip." In terms of capturing the essence of the original, Vegas outdid itself once again.

The Golden Age



Inside the old treehouse.



The treehouse.

PHOTOS: COURTESY WATG ARCHITECTS

There was a time when the International Market Place could not have been mimicked so easily. When it opened in 1957, it was a first-rate Waikiki attraction. In its prime, it was lush, mysterious and enchanting, a faux-Polynesian fantasyland for the *Mad Men* era. All around there were dangling vines, tikis, cascades, foot bridges crossing dark pools, and kooky surprises, like the clocks. The Market Place ran on “Hawaiian Time,” so every clock on the property was set seven minutes behind. And there were tree houses hanging in the giant banyan. One served as a private dining room, the other as a radio broadcasting studio.

The Market Place has good pedigree. It was designed by the renowned architect Pete Wimberly, whose firm went on to build some of the world's foremost theme parks and resorts, and by Donn Beach, who launched America's tiki craze when he opened his Don the Beachcomber restaurant in Hollywood in 1934.

The original layout included a series of little “villages,” representing Japan, Korea, China and the South Seas. They faced a grassy courtyard and a central bazaar, which had a few dozen thatched stalls for vendors, an amphitheater for Polynesian dancers, and open spaces for crafts makers. It sounds simple enough, but the design featured a labyrinth of criss-crossing pathways, which were all too easy to get lost upon.

Naturally, the shops catered mainly to tourists, but there was always something to draw residents, as well, at least for the first few decades. Among them was the Gourmet Bazaar, which a 1957 article in *The Honolulu Advertiser* called “a gourmet's shop equal to anything in New York or Paris.” It offered cheeses from across Europe, bottled sweetmeats, British biscuits and uncommon delicacies such as “bottled fried grasshoppers” and “rattlesnake canned meat.” According to the article, “No collection of rare and imported foods like this bazaar has heretofore been seen in Hawaii.” Or possibly since.

At the Market Place's nightclubs, residents and visitors mingled in roughly equal numbers. Generations of notable Island musicians found a home there, including Martin Denny, the bandleader behind the fusion of jazz, pop and jungle noises called "exotica." Before Don Ho got so big he had to move his show into the Hilton Hawaiian Village Dome, he had a regular gig at the International Market Place.

But things change. When the Market Place opened in 1957, statehood was still two years away, it took 12.5 hours to get to Honolulu from the West Coast by air, and fewer than a quarter of a million visitors a year came to Hawaii. With statehood, and the advent of the Jet Age, the visitor count grew exponentially (8 million last year). Through the 1970s, Waikiki grew denser and more towering, parking grew scarcer and the tiki craze began to look more asinine than alluring. In the 1980s, the drinking age went up, the club scene sputtered out, and the International Market Place's Golden Age was behind it.

The Living Heart of the Market

For a second opinion on what the banyan tree has to say, I call Steve Nimz. He's an arborist—a tree doctor—and he has been caring for this particular tree since 1971. He agrees to meet me beneath the banyan.

"There are people who talk to trees," Nimz tells me. "I'm not one of them. I don't talk to trees. I don't hug trees. I'm not a hokey guy. But I do feel trees. I touch trees."

He slaps a hand onto the side of the banyan and gazes up into the canopy, demonstrating his technique. In order to truly understand a tree, he says, to really get a sense of the mass, breadth and life of the thing, you have to do this.

This tree has been the living, breathing soul of the International Market Place since Day One. But it goes back further than that. It was planted sometime in the mid-19th century by a New Zealand entrepreneur named Harry Macfarlane and his wife, who lived on this land for a while. (Macfarlane's other historic claim to fame is that he's the guy who brought gas lighting to Hawaii, hanging the first gas lamps over the billiard tables in his Honolulu saloon.)

A young alii named William Lunalilo owned the property, a bit of prized high ground in a Waikiki dominated at the time by wetlands. Lunalilo had a summer home here, along with a cottage and some outbuildings, all fenced in to keep wandering animals out. It was here that Lunalilo died of tuberculosis in 1874, a little more than a year after becoming Hawaii's first elected king.

