

# Les Made His Mark on Honolulu

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Val Ossipoff, architect, is a quiet man with a white mustache who has an almost mystic reputation in Hawaii for producing buildings that combine beauty, individuality and practicality.

He has had a particular sense of humor that is indicated by a net of cheerful lines about the eyes and revealed more fully in his good-humored techniques of interviewing his interviewees.

Ossipoff, married and the father of two daughters, is a man of many interests.

He is a hiker who has explored the mountains and wilderness areas of all the islands. He and a single companion once climbed Mauna Loa and spent two nights in the open at the summit. "A terribly foolish thing to do," he says now. "But a wonderful adventure."

He is a sometime photographer. He admits cheerfully that he enjoys "all the aspects of gracious living" and has a special interest in fine foods. The latter led him to presidency of the local Wine and Food Society at one time, and has made him an amateur chef of note.

He reports firmly that he does not fish, and is not a golfer.

About some subjects, Ossipoff is intensely serious, notably the course of physical development in Honolulu and in all of Hawaii.

## Architect's Office

His own quiet office, looking out across busy Ward Ave. toward Thomas Square and the Honolulu Academy of Arts, is in the old building that once housed architect Richard N. Dennis built together. "Dennis did most of the design," Ossipoff reported.

The structure is supported on long concrete beams, leaving almost all of the ground level open for uncrowded parking. "Traffic noises fail to penetrate the second-floor office areas."

Ossipoff does not decry this explosion of our city," Ossipoff said. He swiveled his chair and looked toward the green park area.

"But it's really pointless to decry it," he said. "We just have to do the best we can with the fact that it's here, and try to guide it."

"In Honolulu, it's not just an explosion of the local population that we have to consider, but with travel becoming easier and less expensive, we're continually having a terrific influx of new residents."

It is obviously necessary to provide housing for this growing population. "I do not mind seeing houses overtake the countryside when they come one-by-one, because they must accommodate themselves to the terrain," Ossipoff said.

But too often in tract developments, he believes, "it's largely a matter of ignoring the obvious and it's terrible to watch the devastation of the terrain."

He flipped through the pages of a published study of a major development in Southern California to locate "before and after" photos of the landscape. There, the report found, the development had resulted in "total destruction of the hillside character of the terrain."

"In the long run, I think we can only hope that the public itself will become more discriminating in what it is willing to accept. The Ossipoffs must admit, unfortunately, the public has had very little choice."

## Transportation

In the future development of Honolulu, he believes the problem of the automobile can be overcome.

"The obvious solution is mass transportation, which now is beginning to get serious attention in mass transit. There, the mass transport were made attractive enough, there's no question that people would use it rather than battle traffic and parking space," he said.

Ossipoff regards the current experiment with "minibus" operation downtown as one that is extremely interesting. "I think that it wasn't possible to start with more buses."

"The schedule is for 15 minutes between



Advertiser Photo by Charles Okamura

## Ossipoff: "Local conditions will again influence our building."

buses, and that is just too long for most people to wait. Ideally, one should come along almost every 30 seconds," he said.

"What I fear is that something like this will keep the plan from succeeding, and that new plans for downtown transportation then will be set back for years," he added.

Ossipoff regrets, too, that there's little distinctive island flavor to the design of modern commercial buildings here, but he sees slight hope for immediate change.

"The reason is simple," he said. "Because of the actual or avowed need for air conditioning, we have no further need to be different. When you've sealed off the building from the outside, it might as well be in any climate."

He expects even this to change with time, however.

"I think that there will be an economic demand to do more with air conditioning than just, when that comes, factors such as exposure and sun angle and humidity will be given more consideration in building design."

Then, local conditions again will influence the appearance of our buildings, even though they are high-rise," he said.

"But now there's no reason for them to look different. We use no local building materials, and we ignore the climate."

## Years of Difference

When Ossipoff first saw Honolulu as a young of 16, things were different.

"Waikiki was the Moana Hotel, period," he said. Then he reflected a moment, and added, "I suppose there must have been other hotels, but from the ship that was the only one we saw. We were here just for a day."

That was in 1923, and the Ossipoff family was on its way from Japan to a new home in the United States.

When Ossipoff came back again, in 1932, it was because his college roommate had urged him to see the islands and had asked in his letter, "What have you got to lose?" Hawaii has been his home ever since.

Vladimir Nicholas Ossipoff was born Nov. 25, 1907, in Vladivostok, the son of an officer in the Imperial Russian Army then assigned to his country's Far Eastern Institute in that outpost facing the Sea of Japan.

When Vladimir was 2, the father became a military attaché to the Russian embassy in Japan, and the architect's earliest memories are of life in that country. He learned to speak Japanese from his nurse, Russian from his parents, and English at school.

