

Business

Local Artisans Are Thriving Amid Kakaako's Condo Boom

If they make the right connections, artists, woodworkers and other creative types can benefit from the development of all those shiny skyscrapers.



By Stewart Yerton   

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Located on a narrow side street in Kalihi, Dae Son's [Wood Hi](#), is a world away from the gleaming high rises and hip eateries of nearby Kakaako, but the woodshop has strong ties to the fast-growing district.

Son has a small but steady flow of business from Kakaako thanks to Miwa Yamamuro, the principal of the interior design firm [Muro Designs](#). Yamamuro has built a thriving business designing interiors of the new luxury condos sprouting up in Kakaako and Ala Moana. And artisans like Son, as well as local artists, are part of the equation.

"It's Hawaii," Yamamuro says, explaining why clients want local design elements in their homes. "And they want to feel like they're in Hawaii."



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Designer Miwa Yamamuro, principal of Muro Designs in Honolulu, has worked with woodworker Dae Son to produce art pieces for Kakaako condo projects.

Jen Toba-Davila, senior architectural designer with [Philpotts Interiors](#), agreed that condo buyers want something uniquely expressive of Hawaii, a conversation starter or “memory maker.”

“They’re always looking for something that’s handcrafted, locally made to locally sourced,” she said.

Negative side effects of development are well known and oft-discussed: increased traffic, gentrification and heightened demand for public services like waste management, among others. But the experience of people like Yamamuro and Son shows one of the positive results: increased demand for the work of fine artists, photographers and artisans like Son, also known as “makers.”

‘A New Urban Community’

There are no data on how much work Kakaako’s condos have spun off for artists and makers. What is known is that the creative industries produce substantial jobs and income in Hawaii. According to a recent [report released](#) by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, “core” arts and culture production jobs – mainly performing arts, writers, museums, arts educators and design services like Muro Designs – generated just under \$340 million in income in Hawaii in 2016 and employed about 6,800 people.

That doesn’t count what the bureau calls supporting arts and cultural industries, including publishing, broadcasting and motion picture production, which employed almost 15,000 people and generated about \$950 million in income in 2016.

The supporting industries have gotten a big boost from Hawaii taxpayers, who subsidize movie and television production by paying producers back as much as 25 cents for every dollar they spend on Hawaii-based projects, even for money spent out of state. While there’s no such support for most other arts and design jobs, there has been enormous private investment in Kakaako, the former light industrial neighborhood stretching from Ala Moana to the edge of downtown.

As of December, Howard Hughes Corp., a Dallas-based real estate investment trust, had either opened or was constructing 2,129 condominiums in its master-planned Ward Village project encompassing the east end of the neighborhood. That does not count properties developed at the west end and in neighborhoods on land owned by Kamehameha Schools.

And Howard Hughes’ plans envision more down the line.

The magnitude of the development is staggering. The estimated cost for Howard Hughes’ five projects alone, two of which are under construction, is approaching \$2 billion, and the company reported profits of \$726 million in its [report to shareholders for 2018](#).



Honolulu photographer Franco Salmoiraghi scored a major coup with a commission to use his photographs on common spaces at Howard Hughes' Waiea condo project.

The boom has supported a lively art scene that gives soul to what could be a stark new neighborhood. [Pow! Wow!](#), an annual arts festival that has brought a collection of street murals to Kakaako, recently wrapped up. And the Honolulu Biennial is now underway, its main exhibition space located at Ward Village. There's also a community of creatives in the neighborhood, working out of collective workspaces like [Lana Lane Studios](#) even as the area goes upscale.

Toba-Davila said it's not surprising that there are still pockets of artists and makers in and near Kakaako, despite the gentrification.

"That's what makes Kakaako so dynamic and interesting," said Toba-Davila-Davila, who serves on the executive committee of the American Institute of Architects in Hawaii. "I hope they're always there."

Howard Hughes recognizes this and works to support local arts and culture in the neighborhood, said [Todd Apo](#), senior vice president of community development at Ward Village. This includes supporting events like the biennial, hosting public art exhibits and creating affordable retail spaces for small, local businesses. As the company continues to redevelop the area, work spaces and studios for artists and makers "will continue to be a part of Ward Village," Apo said.

