

# Pacific Modern: the Life and Work of Haydn Phillips

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## Abstract

When the topic of expatriate architects was explored in a series of articles in the RAlA (Vic) journal in 1969, the first instalment profiled the career of Haydn Hope Phillips (1905-1992), who grew up and trained in Victoria but spent his last six decades in Hawaii. Born in New Zealand, schooled in Bendigo, trained and briefly employed in Melbourne, the young architect left Australia in 1927 to travel the world. Arriving in Honolulu almost by accident, he worked as a building contractor for almost twenty years before a chance encounter with a Dean of Architecture inspired him to return to the profession. Phillips opened his own office in Honolulu in 1951 at the age of 46 years, and, for the next three decades, formed part of a tightly-knit group of enthusiastic modernists who transformed Hawaii during the boom era when it became the fiftieth US state. This period saw Phillips design many striking modern houses, university buildings, office blocks, hotels and branch banks – one of which won him an AIA award. Neil Clerehan remembers him, Roy Grounds and Robin Boyd both reportedly met up with him on trips to Hawaii, and many of the island's elder architectural statesmen still recall him fondly to this day. Yet little is recorded of Phillips' remarkable career, on either side of the South Pacific. This paper, informed by new research in Hawaii and contact with Phillips' family, colleagues and clients, provides the first detailed review of the remarkable career of an undeservedly little-known Oceanic architect.

In March 1969 the RAlA (Victorian chapter) relaunched its journal as a new bi-monthly square format publication, simply titled *Architect* and boldly rebadged as Issue No 1. Its new features included the first in series of articles exploring the work of expatriate Australians. Subsequent issues would profile such luminaries as John Andrews (Canada), Kirkland Robertson (England), Clement Meadmore (New York) and even Jorn Utzon (Denmark), but the first described 'the story of one who went to a land where the lotus is of the same genus as the Australian variety, but grows bigger and more luxuriantly'.<sup>1</sup> The place was Hawaii, and the man was Haydn Hope Phillips (1905-1992). The article went on to provide what remains the most detailed account, until now, of the life and work of an Australian-trained architect who spent the last six decades of his life in Honolulu..

The 1969 article referred to Haydn as 'a native of Oceania'.<sup>2</sup> He was actually born in Auckland, where his father, Herbert Edwin Phillips, a mining engineer and consulting metallurgist from Adelaide, was caught up in the last gasps of New Zealand's gold mining boom. Seven years later, the family returned to Australia to settle in another mining town, Bendigo. Phillips completed his education at Melbourne Grammar (1921-3) and then enrolled at the Architectural Atelier at the University of Melbourne. For the next four years, he took evening classes at the atelier while working during the day in the Collins Street office of Barlow & Hawkins.<sup>3</sup>

Phillips, who developed a fondness for sailing, left Australia in 1927 to travel the world. His chatty obituary in the *Honolulu Advertiser* barely touched on this period of his life, stating only that he had 'sailed halfway round the world on a three-masted schooner and worked in the mountains of Peru'.<sup>4</sup> The 1969 article alluded to time spent in Europe, England, New Zealand, New York and Bermuda, with 'a different job in practically every place'. If Phillips's own words (as related on his application for AIA membership) might be relied upon, we know that he visited South America, England, France, the Mediterranean, Ceylon, New Zealand, Bermuda, Panama, Cuba and the mainland United States. Shipping manifests, which list his profession as 'engineer', confirm his arrival in New York in 1927 via Chile, and again in 1930 via Cuba. He was actually *en route* to Alaska in 1932 when he stopped off in Hawaii and decided to stay. As a local newspaper later put it:

Haydn H Phillips came to Honolulu with the idea of getting a job and sticking around for a while. He had \$30 in his hip pocket and a couple of extra shirts, but he had already made good as an architect and contractor on the Mainland and in France.<sup>5</sup>

'They can't take that experience away from me', Phillips had told his journalist interviewer. Having already styled himself as an engineer, architect and builder, he promptly started his

own business in Honolulu, initially working solely as a building contractor. Although Hawaii has a long and complex history of multicultural presence from Asia, the British Isles and mainland USA, the presence of an Australian building professional was certainly unusual at that time. Indeed, it would appear that Phillips was the first Australian-trained architect to work in the islands since the Sydney architect Thomas Rowe (1829-99) had completed plans for one of Honolulu's most celebrated public buildings, the Ali'iolani Hale, in 1872.

