

DESIGNED FROM HERE

The Connective Tissue of Culture and Why Hawai'i Leads

La'akea Ching

La'akea Ching is a Native Hawaiian creative producer and designer whose work spans global markets. Having witnessed firsthand how other cultures use intentional design to carry their identity to the world, he returned to Hawai'i with a clear conviction: the creative foundation is extraordinary, the global appetite is real, and the infrastructure to carry it outward on Hawai'i's own terms is exactly what needs to be built. This paper makes the case for why. Sacred Light 'Ohana is the work.

I. WHERE WORLDS COLLIDE

The most enduring creative movements in human history were not born from isolation. They emerged from collision, from the meeting of peoples, languages, and ways of seeing that produced something neither culture could have made alone. This is a theory of synthesis, and synthesis, when held together by a strong identity at its core, is the engine of the world's most recognizable and lasting creative cultures.

Intentional design and creative infrastructure are how that synthesis travels beyond its origin and returns as lasting influence. Through them, a culture builds the global relationships, pipelines, and exchanges that transform local creative excellence into something the rest of the world feels called to enter.

Most people encounter the products of this process without seeing the system behind it. They see a garment, a film, a building, a sound, and experience it as a singular creative act, when what they are actually encountering is the output of a culture that has done the long work of knowing itself deeply and building the infrastructure to express that knowledge outward.

Hawai'i is one of the most compelling living examples of that process. The history of synthesis is documented across every creative discipline, from fashion to music to architecture to oral tradition. The global appetite for what Hawai'i carries is real and growing. What remains to be fully activated is the infrastructure that carries what already exists to the world on Hawai'i's own terms. That infrastructure begins, as all meaningful design does, at the root.

II. THE ORIGINAL DESIGN SYSTEM: ORAL TRADITION AND MATERIAL CULTURE AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Every culture that has successfully transmitted its identity across generations did so through a system, not through accident or passive inheritance, but through deliberate architecture. The forms that system took varied widely, but the function was consistent: to encode what a people knew about themselves, their land, their relationships, and their obligations, and to carry that knowledge forward in a form that could be received, understood, and built upon.

Oral tradition was that system. It was a precision architecture, and in many cases it achieved a depth of encoding that written and digital forms have yet to replicate. The West African griot, a hereditary keeper of history, law, and cultural memory, carried the knowledge of entire peoples across generations, functioning not as entertainer but as civic infrastructure. The Polynesian wayfinder encoded an understanding of stars, currents, and wind patterns precise enough to navigate thousands of miles of open ocean without instruments, knowledge passed not through text but through oral tradition, song, and embodied practice. Different forms, different geographies, one function: encoding what a people knew about themselves into a system that could be carried, transmitted, and built upon.

In Hawai‘i, this system reached a particular sophistication. The ‘oli, or chant tradition, functioned simultaneously as cosmology, governance, environmental science, genealogy, and creative practice. The Kapu system, encoded and transmitted through ‘oli, established the natural laws by which Hawaiian society operated. Water, forest, mountain, and ocean were not resources to be managed but relationships to be honored, specified and maintained through language. The Kānawāi, the protocols and bylaws governing how people engaged with the health and function of the land, were carried in the same tradition. The ahupua‘a land management system organized entire island ecosystems from mountain to sea, with human interactions strictly governed through laws and social norms passed from generation to generation, an approach that modern environmental science increasingly recognizes as among the most effective methods for maintaining ecosystem health and sustaining biodiversity (NOAA National Marine Sanctuaries, n.d.; Mueller-Dombois, 2007). This was one integrated system, with religion, governance, and design inseparable from each other. The ‘oli tradition embodies what systems thinkers describe as emergence, where the behavior of the whole is richer and more complex than any of its individual parts could produce alone (Sellers, 2017). The chant carries more than the sum of its words.

The Kanaka‘ole Foundation’s active recovery and application of ‘oli as a living reference point for contemporary community life is among the most significant demonstrations of this principle in action today. Their work affirms that the most durable systems are those in which a community’s values are embedded at the level of daily practice and transmitted through forms that are accessible, repeatable, and alive.

When a creative culture has this kind of system intact, everything it produces is informed by it. The pattern on a piece of kapa cloth carries encoded meaning. The motif on an airplane carries the weight of a knowledge tradition. Design rooted in this depth communicates worldview, and worldview, expressed with skill and intention, is what travels. The first condition for a culture that shapes the world is depth of identity.