"We are creating a new urban community," said Apo, a former Honolulu City Council chairman. "And you can't do that just by building mixed-use buildings."



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Making Connections

On a recent evening in a nondescript Kakaako warehouse exhibition space, a few dozen artists and makers gathered for a potluck. In her second-floor studio of [Aupuni Space](#), designer [Emiko Miyazawa](#) discussed her kinetic silver jewelry inspired by Swiss watch movements and explained how she used a Japanese pottery technique to repair a moonstone ring, creating gold metallic lightning in the opalescent orb. Nearby, the [sculptor Mark Chai](#) was admiring Miyazawa's new high-tech microscope, while [SheenRu Yong](#), a dancer and choreographer, chatted on a sofa.

Kun Xu, a welder from the metal [workshop next door](#), admired a painting in the hallway. Downstairs, spilling onto the sidewalk, there were more artists; a deejay, Lino "DJ Leanski" Delgado spinning tunes, and plenty of wine and hard cider.

The event was organized by Janis Ku'uipo Lee's organization [E-Merge Collective](#) and [Art World Escape](#), an arts tour organization founded by Paige Donnelly and Ben Carpenter-Nwanyanwu. Lee's idea is to nurture a community of creatives who can exchange ideas and collaborate. She's what the author [Malcolm Gladwell](#) describes as a classic connector, a 27-year-old artist and salon impresario who's enhancing E-merge's online artists' directory with monthly potlucks.

"The foundation of the relationships is really important," she said.

Lee's vision is more about community than commerce, but it addresses a fundamental problem. For the artists and makers to get the most economic benefit from Kakaako's condo boom, they somehow need to get exposure to tap into the billions of dollars being invested in the neighborhood.



Kun Xu, left, and Michelle Kaneko of Heavy Metal Inc. inspect a new door created for a Kaimuki coffee shop. Kaneko said it's been hard to connect and create custom goods for new condo buyers despite the firm's ability to create finely crafted metal works.

It's a difficult task, said Michelle Kaneko, an architect who serves as the business manager for the metal works shop Heavy Metal Inc. Bill Reardon, a former Pearl Harbor welder who owns the shop, does work few others in town can, says Son, the woodworker, who has collaborated with Reardon on some expensive dining tables. But Reardon said

the work from Kakaako has been scant. Kaneko said she's not sure how to let designers and real estate agents know about Heavy Metal.

"I don't know how to leverage that, to market that to everybody," she said.

Connections are made largely by interior designers, who know condo buyers through real estate agents. A case in point is Maura Fujihira, co-founder of [fishcake](#), an art gallery and furnishings shop, and an affiliated interior design company.

Fujihira and her longtime colleague Keiko Hatano, who is fishcake's art curator, have been supporting local artists for decades. When designing a 3,000-square foot condo in Howard Hughes' Waiea condominium project, for instance, Fujihira and Hatano included sculptures by George Woollard and [John Koga](#), a painting by [Mary Mitsuda](#) and a large photo by [Rex Maximilian](#).

Fujihira said such works can bring local life to spaces that otherwise could be anywhere.

"That's what makes it special," she said. "But you need the client who is willing and able."



Maura Fujihira, co-founder of fishcake, says spaces such as this Kakaako penthouse can be a canvas for showing the work of Hawaii artists and craft makers.

While many of Fujihira's clients give her the freedom to create unique spaces, Yamamuro is able to offer Hawaiian touches even in turnkey packages that include everything from furniture to linens and kitchenware. Among the handcrafted products are framed planks of polished monkeypod wood made by Son.

It's rare, of course, for the artists and makers to be able to live in the condos. The irony's not lost on Honolulu photographer Franco Salmoiraghi, who got a major commission from Howard Hughes that put 120 of the 77-year-old photographer's pictures in the common areas at Waiea. The job came at a critical time when Salmoiraghi had been evicted from his long-time home in Manoa.

"It was the biggest commission I've ever had," he says. "But it wasn't enough to retire on."

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