Research to date, however, indicates that Phillips's early construction projects in Hawaii were designed by others. His best known undertaking from this period, the Church of the Crossroads, in Honolulu's University district (1935), was designed by the Californian-born architect Claude Stiehl (1902-1959). A biographical profile published in 1940 listed many other structures that were erected by Phillips, including houses, office blocks, school and hospital buildings and even an auditorium – but without naming the design architects.<sup>6</sup> Residential clients included one Herbert Truslow and wife Ruth – the latter the sister of Lois Cooper O'Reilly (1901-99), a widow with two young daughters, whom Phillips married in 1935.

Thirteen years later, the younger daughter was herself married, and Phillips sailed his fifty foot ketch to San Francisco to attend the wedding. There, he met the architect John Shear (1917-1958), newly appointed Dean of Architecture at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. It was Shear, more than a decade Phillips's junior, who encouraged Phillips to return to architecture as a profession. Haydn and Lois moved to the mainland, where he enrolled at Carnegie Tech and completed the five year course in a record fifteen months. Architect Edward Sullam, who studied at Carnegie with Phillips, recalls that 'he was something of a curiosity to his fellow students, since he was at least fifteen years older than most of us, and was from a distant land'.<sup>7</sup> For his final thesis, Phillips prepared a scheme for low cost housing inspired by the model suburb of Leavittown in New York State. Two months after his graduation, the project was published in *Architectural Forum*, described as 'a thought-provoking attempt to plan a house that will meet the varying space requirements of a typical family as it progresses from the newlywed stage through years crowded with children to a period of leisurely old age'.<sup>8</sup> This was hardly a challenge for a designer with Phillips's background, as the author of the article perceptively noted:

This is no brainstorm. Phillips is a practical man – practical enough to have done 17 years and several million dollars of building in Hawaii before he came to the US and Carnegie Tech to get an architectural degree. If Phillips has built a hospital, a school, two churches and scores of houses, not to mention highways, he is not likely of unsound mind when he drafts up a set of stimulating small house plans.<sup>9</sup>

Phillips returned to Honolulu in 1951 where, at the age of forty-six years, he opened his architectural office. This was a notable time to embark on such a venture in Hawaii. As in Australia, the local building industry was much affected by wartime restrictions (in this case, due to labour and materials being diverted to Korea), and a new generation of progressive architects was emerging.<sup>10</sup> Many young architects stationed in Hawaii during the war had chosen to settle there afterwards, such as the influential and respected George Wimberly (1915-86). Phillips himself was one of several expatriate architects who had arrived just before the War, as had the Russian Vladimir Ossipoff (1907-98) and Austrian Alfred Preis (1911-93). Most significantly, the island territory was also beginning to experience a development boom, which peaked after Hawaii became the fiftieth US state in 1959.

Phillips's early career was dominated by upscale residential projects. One of his first significant commissions was a house designed in 1952 for Max Moody (1903-1985), a fellow building contractor who had purchased a large but oddly-shaped site in the valley region of Nu'uano on the island's south coast. To preserve the mountain views, Phillips's scheme incorporated huge window walls which opened onto broad terraces. What was later described as 'a clever system of lighting utilizing both nature and electricity' included cove lighting in some rooms, indirect lighting in others, plus skylights and dome lights elsewhere. This system, and other electric wizardry such as a home theatre with concealed projector and sound system, prompted the Hawaiian Electric Company to publicise the new dwelling as the 'all electric house' in local journals and newspapers. A longer write-up in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* described the house in detail: butterfly roof, redwood cladding, feature walls of lava stone, and paving in Hawaiian sandstone. Interiors had redwood and walnut panelling, oriental patterned wallpaper, and custom-built timber furniture finished with a dark mahogany

stain or green and gold paintwork. Many qualities inherent in the Moody House, most notably the open planning, window walls and pervasive Japanese influence, would recur throughout much of Haydn's subsequent domestic output.

It might be noted at this point that the oriental influence in contemporary Hawaiian architecture is not exclusive to Haydn Phillips's work, but reflects a long-standing cross-fertilisation between the two related cultures. Japanese immigration in the early twentieth century saw explicit oriental influences in much earlier buildings on the island, such as the Troys Theatre (1938), the First Chinese Church of Christ (1929), the Izumno Taishakyo Mission (1923) and the Adams House at Diamond Head (1912).<sup>11</sup> The postwar period saw a number of design professionals of Asian descent working in Hawaii, including the architects Takashi Anbe, Kenji Onodera and Tsutomu Shiraki, the landscape designers Richard Tongg and Kenzo Ogata, and the mural artist Hon Chew Hee.<sup>12</sup> The pervasive influence of oriental culture on local architects is evident not only in the work of Haydn Phillips, but also in that of many of his Caucasian contemporaries, such as Frank Slavsky, Edward Sullam and Vladimir Ossipoff.