III. HOW DESIGN CARRIES CULTURE INTO THE WORLD: THE CONNECTIVE TISSUE ARGUMENT

Culture does not travel on its own. It travels through form. The ideas, values, and ways of seeing that define a people move through objects, images, sounds, buildings, and stories, and design is the process by which identity becomes form. The quality and intentionality of that design determines how far and how long that culture travels.

Consider what it meant when Hawaiian Airlines placed a kapa-rooted design language on the exterior of its aircraft. Every airport in the world where that plane landed became a site where Hawai'i's identity made a statement, traveling not as explanation but as presence. That is the mechanism this section describes.

When a culture has a strong and coherent sense of itself, that coherence produces specificity in its creative output. Specificity is what makes a design language recognizable, and recognizability, sustained across multiple disciplines, generates cultural currency. Cultural currency is what allows a creative culture to move beyond its geographic origin and take up residence in the imagination of people who have never been to the place it came from. This is the operational logic behind every creative culture that has shaped global aesthetics.

When design neglects its roots and optimizes for trend or market demand alone, it may circulate widely but it does not accumulate. It does not build the kind of recognition that compounds into lasting influence. It is consumed and replaced. The cultures whose creative output endures are those where design is inseparable from the identity that produced it, where you cannot encounter the work without encountering the worldview behind it.

Media completes this system by making identity mobile and ensuring it does not remain too niche to travel. Without media, even the most extraordinary design language reaches only those who can physically access it. With it, that language extends across distance and time, carrying cultural meaning into new contexts while preserving what makes it irreplaceable at the source. Together they form the infrastructure of cultural influence, and the cultures that build and control both shape how the world understands them.

Abel Paul George argues that design operating only at the surface level produces symbolic change without lasting impact (George, 2025). He points to the 1972 Federal Design Improvement Program as the model that worked because it treated design as civic infrastructure, embedding it across architecture, communications, and public narrative rather than limiting it to aesthetic dressing. The kind of design that shapes how a culture is understood in the world is structural, building the conditions through which identity becomes legible, institutions become trustworthy, and a people's story reaches those who have never been to the place it came from. Sellers describes this as the relationship between mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics, where surface experience is only as rich as the systems beneath it (Sellers, 2017), and it is precisely this systems-level thinking that the infrastructure of cultural influence requires.

Every creative movement that has shaped the world did so because it developed a language, not a literal language alone, but a complete system of signs, forms, sounds, and stories through which its identity became readable to the world. Once a culture has a language that travels, everything it produces becomes part of a conversation that extends far beyond its origin. The question for Hawai'i is not whether that language exists. It does. The question is whether the infrastructure being built now is designed to carry it.

IV. JAPAN AS BLUEPRINT: A FRAMEWORK ALREADY IN MOTION

No culture in the modern era has more deliberately built the infrastructure to carry its identity into the world than Japan. What Japan accomplished over the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first is the construction of a complete creative ecosystem in which every layer, from the most elevated expressions of traditional craft

to the most accessible forms of popular culture, participates in a coherent and recognizable whole. The world does not just consume Japanese creative output. It seeks it out, travels toward it, and returns to it across generations.

Anime is the most visible vehicle of this. What began as a domestic entertainment form became one of the most influential cultural exports in modern history, not because it was aggressively marketed to foreign audiences, but because it was deeply and specifically itself. It trusted that specificity would travel, and it did. Scholars at Stanford's Asia-Pacific Research Center have noted that content is Japan's most successful export industry, contributing not only to entertainment but to soft power diplomacy and long-term economic strategy (Stanford FSI, 2025). Generations of people across every continent grew up with Japanese visual language, narrative structure, and values embedded in their creative imagination, and academic analysis describes anime as a source of soft power that has fundamentally changed the global image of Japan, transforming it from an exotic other into a culture that is both distinctly itself and universally resonant (Napier, 2007). Architecture extended that reach into physical space, with architects like Tadao Ando and Kengo Kuma understood not simply for technical skill but as translators of a cultural philosophy into built form. The building is the argument.