He bequeathed the property to a friend, Queen Emma, who kept it as a summer retreat, and watched the banyan grow, until her death in 1885. Emma established The Queen's Hospital, predecessor to The Queen's Medical Center, and her estate—including the land beneath the International Market Place—is still managed today to support the hospital.

The banyan is now about 60 feet tall, and the new mall will have restaurants on its top floor at eye level with the upper reaches of the canopy. On the ground level, all of the brick and concrete now covering the base of the tree will be replaced



Fifty years of banyan tree graffiti.

with landscaping. This will let more oxygen and moisture into the ground.

"We're going to have a much better environment for the tree than we have now," Nimz says. "But even though you're improving the situation, you never know, it might be happier under the concrete. It's been able to adapt to all of this, and it does seem pretty happy right now."

Nimz has created a tree protection and preservation plan, which he will direct throughout the building process. It includes, among other things, mapping the roots, so that pilings can be driven in between them and not into them. It also involves monitoring the tree's vital signs with sensors in the ground, on the trunk and in the leaves. This will allow Nimz to respond quickly if the tree starts to get too stressed.

But Indian banyans are tough. "I don't want to say bulletproof, but they're incredibly resilient," Nimz says. "Let's just say, if we were on the Mainland, and this tree were an oak, this project would not be happening."

An Insider Tour

Aside from the banyan tree, there's probably nobody left today who was more deeply embedded in the International Market Place's golden age than Twain Newhart.

"You know that kid who grew up in the hotel because his father was the manager?" Twain asks. "That kid who ran roughshod over the place and knew every nook and cranny? I'm that kid!"

Except Twain's dad didn't manage a hotel, he managed the International Market Place, from 1959 until 1987. Twain, who was born in 1960, agrees to give me a tour, and he wasn't kidding about the nooks and crannies.

He shows me where he used to sneak up on the roof of one of the Polynesian longhouses to watch the Aloha Week Parade. He points out the old tea house, now a T-shirt shop, where formal Japanese tea ceremonies were held. He estimates the locations of the amphitheater where Polynesian dancers performed, and the imu where a pig was roasted every Friday—both now covered with concrete.

He shows me Duke Kahanamoku's nightclub, now the food court, and points out where Kahanamoku himself used to sit in his peacock chair greeting guests, and where Don Ho used to sit at his piano. He remembers the tree house dinners he attended with his father's celebrity guests, such as Sammy Davis Jr. He recalls the smell of Donn Beach's Cuban cigars and the pet gibbon that Beach's wife, who wore bracelets up to her elbows, walked around with.

"It was a completely different world back then," he says.

I follow as Twain marches past a sign that says "No Entry," climbs a set of stairs and tries a doorknob. The door is locked. "We can't go in right now, but on the back side of this wall, there was a *giant bed*," he says, laying his outspread fingers on the wall as if touching something sacred. "A big, *big* bed! On the other side of the room, on the far side, there was an *ofuro*. A Japanese bath. You could go in and take baths!"

He moves to another spot on the wall and says: "Inside a little room behind here there was a slot machine. A nickel slot machine. I'm sure they were all totally illegal at the time. And then there was a shower right on the other side of that. Let's see if we can go in."

Twain tries another door, which opens, and we step into the Market Place's management office. A big painting of Queen Emma and King Lunalilo, posing in the garden outside of The Queen's Hospital, hangs on the wall.

"We're just reminiscing," Twain tells a couple of surprised office workers. "My dad used to be the manager years and years ago, and this used to be his office. There was a shower behind this wall. Is the shower still there?"

"No showers," says a woman behind a desk.

"Can I show him the room back here, really quickly, do you mind?" Twain asks.

We march down the hallway to a big, dark room that looks like it's mainly used for storage today. There's no bed and no ofuro. The shower's gone, too, and, in the little room where the slot machine used to be, there's just a refrigerator.