Ruth Truslow house, Kahala, 1953, showing the Japanese inspired landscaping:  
*Paradise of the Pacific*, May 1954, p 21

One of Phillips's most explicitly orientalist houses was designed in 1954 for his sister-in-law Ruth Truslow (1899-1985), whose husband had died since Phillips built a house for them in 1938. According to one account, she simply told her brother-in-law: 'You know how I live, you know my possessions. Design a home for us in this setting. Give me lots of outdoors, spare the lovely trees and landscaping. And have it ready when I return from the mainland'.<sup>13</sup> The possessions to which she referred included a vast collection of authentic oriental furniture and artwork, which, naturally, gave Phillips the opportunity to indulge his similar tastes. He came up with a scheme for a flat roofed house in concrete block and local koa timber, which was open planned, but at the same time designed for privacy. This was put to the test in May 1954, when the new house served as the venue for the first annual meeting of the Queen's Hospital Auxillary, of which both Ruth Truslow and her sister, Phillips's wife Lois, were keen members. The one hundred attendees included a journalist for the *Honolulu Advertiser*, who would later describe the house as 'one of Honolulu's most beautiful homes', noting that:

The social part of the afternoon was highlighted by informal tours of the tree-shaded garden and the lovely house. Oriental decor at its best and off-white furnishings blended well with the leafy setting.<sup>14</sup>

The setting was indeed integral to the house. Phillips had carefully planned the building around three huge algaroba trees on the property, and the remaining grounds were landscaped in a suitably oriental manner (with a Moon Gate) by the landscape designer Mansfield Claflin (1907-1966). The garden also included two mango trees, one of which, according to family folklore, stubbornly refused to fruit until it 'overheard' Mrs Truslow's proposal to cut it down.<sup>15</sup>

However, the Japanese influence was barely evident in one of Haydn's most famous houses. This was designed the following year for Thomas Reiersen (1892-1973), a successful car dealer who owned a breathtaking site in the exclusive hillside suburb of Upper Manoa, halfway up the side of the extinct volcano which overlooks Honolulu. Phillips's scheme for a minimalist and almost Miesian house, all flat roof and glass walls, reportedly 'gave the owners the best of both Hawaiian worlds: one side opens to the view and a hot sun lanai, the other side turns into the hill and a cool green moist lanai'.<sup>16</sup> Only six months ago, this striking modernist house was illustrated in *Architectural Digest*, offered for sale for almost US\$5 million.<sup>17</sup>



Haydn Phillips, c 1967; Buzaid house at Diamond Head, 1954, showing the top-lit courtyard.  
Phillips family collection

The iconic hillside setting of the Reiersen House contrasted with that of a smaller but no less considered seaside house which Phillips designed at about the same time for Dr Louis Buzaid (1909-2004), Director of Radiology at the Queens Hospital, where Lois Phillips worked as a volunteer. Much impressed by the house that Phillips had designed for Ruth Truslow, the Buzaid's engaged him to design something similar on two lots which they owned at Diamond Head.<sup>18</sup> When the couple had the chance to exchange those lots for an oceanfront site further down the hill, Phillips's original scheme was abandoned and a new design prepared. As Mrs Buzaid recently recalled:

We gave him free reign, and he came up with the plan as it was built. We added few requirements other than to take into consideration our two growing boys. The open central court was Haydn's idea, although we added the small fishpond and the moveable roof cover, patterned after the closures on the island's windward coffee plantations.<sup>19</sup>

The open courtyard would reappear in several subsequent projects, most notably in the house which Phillips designed for his own family in 1957. The most striking aspect of the Buzaid House, however, was the manner in which the architect dealt with the problem of underpinning such a large structure on such a steep site. Through the apparent miracle of structural steel, the upper level of the two-storey house was cantilvered boldly over the swimming pool area far below.<sup>20</sup> Inside, the house was furnished with custom-built furniture manufactured by a local company of which Dr Buzaid was a financial partner, and the oriental influence emerged most prominently in a full-height dining room mural, which was specially made in Japan.<sup>21</sup> The huge house, with four bedrooms, four bathrooms and a two-car garage, was completed at a cost of US\$35,000.<sup>22</sup>



