The Master of Hawaiian Architecture

By Lois Taylor, Star-Bulletin Writer

THE Pacific Club physical plant committee, Honolulu business executives whose decisions involve hundreds of jobs and millions of dollars, wanted to move a painting in the men's cardroom—not very far, just across the room.

"Has anybody asked Val?" the chairman inquired. Nobody had asked Val. The painting stayed where it was.

Vladimir Nicholas Ossipoff, son of an Imperial Russian military officer, is the principal architect of the club and ever since the building went up, there have been no physical changes made there without his approval.

According to Ossipoff, this despotic system was not of his making and simply relieved the committee of some decisions.

The Outrigger Canoe Club membership, a more laid-back group, made some unauthorized changes to their Ossipoff-designed clubhouse, of which the architect disapproves. "The club is over-utilized and is bursting at the seams. The open trellisework we put there has been roofed over for more space and it changes the building."

Ossipoff is probably the only living local architect whose name shows up in the real estate advertisements, where the cachet of "an Ossipoff house" jacks up the price.

"It doesn't mean a damn thing," Ossipoff said this week in his comfortable office across Ward Avenue from the Honolulu Academy of Arts. "It's one of those things the real estate ladies glommed onto. Actually, all the 'Ossipoff houses' in the ads aren't always mine."

A vigorous 72, member of a regular tennis foursome and a globetrotting traveler, Ossipoff works a full day at the architectural firm of Ossipoff, Snyder, Rowland and Goetz. It is now owned by the other three partners since Ossipoff sold his interest two years ago, but his name remains on the masthead. It is there for the same reason that the real estate ladies drop it into the classified ads—Ossipoff is considered the dean of local architects, the Frank Lloyd Wright of warm weather shelter.

Because of this reputation, the Hawaii Society of the American Institute of Architects is honoring Ossipoff at a testimonial dinner tonight.

During his 44 years as an architect, have clients' needs changed? "Not much. They all want closet space," he said. "The biggest change has been in the relative dimensions of houses. Kitchens are much bigger because the Japanese maid is gone and the housewife is doing the cooking herself.

"Appliances are bigger and there are more of them—trash compactors and microwave ovens along with all the other labor savers like dishwashers and clothes dryers. With no help, the family is more likely to eat in the kitchen, and if enough of them eat there at the same time, it becomes the family room.

"The other change is security. We're beginning to put grilles in windows. They work better in Italy and Spain where nobody worries about screens against insects. A grille is more functional on the small windows of Mediterranean houses because the climate is different. They have cool nights. We use large windows because moving air is what makes Hawaii habitable. When the tradewinds stop, we have a problem.

'I think Hawaii has developed an indigenous architecture, recognized by the use of openings, of windows and doors. The most Hawaiian house I ever designed was for Blanche Hill on Kahala Avenue. It has terrazzo floors and there is no way to close it up entirely because it has shutters rather than solid doors or walls.

"She told me that she wanted a light, summery feeling to the house and that she was willing to accept a wet floor on occasion to live with shutters. That's why the floor was terrazzo." The house has won several national architectural awards.

Ossipoff rarely builds air conditioning into his houses and instead relies on cross-ventilation. "That's because I most often work on large houses with space around them. If you're doing a townhouse on a zero lot line or cluster houses, then you don't have cross-ventilation and you have to look for something else," he said.

He does not always approve of alternatives used to keep down the interior heat, and said, "I don't like the mirrored glass on the Grosvenor Building. The problem should be handled differently, either by shading the surface of the building with projections or recessing windows, and not by heat reflection.

"Many of the new buildings downtown, though, are very fine. Davies Pacific is excellent, with a good use of landscaping. Provision for landscaping should be in every building, drawn right into the plans.

'A building that is just awful is the one going up on Waialae Avenue (on the former site of the King's Daughters Home). It is on the side-walk. It is so bad, so insensitive that even if it is within the city's building code, I think it is too bad that the city permits it.

"There is no esthetic judgment in granting building permits here as there is in Singapore. We are doing work in Singapore, and the city's decision to grant or not to grant a permit is largely based on how desirable the building is, an esthetic evaluation," he said.

"The buildings in front of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel are misjudged. I have a lot of respect for Howard Wong, and I think his reasons are valid. His argument (for designing the buildings as he did) is that Kalakaua Avenue is such a hodgepodge that it needed a strong, positive statement to bring order. Most of the criticism comes because it hasn't enough openings. But he was able to get planting between the sidewalk and the curb and now that it's growing, the buildings won't look as heavy. They'll be OK."

When Ossipoff first saw Waikiki, he was 16 and traveling by ship with his family from Japan to California. The ship was in port for one day, and the family had been "shaken out of Japan during the great earthquake of Sept. 1, 1923," he recalled.

Ossipoff was born Nov. 25, 1907, in Vladivostok where his father was assigned to the Imperial Russian Army's Far Eastern Institute. Two years later, the senior Ossipoff was transferred to the Russian Embassy in Tokyo, where young Vladimir became trilingual. He spoke Japanese to his nurse, Russian to his parents, and learned English when he attended the Foreign School.

