


THE (RE) URBANIZATION OF HONOLULU: COLONIALISM AND URBAN RENEWAL IN HAWAI'I

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ABSTRAC

In this essay, I explore the implications of (neo)colonialism on Ke'eaumoku street and look towards indigenous and community-based answers. As issues of gentrification, homelessness, and the rising cost of living plague Hawai'i, many look for ways to solve these issues as an "Us" (Hawai'i Residents) versus "Them" (Continental U.S. and International Corporations) dichotomy, as opposed to looking towards the broader issues of colonialism and the further implications. To do this, I specifically look at the Transit-Oriented Development and make connections between the historical and contemporary urbanization of Honolulu and the ongoing colonization of Hawai'i. I also suggest that the social action previously taken by communities in Kaka'ako should be used for the Ke'eaumoku street community.

KEYWORDS

colonialism ➤ urbanization ➤ urban renewal ➤ gentrification

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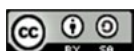
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LA (RE)URBANIZACIÓN DE HONOLULU: COLONIALISMO Y RENOVACIÓN URBANA EN HAWAII

RESUMEN

En este ensayo, exploro las implicaciones del (neo-)colonialismo en la calle Ke'eaumoku y observo las respuestas indígenas y comunitarias. A medida que los problemas de gentrificación, la falta de viviendas y el aumento del costo de vida se convierten en una plaga para Hawai'i, muchos buscan resolver estas cuestiones como una dicotomía entre "Nosotros" (Residentes de Hawai'i) contra "Ellos" (corporaciones estadounidenses e internacionales continentales) en lugar de fijarse en los problemas más graves del colonialismo y las implicaciones adicionales. Para ello, examino específicamente el Desarrollo Orientado al Tránsito y trazo conexiones entre la urbanización histórica y contemporánea de Honolulu y la colonización en curso de Hawai'i. También sugiero que la acción social que emprendieron anteriormente las comunidades en Kaka'ako se lleve a cabo en beneficio de la comunidad de la calle Ke'eaumoku.

KEYWORDS

colonialismo ➤ urbanización ➤ renovación urbana ➤ aburguesamiento

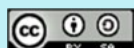
A (RE) URBANIZAÇÃO DE HONOLULU: COLONIALISMO E RENOVAÇÃO URBANA NO HAWAII

RESUMO

Neste ensaio, exploro as implicações (neo) do colonialismo na rua Ke'eaumoku e observo as respostas indígenas e comunitárias/ das comunidades. À medida que os problemas da gentrificação, falta de moradia, e o acréscimo no custo de vida, convertem-se numa praga para o Hawai'i, muitos procuram resolver estas questões como uma dicotomia entre "Nós" (Residentes de Hawai'i) contra "Eles" (Corporações dos Estados Unidos e Internacionais Continentais) ao contrário do / ao invés de olhar para os problemas mais graves do colonialismo e das novas implicações. Para fazer isto, especificamente examino o Desenvolvimento Orientado ao Trânsito e desenho conexões entre a urbanização histórica e contemporânea de Honolulu e a colonização contínua do Hawai'i. Também sugiro que ação social anteriormente empreendida pelas comunidades em Kaka'ako seja realizada em benefício da comunidade da rua Ke'eaumoku.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

colonialismo ➤ urbanização ➤ renovação urbana ➤ gentrificação"



Introduction

“Could you just imagine they came back. And saw traffic lights and railroad tracks. How would they feel about this modern city life?” (Kamakawiwo’ole, 1993)¹. As Hawai’i seems to follow the larger trends of urban renewal, Brother Iz’s song Hawai’i ‘78 seems more and more relevant. These urbanization and gentrification trends are part of a larger colonial and settler system in which both Kanaka Maoli² and marginalized settler communities are harmed. Kaka’ako has been one of the more obvious examples of gentrification in Hawai’i; however, the newest addition to this trend is the lower Ke’eaumoku Street and Ala Moana Center area. This new gentrification project, Transit Oriented Development or TOD³, follows similar patterns as previous projects, such as Kaka’ako, and works to displace residents, small businesses, and communities for the benefit of the U.S. and international consumption and corporations. To understand the further implications of TOD on Ke’eaumoku Street, I look towards the long colonial histories of urban renewal projects in Honolulu and the work of Tina Grandinetti to inform the ways in which we approach and address current gentrification projects. In this paper, I hope to explore the future of decolonizing our ideas of urban living and solving the larger issues of gentrification and colonialism in its many forms.