A few years later, Phillips designed a house for another prominent medical practitioner: obstetrician Dr William Benton Patterson (1912-2006). The two men had met back in 1948, when Phillips designed some furniture for the lanai at Patterson's house at Pu'uone.<sup>23</sup> Ten years later, Patterson engaged Phillips to design his new house on the island of Maui.<sup>24</sup> Phillips came up with a scheme for a butterfly-roofed dwelling on an elongated plan, again with a fully glazed facade. The Japanese influence was evidenced internally by the use of shoji screens and grass mats, and externally by detached guest quarters in the form of an oriental tea house. The latter seemed so authentic, as Dr Patterson recalled in his memoirs, that some friends visiting from Tokyo requested copies of the blueprints so that could build a replica back home.<sup>25</sup>

Phillips's association with Dr Patterson saw him design a new medical clinic on Maui a few years later. Its waiting room opened onto a skylit courtyard garden with lava rocks and tree ferns, and a huge mural by the prominent Hawaiian-born Chinese artist Hon Chew Hee (1906-1993).<sup>26</sup> When the clinic outgrew the premises in 1970, Patterson acquired and converted the defunct Wailuku Hotel nearby – built five years earlier and, entirely coincidentally, designed also by Haydn Phillips. A six storey slab block with louvred sunhoods, this building typified the more mainstream International Modernist style which Phillips adopted in non-residential projects.

This tendency is also evident in Phillips's most celebrated non-residential project: a new auditorium 'of unique acoustical design' for the University of Hawaii's Music Department.<sup>27</sup> This was not only the first privately-endowed building to be built on the campus, but also the first purpose-built music performance venue ever built anywhere on the islands. In 1960, retired stockbroker, Arthur Ellington Orvis, donated \$180,000 for a building in honour of his wife, a former opera singer. The commission was given to Haydn Phillips, who had recently designed administration and other buildings for the same faculty. Opened in 1962, the 409-seat Mae Zenke Orvis Auditorium comprised a series of massive concrete portal frames, from which a flat roof was suspended by steel hangers, and timber panels were attached as non-structural wall infill. Artwork was again integrated, including a lively abstract mural and a wall-mounted metal sculpture by Edward Brownlee (born 1929).



Branch of the First Hawaiian Bank, Pearl City, which won an AIA award in 1966  
Phillips family collection

Phillips's non-residential commissions, which increased steadily from the late 1950s, included further university buildings as well as office blocks, schools, restaurants and several telephone exchanges. By the late 1960s, he had become particularly well-known for a series of branches of the First Hawaiian Bank, stylistically far removed from the oriental-themed houses of his early career. Some of these banks adopted a cool neoclassical idiom, expressed as stark flat-roofed temple forms, with wide eaves and massive piers which defined colonnades infilled with glazing or sheets of translucent marble. One particularly fine example, at Pearl City, won Haydn an Honour Award from the AIA (Hawaiian Chapter) in 1966, and was subsequently published in *Architectural Record*.<sup>28</sup> A slightly later one, built at Kailua-Kona on the Big Island, reflected Phillips's interest in Frank Lloyd Wright, with rubble walls and a bold sloping roof with overscaled redwood beams.<sup>29</sup>

Haydn Phillips retired in 1984, just short of his eightieth birthday, and died eight years later on 3 June 1992, survived by his wife Lois (who died in 1999 at the age of 98 years), two adopted daughters, five grandchildren, six great grandchildren and countless fine buildings throughout Hawaii. A glowing obituary in the *Honolulu Advertiser* was testament to the high regard in which he was held amongst the islands' architectural community. Frank Haines, former president of the AIA (Hawaiian Chapter) and now elder statesman of the island's surviving postwar architects, recently described him as 'a very competent designer' who deserved more awards than he received.<sup>30</sup> However, although Phillips's work was certainly well represented in local journals, newspapers and slim architectural publications such as *Hawaiian Residential Architecture* (1954) and *A Decade of Design* (1969), it remains conspicuously absent from more recent reappraisals of Hawaii's built heritage, such as Geoffrey Fairfax's *The Architecture of Honolulu* (1971) and Rob Sandler's *Architecture in Hawaii: A Chronological Pictorial* (1994). Interest in the island's modernist architects has burgeoned in the past few years, as demonstrated by the very recent publication of *Hawaiian Modern*, a glossy and lavish monograph devoted to the work of Haydn's fellow expatriate modernist, Vladimir Ossipoff.