NIGO represents the human-scale illustration of this system. Everything he has built is a portal into Japanese cultural identity expressed through the language of contemporary global culture. His brand Human Made draws from vintage Americana filtered through a Japanese sensibility, producing something that could only have come from that specific cultural intersection. His appointment as creative director of Kenzo, his recent IPO, his presence across fashion, convenience culture, and luxury alike are not separate endeavors but expressions of one world, where every touchpoint is a door into it. His collaborations across cultures further demonstrate this: Japanese and American creative identities meeting at the highest levels of global culture, each representing their origins while producing something entirely new together. That convergence is the system working as designed.

At the institutional scale, Muneaki Masuda, founder of Tsutaya and Culture Convenience Club, built one of Japan's most significant cultural institutions on the

same principle. His Intellectual Capital Theory argues that design and creativity are the primary engines of value in contemporary culture, and that the mission of any institution is to build cultural infrastructure rather than simply sell products (Masuda, 2014; CCC, 2025). Tsutaya's transformation from retailer to cultural destination is the proof, with spaces designed to propose lifestyles rather than move inventory, turning commerce into culture and culture into demand. What Japan built at every scale simultaneously, from the individual creator to the national institution, is exactly the infrastructure Hawai'i now has the conditions to build.

What Japan demonstrates is that cultural influence at this scale is not accidental. It is the result of a culture that maintained a strong enough sense of its own identity to express it consistently across every medium available, building the systems to carry that expression outward without losing what made it irreplaceable at the source. That is the blueprint, and Hawai'i's opportunity is to build its version of this framework now, with community ownership, creative sovereignty, and cultural integrity embedded in the infrastructure rather than considered after the fact.

V. HAWAI'I AND JAPAN: A NATURAL BRIDGE

Hawai'i and Japan share more than geography. Their relationship is one of the most consequential cultural exchanges in Pacific history, one that predates mass immigration and reaches back to diplomatic ties between two sovereign Pacific nations. When Japanese immigrants arrived in Hawai'i in significant numbers beginning in 1885, they entered a culture already formed, already sophisticated, already deeply rooted in its own identity. By 1923, Japanese immigrants and their descendants had become the largest ethnic group in Hawai'i, a transformation that permanently reshaped the islands' cultural landscape (Library of Congress, n.d.). Japanese aesthetic sensibilities, food culture, craft traditions, and community values entered into conversation with Hawaiian, Chinese, Portuguese, Filipino, and Western influences, and that conversation produced something that could not have emerged anywhere else. Hawai'i became a melting pot as a lived reality, held together by a strong indigenous core that gave the synthesis its character and its ground.

That foundation matters because before the ships arrived, Hawai‘i was already a world-building civilization. Native Hawaiians developed sophisticated systems of aquaculture, navigation, agriculture, governance, and design that ranked among the most advanced of their time. The voyaging traditions of Polynesian navigation mapped the Pacific through a knowledge architecture so refined that its recovery in the twentieth century stunned the global scientific community. The oral tradition encoded law, cosmology, genealogy, and environmental stewardship into chant with a layered complexity no single medium has since matched. This was a culture that had already built one world, and was ready to engage with many more.

The conditions Japan spent decades constructing, Hawai‘i has carried organically for generations, making the question not whether Hawai‘i has what it takes but whether the infrastructure now exists to carry what has been built outward with the same intention.

VI. WHAT HAWAI‘I HAS ALREADY MADE

Hawai‘i has always produced. Long before the world had language for what it was witnessing, this place was generating forms of creative and cultural expression of extraordinary depth and sophistication. What interrupted that was not a natural pause. The illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, the systematic suppression of the Hawaiian language, and the deliberate dismantling of cultural practice created ruptures that generations have spent lifetimes repairing. Despite every attempt to erase it, the foundation held. What exists today is not recovery. It is continuation, and a generation is only now beginning to understand the full depth of what they are building from.

People see scattered pieces. A shirt. A song. A chant. A building. A wave. They encounter these as separate expressions of a place understood globally more as destination than as creative culture, when what they are actually encountering is the output of a civilization that was extraordinary before the world arrived and has only deepened since. The pieces are not scattered. They are expressions of the same thing, rooted in the same soil, carrying the same depth of identity beneath their surface.

Through their family-led studio, Sig Zane and his son Kuha‘o brought that design language into one of the most visible expressions available to a contemporary design culture. Their kapa-rooted patterns appeared on the livery of ‘Ohana by Hawaiian’s aircraft and on the uniforms worn by over 5,000 Hawaiian Airlines employees across every workgroup, making every airport, every gate, and every flight crew a site where Hawai‘i’s design language made a statement about who Hawai‘i is and what it values. That is cultural infrastructure operating through commercial form.