Historical Context

The urbanization of Honolulu happens throughout the plantation and post-plantation era, making it a byproduct of colonization. Current day urbanization is part of the larger neocolonial systems at hand, in which the colonial powers and systems still perpetrate in contemporary times (Trask, 1999). One of the first large waves of foreign residents residing in Honolulu is Chinatown, named after the large population of Chinese plantation workers, which was later a popular area for Chinese, Japanese and Filipino plantation workers (National Park Service, 2019) to reside. Other large pushes for urbanization come from the draining of wetlands in Honolulu to build residential areas and schools. Some examples of these areas are Waikiki and Manoa Valley (Goodyear-Kaopua, 2009) and Kalia wetlands (Wegel, 2008) which led to the building of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, as well as Fort DeRussy Park and Ala Moana Center. These are examples of the catalysts for historical and current-day urban renewal projects which worked to displace agricultural spaces (Feeser, 2006, 42): Ahupua’a, Auwai, and Loko I’a⁴.

Other urban renewal projects in Honolulu have been happening for decades, from Chinatown fires to the A’ala Street project to contemporary projects like Kaka’ako. In the early 1900’s, Chinatown had a bubonic plague outbreak which led to the burning of Chinatown (Tsai, 2002). This was seen as the first urban renewal project in Chinatown; however, not the last. Later in 1965, the State recommended that the A’ala park area be the next urban renewal project

¹ In this, I acknowledge the various discourses around the song Hawai’i ‘78 specifically regarding arguments for both urbanization and growth of technological advances as well as arguments to decolonize space. I mention the song to bring forth and invoke the sense of community, paying homage to Kanaka Maoli while working through these neocolonial systems which not only harm Kanaka Maoli but also marginalized settler communities.

² Kanaka Maoli are the Indigenous people of Hawaii; Native Hawaiians.

³ The State-sanctioned rail-related urban renewal project on O’ahu.

⁴ These three terms make reference to different aspects of Hawaiian agricultural practices. Ahupua’a is the traditional land division that designated different spaces for different agricultural uses. Auwai is the waterway system that was used to sustainably direct water to lo’i (taro patches). Loko I’a is the traditional fish pond that Native Hawaiians used to attract and cultivate fish.

(ASLA, 2011), which displaced numerous residents of the area. The surrounding area, Chinatown, also went through urban renewal projects during this time. As Honolulu's population rose so did the extent of the urban renewal projects. Kaka'ako, which was home to many locals⁵ as well as numerous houseless camps (Grandinetti, 2018), was gentrified and became an extremely well-known urban renewal project in Hawai'i.

Contemporary Issue

Urbanization and urban renewal projects have not stopped. In fact, they have become more common. In Hawai'i, on the island of O'ahu, the construction of rail, a public transportation project, has been a catalyst for urban renewal projects in Honolulu, as well as other parts of the island: Kapolei, Waipahu, and other West-side communities (Department of Planning and Permitting, 2020). Specifically, I'll be looking at the TOD, Transit-Oriented Development, and the State's plans for the Ke'eaumoku Street-Ala Moana Center area. TOD is a State-sanctioned project, in which the State government works with private corporations to create and implement urban renewal projects across the island. This urban renewal project will displace current community members, businesses and jobs to raise the cost of living in urban Honolulu. This project will demolish existing structures to build new high-rise apartments, with a mix of regular and luxury apartments. TOD government documents report that "gentrification is an important consideration here. Requirements for affordable housing set-asides in conjunction with new residential development are an additional recommendation from some of the stakeholders for addressing the issue" (RTKL, 2013). The uncertainty of this answer leads to questions of availability for working-middle class housing and the further issues of displacement of these specific residents.

