

MAUI MAGIC AT LUMERIA

ARTICLE BY GRAEME KEMLO



To interior designer and architectural conservator, Xorin Balbes, there was something magical about the derelict property on the foothills of Maui's Mt Haleakala.

The land was special – he had felt its energy, but he'd also seen the dry rot that now invaded the buckled timber buildings that, a decade earlier, had housed pineapple pickers. So Xorin knew the onerous task he faced, but believed it was important to restore the unique 1909 authentic Craftsman style property with its "neo-classical and vernacular Japanese details."

So today, when you first round the corner of the driveway and take in the fully restored Baldwin house, this is clearly something far removed from the five-star Maui hotel marques that cling to the west Maui shore.

Fortune would smile on this haole (outsider) from California as he contemplated buying the property, when into his driveway, and into his life, drove a woman who introduced herself as "Aunty Fran". She would turn out to be respected Hawaiian Hope Kahu (priest) and architect, Dr (Rev.) Fran Palama, a specialist in architecture for restoration and very well connected at Maui County, who controlled planning and ultimately, Xorin's fate.

When they first met, Aunty Fran took Xorin to the entrance of the main building to share a spiritual experience she encountered just days before. Pointing to the staircase up to a second storey suite, she said: "There was a young man's spirit that was up there... he's been the guardian here... he was also a son of Henry Baldwin". The son of pioneer missionaries sent to Hawaii in 1831, Henry co-founded Alexander & Baldwin Inc., one of Hawaii's five oligarchies that ran the local sugar and pineapple industry. Henry's son, Frank, had died of appendicitis aged 25 and the house bore his name in memorium.

So this was a Baldwin house – a name closely associated with the first missionaries, who married into Hawaii's royal families and into power. So the County would not permit just anyone to restore it. But as she drove away Aunty Fran told Xorin, "If you meet anyone at the County let them know that you met Aunty Fran and everything will be taken care of".

The next day, back in Los Angeles, where he was living in the Hollywood Hills in his latest historic restoration – a 1926 design by Frank Lloyd Wright Jnr in the form of a Mayan temple – Xorin got on the phone. "I started calling all the people I had met with at the County and I also shared with them that I had met Aunty Fran and they all could not believe that I had met her. They were, like, 'how can you be here for a few days and meet Aunty Fran?' And so it was the connection with Aunty Fran that allowed my permitting process to happen in 25 per cent of the time it should have happened for most people."

The County need not have worried. Xorin had undertaken significant and expensive historic restorations in Los Angeles, apart from the Frank Lloyd Wright Jnr house, which featured in the film 'Aviator'. These included a replica 17th century Italian villa once owned by 1920s movie legend, Norma Talmadge (and later by Jimi Hendrix), plus an award-winning restoration of the 1929 art deco Security-First National Bank in Los Angeles.

But for Xorin, the Baldwin property was quite a different challenge.

"There was a part of me that felt like my developer experience my designer experience and my spiritual path could all come together in this one place. One of the things I believe is that the intention that goes into the restoration of a project is as important as the work that is going into it. So, for me, the intention for the restoration of this building and this land was really about honouring the culture and the history – this historic property, the land itself and the culture that the property is connected to," he explained.

Lumeria exterior

After \$8 million and two years, with the strong support of Aunty Fran at County hearings, an army of tradespeople complete the physical transformation. Now Lumeria Maui specialises in personal transformation. The land is known as Manu Ola (the healing mount), "...and so in restoring it from a place of hoping and energy... the [guests'] transformation and their restoration will be easier if the intention of every nail and every particle of the renovation was about honouring the restoration and transformation for people to go through," Xorin explains.

What were once old dormitories have been transformed within the original footprint into 24 elegant suites set around a central landscape of gardens, lawn terraces, conversation nooks and corners for quiet contemplation, surrounded by lanais that afford panoramic views both makai (to the sea) and mauka (to the mountains). The view across the island at sunset, when the fiery orb bows down behind the Lao Valley, the secret burial place of ali'i (chiefs), is spectacular to behold.

In ancient times this land was Ahupua'a (land division), an equitable system in which the land was divided like a slice of pie running head to tail – from the mauka to the makai – and it was the responsibility of the community that inhabited the Ahupua'a to protect the land and the water resources. There were foresters, farmers and fishermen sharing self-sufficiency.

And so it is that Xorin and his team practice malama 'aina (care of the land) from a flourishing vegetable and herb garden that not only provides sustenance for guests but is part of a weekly education program. He explained that in Hawaiian culture people are not separate from the land – and to honour the culture he has planted one of every native Hawaiian plant on the property.

"Hawaiians knew that the energy that is here was very restorative and very healing, so it is perfect that Lumeria in its mission for restoration and transformation and healing is here."

Guests at the 24-room 'edventure' (education and adventure) retreat will find an authentic experience. No television or radio, but a very cosy individually designed room with furnishings sought from around the world. Then there's the private lanai, pool lounge, or a hammock in the whispering pine forest, to enable guests to choose their own path of contemplation.

"It was meant to be..."

Not just the soul is being fed at Lumeria. Impressive young chef, Indica Chaves, who has worked in Spain, Portugal and Washington State felt drawn back to Maui where she has six siblings. "It was meant to be... it was the vision of what I wanted to do, allowing people to taste Maui, working with local produce and fresh fruits," she says, offering local fish with fresh seaweed and glass noodles.

Lumeria functions as a nurturing five star facilitator, encouraging "an attitude of gratitude". But directed personal restoration is never far away. A yoga concierge helps plan progressive private instruction through a range of daily classes with yoga masters offering different styles: Anusara, Hatha, Kundalini, Vinyasa and more. There's also a range of wellness options, detox therapies, meditation, aromatherapy instruction, even gardening lessons.

Now Xorin's next big challenge is to use Lumeria for "the restoration of corporate America... one executive or one executive team at a time." ■