The Gump Building in Waikīkī

By Richard Kelley

In conjunction with the celebration of the 65th anniversary of the founding of Outrigger Enterprises Group, I have been researching, talking and writing frequently about what life was like in the early days of Waikīkī.

This week, I had an opportunity to speak to members of our ‘ohana at Outrigger’s Quarterly Business Review. I showed them an aerial photograph of Waikīkī taken in 1930 to emphasize how quiet and sleepy this now-bustling resort was at that time.

In the photograph, only two hotels are visible – The Royal Hawaiian, which opened 85 years ago in 1927, and the Moana, which was built in 1901. There was hardly any traffic visible on Waikīkī’s main thoroughfare, Kalākaua Avenue, and no one enjoying the beach on what looked like a bright, shining day. Behind Kalākaua Avenue, there were very few homes and certainly none of today’s high-rise hotels or condominium buildings.

What intrigued me in the photograph was a two-story white building standing virtually alone on Kalākaua Avenue at the corner of Lewers Street. A little research confirmed that this is building that originally housed Gump’s, a San Francisco-based retailer of jewelry, luxury furnishings and home décor items.

Gump’s Waikīkī outlet, designed by noted Hawai‘i architect Hart Wood, opened in 1928. It is an example of the architecture of Hawai‘i’s pre-War territorial period, 1898-1941, when the sugar and pineapple industries were operating at full tilt. A number of distinctive buildings were constructed during those years, adapting features of Asian, Mediterranean or European styles that suited Hawai‘i’s tropical climate, including large openings to catch the trade

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winds, wide eaves and often a double-pitched hipped roof. The Gump’s building in Waikīkī was noted for its unique blue-tiled roof.

Gump’s, founded in 1861, still has its headquarters in San Francisco. Owners Solomon and Gustav Gump and their heirs frequently traveled to Asia to acquire products. I am almost certain they stopped in Hawai’i on some of those trips and observed the construction of the deluxe Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

If the Gump family had a vision of the potential for shopping along Kalākaua Avenue, they were decades ahead of their time. Even in the 1950s and early 1960s, Kalākaua Avenue was not a center of high-end retail sales. It was not until the 1980s, with the arrival of waves of visitors from Japan, that a significant number of other high-end shops, comparable to Gump’s, sprang up in Waikīkī.

In fact, the Gump building in Waikīkī was converted into a McDonald’s restaurant, possibly in the 1970s or 1980s. With the boom that began in the late 80s, it was sold for $21 million in 1991 to a corporate affiliate of high-end retailer Louis Vuitton Malletier of Paris, refurbished and, in 1992, rededicated to retail.

Today, luxury retail is seen all along Kalākaua Avenue and on Royal Hawaiian Avenue at Waikīkī Luxury Walk, which features boutiques with brands such as Emporio Armani, Coach, Emilio Pucci, Burberry, Ralph Lauren and Chloé. Visitors from Japan are still great customers but those arriving from China are today’s biggest spenders.

Yes, the vision of Waikīkī in the minds of the brothers Gump was absolutely correct, but it took the rest of the world half a century to acknowledge it with that sincerest form of flattery – imitation.