ALTHOUGH the Russian Revolution removed the czar, Japan did not immediately recognize the revolutionary government, Ossipoff said. "The representatives of Imperial Russia stayed on as long as the money lasted. But my father had been thinking of emigrating to the United States for some time, and the earthquake was the catalyst. He sent the family on ahead, and died before he could join us."

Ossipoff finished high school in Berkeley, Calif., and graduated in 1931 from the University of California with a degree in architecture. ("I'm thinking of going to my 50th reunion next year, but I'm afraid there's nobody left," he commented.) The depths of the Depression were not an optimum time for the profession, but he was hired by a San Francisco firm at a salary of $100 a month. When hard times caused a 50 percent cut, Ossipoff decided to come to Hawaii where a former college roommate now lived.

He worked for a while with the home building department of Theo H. Davies, and in 1933 went into private practice as an architect. He was married the same year to Raelyn Dougherty of San Francisco, and they are the parents of two daughters. In 1956, Ossipoff was named a fellow of the American Institute of Architects, only the third Hawaii resident to be selected.

Although Ossipoff is most often identified as architect of deluxe single family homes, he has also designed a subdivision at Wainiae Nui, high-rise office buildings and condominiums. "We did the Diamond Head Apartments, one of the earliest high-rises on Diamond Head. We probably should never have been allowed to build there. Now it seems inevitable that such buildings will go right out into Kahala.

"We were never going to have a hotel in Kahala, remember? We've had one for quite a while."

HE suggested that Oahu take a look at how Maui has "finally awakened to its problems, and is handling it miles very well. We designed townhouses there, and I was amazed at how many restrictions were being exercised. Maui woke up when they realized what a mess had been made of Kihei.

"Princeville on Kauai is well-planned, but they have a problem there growing things. Everything looks windblown."

If Kahala Beach eventually gets the condominiums Ossipoff thinks are inevitable, he said that the Bishop Estate should exercise the same kind of control that Alexander and Baldwin has at Wailea. "They can do it because they own the whole thing. Kihei is individual pieces of property, singly owned, and control becomes the problem of the county zoning laws that can't take aesthetics into account." He was asked what an ideal client needs besides a quick hand to the checkbook, he answered. "The most important thing is to have one who understands what you're trying to do, one with whom you can have a dialogue. Corporations that want high-rises have no emotions or idiosyncrasies, and are easier to work with than people who want houses. Houses are much more personal."

This problem may be on the way to solving itself since single-family houses now cost at least $100 per square foot to build plus the cost of the land and landscaping. Fewer are being built, Ossipoff said, although there will always be clients within the price range he works.

The Ossipoff family house on Paiko Lagoon in Kuliouou is an Ossipoff design. "I'm the one client I can't fool," the architect said; "the one client I couldn't talk into something else. Architecture is not an absolute science and there are different ways of accomplishing the same thing. There are always worrisome judgments.

'IF you design a building like a battleship, you can't afford to build it, so you compromise, and sometime it's wrong. And clients always want more than they are willing to spend—not necessarily more than they can afford—so they make compromises, too."

Of all the buildings Ossipoff has designed, and many of them have won awards, he said that he has no favorite. "I haven't thought of a 'monument,' the one building I would choose to be identified with as long as it stands. I'm not sure I like the idea. Maybe it will be the next one. I'm never satisfied with my work, and whenever I look at a building or a house I've done, I think of how I might have done it differently."

The mark of Ossipoff's success, though, is that few of his clients would even consider that.

Ossipoff's office, above, reflects his utilitarian and minimalist attitudes towards his work—there's a sense of balance with no clutter.—Star-Bulletin photo by John Titchen.

Ossipoff Homes

Dr. and Mrs. P. Howard Liljestrand's house on Tantalus was singled out as the nation's 'Poacsetter House' by House Beautiful magazine in 1958. The site has an unobstructed view of downtown Honolulu and Waikiki as well as the tropical jungle of Tantalus.

Ossipoff considers the house he built for Blanche Hill to be "the most Hawaiian" he ever built. There is no way to shut it up entirely except by closing the folding shutters which will not keep out a heavy rain. The floors, as well as the pool deck, are terrazzo, and Hill was willing to accept a wet floor on occasion for the open, summery feeling of the house.

Good

The Davies Pacific Building is admired because offices in it are shaded by projections and the windows are recessed. Ossipoff finds this a good way of handling interior problems of heat and light.

Bad

Ossipoff Thinks heat and light are handled poorly by the reflective glass of the Grosvenor Building downtown.

He considers the Royal Hawaiian Center 'a positive strong statement amid the hodgepodge of Kalakaua Avenue.' The planting between the buildings and the curb softens the heavy structural look.

He calls the Kaimuki Shopping Center going up on Waialae Avenue at the former site of the King's Daughters Home 'insensitive' and 'awful.' It is built almost flush to the sidewalk.

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