Two key works of Island architecture are C.W. Dickey's Halekulani Hotel and the Waikiki Theater, now threatened with demolition. Dickey, 1871-1942, was from a missionary family but left for the Mainland to be educated. Before returning to Hawaii in 1924, he worked in Oakland for 20 years.

This was a creative period for California architecture. A main need for architecture in general was to replace the palatial, formal residences of the previous generation with smaller, more informal homes appropriate to the emerging lifestyle and yet not lose gentility and aesthetic satisfaction. In England, sophisticated city architects began to study country cottages as a basis for design. In doing so, they came into contact with the still living traditions of building with local techniques and materials, practices which made houses closely fit their settings.

Another influence, especially in California, was the architecture encountered in hot climates. The simple Bengali house, for which the word "bungalow" was coined, was studied for its broad verandas and ventilating windows and screens which permitted inside-outside living. A high, wide-projecting roof helped cool the interior, kept simple and livable.

When Dickey returned to Hawaii, he naturally studied both the environment and previous local architecture. In 1937, Paradise of the Pacific praised his design for a private theater built in 1930:

"Pa Hauoli follows the lines in harmony with the Hawaiian environment... Wide lanais surround the main structure, furnishing a delightful rendezvous for a smoke or a chat..."
between acts... The curtain is in delightful harmony with the Hawaiian atmosphere. It has a decoration as of tapa, designed and executed by Juliet May Frazer... The side walls are a succession of French doors. These may be opened as desired. Thus, on warm nights, the edifice can be transformed into an open-air theater with a roof.

Equally important is the theater's resemblance to earlier local buildings, such as the Waialiki Mission, and to the New England clapboard style of the patroness's forebears. Dickey in fact took pains to link his work to the past. In his 1939 proposed design for the beach side of the Outrigger Canoe Club, he used a long flat roof and a covered terrace which recalled the previous building on the site.

His most famous example of using the past is the "Dickey roof." He modified the cooling, high peaked roof with sloping sides of the Polynesian long house by modulating its surface to reflect changes in the interior. For instance, the roof's angle of descent can lessen as it reaches the wall separating inside rooms from the lanai, so that the lowest section of the roof flares out, creating a wider space under the eaves and a slight Oriental effect. The roofs are shaped so smoothly that they seem to drape over and simplify complex structures into sculptural shapes.

In all Dickey's buildings can be found this sensitivity to local conditions, attachment to earlier architectural achievements, and intelligent, creative solutions to the problems posed by the project.

Previous Waikiki buildings had divided into two types: the palatial—such as the Moana Hotel and the Castle residence—and the small and informal—such as the beach house of Kamehameha V. Dickey chose the latter type for several reasons. In his article, "Honolulu a City of Homes," [See Paradise of the Pacific, page 23] he reveals his perception of Waikiki by describing a stay there in very domestic terms: a restful, home-like lawn rather than an adventurous boardwalk. He had in fact already designed at least one Waikiki residence which fitted his description. Moreover, the Kimball family, which commissioned Dickey, had a definite philosophy: "to enable the guests to enjoy the type of living Island people have in their own homes" and
maintain “the spirit of Hawaii.”

Significantly, the hotel developed from several family homes to which were added cottages and bungalows. Dickey’s main building, completed in 1931, replaced the oldest house on the property, built in 1833.

He was careful not to lose the home-like atmosphere. For instance, his building hides its size. By flattening the roof, he made its two stories seem little higher than the high peaked, single story bungalows he built beside it. The facade is the narrow side of the building, and the long side is never seen as a whole.

The interior had to be home-like as well, but needed also to accommodate large numbers in well ventilated comfort. Dickey’s solution was one he used in other buildings, such as his Cooke Building downtown. He designed the interior as a long opening through which the tradewinds could flow.

But he avoided a tunnel appearance by careful use of intervening half walls, columns, and varying floor levels, which create different “rooms,” each with its own function and atmosphere. These rooms are further defined by projections and indentations on the west wall and large, individualized openings on the east, which distract from the main, mauka-makai axis.

Yet there is a sense of progression as one moves down the full length of the building: one passes from the very small lobby and reading room to the larger lounge and into the even larger dining room and finally steps out onto the wide terrace which faces the sea. This is rather like walking from the narrow head of a valley toward the beach and looking out at the ocean. The building prepares us for and helps us appreciate our setting.

The rooms Dickey created are remarkable examples of the inside-outside living developed for island homes. He even took elements from such homes as visual clues. For instance, we understand the dining room as a lanai—even though it is larger than the lounge and there is a terrace further on—because a few steps lead down to it from the lounge, which represents “the inside of the house.”

Dickey filled the hotel with family rather than institutional furniture: wall moldings, book cases, cane and wicker chairs, lauhala mats, tapa decorations and fresh flowers.

But more important than any details in establishing the mood of the hotel is the special type of beauty he achieved: quiet, unstriking, undramatic. The Halekulani reveals itself only as it becomes one’s home.

Dickey’s 1936 design for the Waikiki Theater is an extreme contrast. His problem was to design a 1930’s movie palace which would be appropriate to Hawaii. He used the expected art deco with such flair and taste that the theater compares favorably with any of the type I know.

He then made the theater appropriate. First, he replaced the then customary large foyer with an open court, perfectly adequate and more pleasant in rain poor Waikiki. Customers would pay at the box office at the bottom of the east ramp. We would then walk up the ramp and eddy into the court, while the previous customers exited both down the west ramp and through the side doors into the parking lot. Once the theater was empty, we walked up through the lanai into the foyer just large enough for the refreshment stand (and two frescos by Marguerite Blasingame), and then down into the auditorium to our seats. This flow pattern—adapted later for the Varsity Theater—was very practical and also gave us, I remember, a sense of festive anticipation on entering and contented release on leaving.

The theater was landscaped with plants which had big leaves and bold shapes: two coconut trees at the front of the theater, pandanus and elephant ears. The auditorium was ringed with stage “scenery,” realistic copies of plants which have always fascinated me. The proscenium arch was a lighted rainbow framed by two coconut trees which echoed those at the entrance. When the lights went out, clouds would flow down the dark blue, starry ceiling. Dickey created an environment as charming and artificial as the image on the screen.

I would like to see the Waikiki Theater restored to its original condition. Perhaps the cleared entrance and court could be taken by the city as a mini-park and the box office could be placed at the door of the foyer.

If the theater is destroyed, we will lose an important side of an architect who helped teach us how to live in modern Hawaii.