The reach of Hawai‘i’s creative influence through sound tells the same story at a global scale. Slack key guitar, known as kī hō‘alu, emerged when Hawaiian musicians took a foreign instrument and reimagined it entirely, developing open tunings and a playing approach that expressed a distinctly Hawaiian relationship to melody, rhythm, and the natural world. The result could only have come from here. That same creative alchemy shaped influence that extended far beyond the islands, with the Roland TR-808, released in 1980 and whose name became synonymous with Hawai‘i’s telephone area code, becoming the rhythmic foundation of hip hop, electronic music, pop, and R&B across four decades of global popular culture, described by scholars as one of the most influential inventions in music history (Sweetwater, n.d.; UCLA Ethnomusicology Review, n.d.). Its influence is now so embedded in the baseline of global sound that its origin is invisible. That is what great creative cultures do. They do not just export. They radiate.

The reach of Hawaiian storytelling through screen media makes the same argument at a different scale. Moana, released globally through Disney, carried Hawaiian cultural values, navigation mythology, and indigenous identity to audiences in every country on earth. Chief of War, produced for Apple TV, brought the story of Hawai‘i’s kingdom era to a global streaming audience with a level of cultural authenticity and production scale that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. These are cultural infrastructure operating through the world’s most powerful media platforms, proof that Hawaiian stories, told on Hawaiian terms, travel.

The emergence of a formalized Hawai‘i design theory represents perhaps the most significant recent development in this story. The methodology of Makawalu, viewing and designing on multiple simultaneous levels, draws directly from the Hawaiian

epistemological tradition in which a single word, image, or form carries layered meanings that accumulate rather than cancel each other out. Teaching this methodology within architectural education positions Hawai‘i not as a recipient of design thinking developed elsewhere but as an originator of a design philosophy with something genuinely new to contribute to global practice. The Kanaka‘ole Foundation’s continued recovery and application of ‘oli as living civic and creative infrastructure is the root system from which all of this grows, with Hawai‘i’s creative culture operating not on memory but on a living system that continues to generate meaning, direction, and form.

Taken together, these are the outputs of a single creative culture expressing itself across every medium available to it, rooted in one of the deepest identity systems in the Pacific, and shaped by centuries of synthesis into something simultaneously specific to this place and resonant far beyond it. Hawai‘i has done extraordinary work building this creative depth from within, and what it now requires is the infrastructure to carry that depth to the world stage.

VII. THE BRIDGE THAT NEEDS BUILDING: FROM LOCAL EXCELLENCE TO GLOBAL PRESENCE

The distance between a great creative culture and a globally recognized one is not talent, identity, or synthesis. Hawai‘i has all three, and the only thing standing between where Hawai‘i is and where it leads is infrastructure, the kind that carries creative culture outward with full context intact, that invites the world in rather than allowing the story to be extracted and retold by others, and that keeps creative talent connected to its source rather than requiring departure as the price of access to global opportunity.

Peter Apo, writing on the state of Hawai‘i’s tourism economy, named a version of this problem clearly: the existing model keeps visitors separated from the real Hawai‘i by a wall of commerce, built almost entirely on a marketing framework driven by global corporate brands (Apo, 2021). Design and media are its correction. When a culture controls the stories told about it, the images that represent it, and the experiences through which the world enters it, the wall of commerce becomes a bridge of culture.

Japan did not simply produce great design and trust the world would find it. It built systems to carry that design with intention, created destinations that made people want to experience the source, and developed creative figures and institutions whose work operated as entry points into the broader ecosystem. The store became the destination. The destination became the experience. The experience became the demand for more. That loop, once established, became self-sustaining. Every creator, every story, every offering is a door into a larger world, and that world grows stronger every time someone enters it.

Hawai'i requires the same loop, built on its own terms and with a critical distinction: the pipeline must flow in both directions. Global resources, audiences, and creative exchange flow inward, enriching what is built here and deepening the conditions for world-class creative work. What is built here flows outward, carrying Hawai'i's design language, stories, and cultural perspective into global conversation, with each direction feeding the other. The outside world coming in strengthens what is built here. What leaves carries more weight and more reach. That cycle, once established, becomes the engine of a self-sustaining creative economy.