He was a pupil at what was then the Foreign School, later the American School in Japan. One of his schoolmates there

was Edwin O. Reichbauer, now the U.S. ambassador to Japan.

Through the years of his boyhood, however, the family made periodic visits to Russia and kept an apartment in Petrograd, then the nation's capital. It is a city of parks and broad boulevards that has been called architecturally one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

The last of those visits, involving the long, long journey over the Trans-Siberian Railroad, as Ossipoff recalls, was in 1916.

It was not until two years ago, as a member of a tour party from Honolulu, that he returned to Russia, and again saw the city. Though it was not greatly altered, he has called architecturally one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

When the revolution came and the imperial government was overthrown in Russia, the Ossipoffs remained in Japan.

"We lived in Japan until 1923. Then we were shaken out by the earthquake," he said.

When the great quake came on Sept. 1, the family was at a summer home in a village in the foothills near Fuji, rather than in Tokyo. "But it still was a terrifying experience."

In California, Ossipoff attended high school at Berkeley, and then entered the University of California, where he was graduated in 1931 with his degree in architecture.

## Depression Years

His introduction to the profession in the depression year was less encouraging—except that he did get a job.

"I started with a San Francisco firm that was working on a school project," he said. "It was the 12th or the 13th on the staff, and when the school job was finished, they fired all the rest and kept me on."

"That wasn't my chance of ability. It was because I was cheapest."

"Then, things got still worse, and my salary was cut in half—to \$30 a month. And do you know that with times as they were, when I did decide to leave, there was ardent competition for that job," Ossipoff said.

It was again that background that he received the letter from his former roommate in romantic-sounding Hawaii, urging him to come to the islands. "I decided that he was right, that I really didn't have

much to lose, and so I came," Ossipoff recalled.

The roommate was Doug Slaten of Pearl City, who by then had become an accountant for Oahu Sugar Co. He was the son of Dr. Arthur W. Slaten, well known as a writer and lecturer, who previously had been minister of the West Side Unitarian Church in New York.

For a time, he worked as a temporary assistant in the offices of two or three Honolulu architects, and then he became architect for the same building department of Theo. H. Davies & Co. "That's where I learned the practical aspects of small residence design."

It was while he was with Davies that—on Jan. 24, 1935—he married Miss Raelyn Loughery of San Francisco.

Soon after that, he resigned his post at Davies becoming associated with Claude Alton Stehl, and since that time has been in private practice here.

Today, his firm of Vladimir Ossipoff and Associates remains relatively small, and he intends to keep it that way.

"I don't have that peculiar talent for administration that it takes to run a large organization," he said. "In an office of more than 10 or 12, I wouldn't be able to stay in touch with every job."

And Ossipoff intends to stay in touch—with his projects, with his assistants, and with the community in which he works.

He has served twice as president of Hawaii Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, one in the latter 1950s and the second time this year.

## Watched Field Grow

In his first term, there were only about two chapters of the chapter. This year there are 148.

Hawaii now has one architect for each 5,000 residents, compared to a national average of one to 6,000, he said. But in Honolulu, there are 100 architects, and Japan, with only a little more than half the U.S. population, has about twice the number of architects, who are divided into two classes. In the case of the U.S., the commissions they are qualified to execute.

When he took office for the 1965 term, Ossipoff said the A.I.A. chapter would "lose a war on ugliness," and since then it has spoken out on many questions involving public planning and development plans. He recently sent the city a seven-page letter to the City Council supporting provisions of "Bill 101," the proposed revision of the zoning ordinance.

By and large, he feels that members of the profession are being heard more in the past, with more practical results. "The day of flowing tide and the long-way hair is gone," he said.

Ossipoff is proud of the architect's record of service of a great number of official committees and commissions concerned with planning. "I would hope that we have been heard more in many areas of the country, architects would feel lucky to be represented just one public commission," he said.

He is also a past president of a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, the third member from Hawaii to be selected. The announcement from the national organization said he was being honored for his achievements in design.

Another honor came in 1959, when he received the A.I.A. Award for the design of his own home here and for the McInerney store in Waikiki.

Many buildings throughout Hawaii bear the Ossipoff stamp, few of them in Honolulu are new wings at the Queen's Hospital and Maunaloa Hospital, elementary school units at Punahoa, the new wing at the Coral Strand Apartments, the Pacific Club, designed with Kenneth Roehrig; the Outrigger Canoe Club, with George Wimberly; the new building for the insurance, and there are scores of residences.

Last week, Ossipoff was puzzling over a letter from the New Hebrides Islands north of the Pacific Islands, where he had a residence at Papete, 2,000 miles to the east.

He mused for a time over the requirements of the letter. "I don't know," he then shrugged. "You know, I've never been to Tahiti," he said. "I think I shall have to do this."