In Australia, Phillips's profile has been a similar mixture of acclaim and indifference. Although he became a naturalised US citizen in 1940, Phillips made frequent return visits to Australia during his long life. However, he tends to be known here only through that 1969 article, and from the dim recollections of local practitioners who knew of him or his work. Neil Clerehan recalls that 'there was a lot of talk about him for a while', but adds that, despite wanting to meet him, he never actually did.<sup>31</sup> He adds that Robin Boyd was another admirer of Phillips's work, and suggested that the two men did meet – presumably when Boyd visited Honolulu in 1959 to address an AIA convention. The following year, the firm of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd was awarded the Pan Pacific citation by the Hawaiian chapter of the AIA, and this time Roy Grounds travelled there to accept it – no doubt taking time to visit Haydn Phillips, his old atelier colleague and fellow Melbourne Grammar alumnus.<sup>32</sup> During the 1960s, Phillips was evidently well known to the next generation of Melbourne architects, one of whom even sought him out and spent time working for him in Hawaii.

Phillips's local significance is most neatly encapsulated in the article which appeared in *Architect* no 1 in 1969, which described him as one of Australia's three greatest gifts to Hawaii, along with macadamia nuts and adjustable louvred windows. But the last word must come from Phillips himself who, after the article was published, provided his own characteristically modest remarks in a letter to the editors:

I was more than flattered by the excellent arrangement and presentation of my work. The chief effect of the article has been:  
A call, while in Honolulu, from an Australian manufacturer  
Calls, while in Honolulu, from several Australians passing through, who were referred by non-architect readers of the magazine;  
A letter from Melbourne Grammar, noting the article and soliciting contributions to a building fund.<sup>33</sup>

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- 2 Ibid.
- 3 'Professional and personal data of Haydn H Phillips, architect, AIA'. (bound typescript, no date (c [1973], Phillips family collection) (courtesy Ms Randi Conway).
- 4 'Haydn Phillips, retired architect', *Honolulu Advertiser*, 6 June 1992, p C5.
- 5 'Contractor Phillips made good, hard way', *Honolulu Advertiser*, 4 August 1940, p 8.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Letter from Edward Sullam, 6 August 2004.
- 8 'Planning for complete flexibility', *Architectural Forum*, April 1950, pp 128-29.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Carl Lindquist, 'History of the Construction Industry in Hawaii' (unpublished typescript, c 1976), excerpts kindly provided by Ross Moody.
- 11 G W Fairfax, *The Architecture of Honolulu*, pp 70, 72, 78, 104-105.
- 12 A review of the listings for Hawaiian architects in the 1962 AIA Directory reveals many others of apparent Japanese descent, including Raymond Akagi, Kenneth Akiyama, Robert Matushita, Richard Iwanaga, Robert Katsuyoshi, Edward Miyamasu, Thomas Nishida and Arthur Yukio Mori.
- 13 'At Home in Hawaii: Mrs Ruth Truslow of Kahala', *Paradise of the Pacific*, May 1954, p 21.
- 14 'Volunteers in annual meeting at Mrs Herbert Truslow's home', *Saturday Star-Bulletin*, 15 May 1954.
- 15 Bob Krauss, *High-rise Hawaii: Life in the Islands Ten Years after Statehood*, p 219.
- 16 'Expatriates', p 14.
- 17 'Estates for Sale', *Architectural Digest*, August 2008.
- 18 Letter from Mrs Bertha Buzaid, 26 June 2004.
- 19 Letter from Mrs Bertha Buzaid, 23 August 2004.
- 20 'Island Living', undated clipping from the *Honolulu Advertiser*, courtesy Mrs Buzaid.
- 21 Letter from Mrs Bertha Buzaid, 23 August 2004.
- 22 Lindquist, 'Construction Industry in Hawaii'.
- 23 W B Patterson, *From the Isle of Skye to the Isle of Maui* (Makawao [Hawaii]), 1991, p 146.
- 24 Patterson, *From the Isle of Skye*, pp 193-198.
- 25 Patterson, *From the Isle of Skye*, p 198.
- 26 Patterson, *From the Isle of Skye*, p 202.
- 27 'UH's Orvis Auditorium to be dedicated next Sunday', *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 1 January 1962, p 15.
- 28 'Hawaii Chapter presents seven honor awards and Pan-Pacific Citation', *Architectural Record*, April 1967, p 40.
- 29 'First Hawaiian to open branch at Kailua-Kona', clipping from unidentified source, 15 March 1971 (Phillips family collection).
- 30 Letter from Frank Haines, 11 August 2004.
- 31 Interview with Neil Clerehan, 9 June 2008.
- 32 'People', *Architecture & Arts*, February 1960, p 64. Roy Grounds (1905-81) and Haydn Phillips were exact contemporaries. They would have not only known each other from the Architectural Atelier, but also from Melbourne Grammar School, where both had matriculated in 1923.
- 33 'Letters', *Architect*, III, 3 (July-August 1969), p 24.