Back outside, we sit on a bench that Twain says used to be a planter. I ask him how he feels about the idea that it will all be gone soon.

"You get sentimental, you get a little misty eyed," he says. "Because it will never be the same. But you don't want it to be the same. It can't be the same. So tear it down, do it quickly, and rebuild something special. The next generation of kids will have no idea that this was ever here, and they need a place for their own memories."

Save The Market

This isn't the first time the International Market Place has faced redevelopment. The first time was in 1988, and a riot nearly broke out at the state Capitol because of it.

It happened on the night the Legislature decided that the site of the Market Place would be a perfect place to build a convention center.

The Market's merchants, faced with losing their livelihoods, roughed up a security guard, menaced a newspaper photographer and shouted death threats at lawmakers. The next day they marched through Waikiki carrying protest signs written in blood and matted human hair. Then, as now, most of the merchants were immigrants, and many had gone deeply into debt to get their spots at the Market Place. One man was so upset he threatened to set himself on fire rather than see the Market Place close.

A competing plan to build a convention center just outside of Waikiki, on a site preferred by the Honolulu City Council, ultimately prevailed. That's why the Hawaii Convention Center is where it is today, and that's how the International Market Place dodged its first bullet.

A second redevelopment plan came out in 2003, after the Market Place's original owner went bankrupt, and the leaseholder, Queen Emma Land Co., took over. Queen Emma Land planned to tear down the obsolete, termite-ridden Market and build something similar in its place. The merchants, at this point, knew redevelopment was inevitable, and there was no rioting, blood letting or talk of self immolation.

But that plan fell through when Queen Emma Land—whose mission is to fund The Queen's Medical Center, not manage fancy retail outlets—decided it didn't really want to be in the mall business, after all. The Market Place dodged another bullet.

Today, Queen Emma Land has a partnership with Taubman Centers, a Michigan-based mall developer that has plenty of experience in upscale retail. Taubman will build, then run, the new International Market Place. And there's no bullet dodging this time.

By 8 p.m. on Dec. 31, every cart, shop, kiosk, dive bar, hole-in-the-wall eatery and fortune-teller's booth at the Market Place must clear out. The same goes for the tenants of the adjoining Waikiki Town Center and the neighboring Miramar hotel. Altogether about 180 tenants will be displaced. Then everything on the six-acre site will be razed, and construction will begin. The new mall is set to open in 2016.



The Way Forward



The International Market Place as it appears today.

PHOTO: DALLAS NAGATA WHITE



A rendering of the high-end retail, dining and entertainment complex that's planned to replace it.

PHOTO: COURTESY WCIT ARCHITECTURE

Peter Apo has an unusually multidimensional perspective on the International Market Place.

As a former state representative, he was there on the night of the merchant uprising.

As a young Hawaiian musician who played in Waikiki a lot during the 1960s and 1970s, he has fond memories of hanging out at Duke Kahanamoku's after his own gigs. "Parking was not a problem. The drinking age was 18. If you were a guy, that's where you went. If you were a girl, that's where you went. It was before AIDS. It was the perfect party storm," he says.

As a cultural consultant for the developer, Apo has been working to ensure that a "Hawaiian sense of place" will infuse the common areas of the new International Market Place. "No matter where you go, there will be something Hawaiian you look at," he says.

Among many other things, this means the story of Queen Emma, and her relationship to the property, will be told. "I think you're going to see exhibitry and certain kinds of expression that celebrate Queen Emma as fundamental to the place," he says. "It's going to be a kind of back-to-the-future thing."

Importantly, the new International Market Place will have a lot more parking—around 750 stalls on a five-level parking structure along Kuhio Avenue. The lowest level of the parking structure will begin on the top level of the mall. When people arrive by car, they'll step out into the restaurant and entertainment area built around the top of the banyan tree.

The design is meant to draw more Honolulu residents to the mall's dining and entertainment area. If it works, if local people return to a world-class attraction in the heart of Waikiki, the new International Market Place will find its way back to the future in that way, too.