A goal of TOD is to diversify the neighborhood, which was historically a place that locals and military men would frequent to find Asian women, specifically Korean women (Danico, 2002). The area has changed over the years, with shifts in the types of businesses available, and the reconstruction of Ala Moana Center. However, the area is still a predominantly Asian held space, with numerous places for locals and tourists alike to visit. The TOD website states that:

"To accommodate diverse lifestyles and varying income levels, a wide variety of housing types and sizes should be provided. A mix of for-sale and rental units would attract a wider demographic, including young families, empty nesters, and singles - making neighborhoods stronger and more sustainable" (Department of Planning and Permitting, 2019).

The project seeks to attract a different demographic to luxury and market value complexes; however, the displacement needed to achieve this goal is not addressed. These apartments price point, specific to the demographic that they hope to attract, fails to align with the average incomes of these groups in Hawai'i. The average income of a Honolulu resident starts at \$31,146 (Sperling's Best Places). In contrast, a single bed unit in a comparable building, the same company that is building luxury apartments in the Ke'eaumoku Street-Ala Moana Center area, is 1.2M-1.9M (Yamato,

<=> I use the term 'local' in the broad sense. I understand the distaste in the term; however, in the context of urban renewal and displacement, I felt that it would be an important term in this paper. I grappled between Hawaiian terms; malahini, haole, etc. Nevertheless, in the end, the term 'local' encompassed a specific demographic which felt appropriate to this area and which can be understood more broadly.

2020). If the average Honolulu resident cannot afford an apartment in these buildings, the assumption is that these apartments are not meant for locals and to attract other buyers. I mention this to critique the current state of the urban renewal not only as a neocolonial system but also as an issue affecting Kanaka Maoli as well as marginalized settler communities.

Social Action / Call to Action

As of right now, February 2020, no social action has been taken by the community. For this reason, I refer to Tina Grandanetti's work in Kaka'ako to look towards community organization and the future of the residents in the Ke'eau-moku Street-Ala Moana Center area. I made these connections due to what Grandinetti explains as the "Urban Growth Machine", which is defined as the cooperation of local political and economic elites whose shared interests drive the ever-intensive development of urban land for-profit (Grandinetti, 2019, 5). This is exactly what is currently happening in the Ke'eau-moku Street-Ala Moana Center area, which led to the connections I made between Kaka'ako and Ke'eau-moku Street and why I look towards the community work previously carried out in Kaka'ako.

Grandinetti explores the concept of "Urban Aloha 'Aina" (Grandinetti, 2015, 113), which I believe to be the future of Ke'eau-moku Street-Ala Moana Center community. She defines "Urban Aloha Aina" as challenging the unromanticized simplification that the relationship held by Native Hawaiians is between people and land in rural areas. She expands this relationship to all lands, either urban or rural (113), the relationships between Kanaka Maoli, "locals" and visitors, and reworking our ideas of what a decolonial future can look like (113). Through this framework, she documents the community's effort to discourage the gentrification of their community (110), they do this through events held by La Ho'i Ho'i Ea, which help to explore what residents and Kanaka Maoli would want the city to look like (Grandinetti, 2017, 17). I believe that the Ke'eau-moku Street-Ala Moana Center community should look towards the work of La Ho'i Ho'i Ea to understand the implications of TOD and the work that can be carried out to stop the displacement of these working, and middle-class communities.

Conclusion

These projects are part of the neocolonial systems that we need to address. To be specific, urban renewal has been a historical and contemporary aspect of colonialism. These urban renewal projects force educators, community members, and others who reside in the surrounding areas to address these issues head-on. We must focus on the community and the work towards the decolonial future. Kanaka Maoli are at the forefront of what this future will look like. These new urban renewal projects force settlers to acknowledge the larger issues and symptoms of settler colonialism, as the negative effects are more prominent for them. With this, Kanaka Maoli-settler solidarities will be built through the shared struggles and support as communities come together to solve the issues of gentrification and displacement in urban Honolulu.

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