The language gets built. The world gets taught. The relationships that form around that shared understanding become the pipelines, and the pipelines, maintained and scaled over time, become the infrastructure that makes a culture's creative economy self-sustaining. Every case in this paper followed that same sequence, and the work now is to follow it deliberately.

The infrastructure Hawai'i needs begins with platforms and pipelines that carry its creative culture to global audiences without stripping it of context, that keep the next generation connected to home while opening doors to world-class opportunity, and that treat storytelling not as tourism but as the cultural offering it has always been.

A feature documentary tracing Hawai'i's creative legacy from its original world-building civilization through its quiet reshaping of global sound, fashion, and screen culture, and into the renaissance being led now, represents exactly this kind of infrastructure in action. It is a collective offering, conceived, crafted, and carried to the world's most prestigious festival circuits by Hawai'i's own storytellers. The story

belongs to this place and so do the people telling it. That is not incidental. It is the argument made real.

Organizations like Sacred Light ‘Ohana are doing exactly that, building the pipelines, producing the media, and creating the exchanges that carry Hawai‘i’s creative perspective outward while drawing the world’s attention and resources back toward the source. This is the model. This is the work.

VIII. THE RETURN: HONORING WHAT WAS, BUILDING WHAT MUST BE

What Hawai‘i is experiencing now is a generation moving in the same direction, each effort compounding the efforts of everyone around it. Ibn Khaldun called this *asabiyyah*, the social cohesion that drives the rise of civilizations. It is not the achievement of any individual. It emerges when shared purpose becomes collective force, and that is precisely what is happening here. Educators are formalizing design methodologies rooted in Hawaiian ways of knowing. Cultural practitioners are recovering and applying knowledge systems as living infrastructure. Designers are encoding identity into form at scales from fabric to aircraft. Storytellers are building the narratives that will carry Hawai‘i’s creative legacy to the world’s most significant stages. These are expressions of a shared purpose, a generation that knows what Hawai‘i has always been and is determined to ensure the world knows it too.

The infrastructure being built now is what makes that cohesion lasting. Intentional design and creative infrastructure are the tools, and the global relationships, pipelines, and exchanges those tools make possible are the system. That system, once established, transforms a moment of renaissance into a permanent shift in how Hawai‘i is understood, resourced, and led on the world stage.

Hawai‘i has always known how to build worlds. The *ahupua‘a* was a world. The voyaging canoe was a world. The *halāu* was a world. Each one a complete system, internally coherent, externally legible, and designed to sustain what mattered most across generations. That capacity for world-building did not disappear. It adapted, persisting through every wave of contact and change, finding new forms without losing its essential character. What the current moment demands is that same capacity applied to the infrastructure of global creative culture.

Modern design and media are the contemporary form of the same infrastructure that kapa and navigational chant provided for centuries. The question has never been whether Hawai‘i has something worth saying to the world. The question is who holds the means of saying it, and whether the systems being built today reflect the depth of what Hawai‘i has always known.

Peter Apo, reflecting on over a century of cultural and political change since the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, writes with the conviction that whatever model Hawai‘i builds for its future must make Hawai‘i a better place for everyone (Apo, 2015). A creative economy rooted in Hawai‘i’s identity and led by its people serves everyone who encounters it, everyone the work reaches, and everyone who comes here to find something they cannot find anywhere else. Quality design and media, built from this foundation, is the key to unlocking that potential at scale.

The knowledge systems are being recovered. The design methodology is being formalized. The visual language is traveling. The stories are being told, and what remains is to build the systems that ensure all of it reaches the world with full context intact, credited to its source, and shaped by the values that made it worth carrying in the first place.

Hawai‘i is not emerging. It is returning, grounded in the depth of what was built before and enriched by everything that synthesis has added since, not catching up to a global standard but setting one.

Honoring what was. Building what must be.

REFERENCES

- [1] Apo, P. (2021). How to manage Hawai‘i tourism for the future. Honolulu Civil Beat.
- [2] Apo, P. (2015). The Hawaiians: a divided people. Honolulu Civil Beat.
- [3] Apo, P. (2024). Trouble in paradise: for the record — Hawai‘i & Hawaiians.
- [4] Culture Convenience Club. (2025). A company that creates culture infrastructure. ccc.co.jp.
- [5] George, A. P. (2025). Why the U.S. Chief Design Officer role will fail. abelpaulgeorge.com.
- [6] Hawaiian Airlines. (n.d.). Brand livery design. Public record.
- [7] Kanaka‘ole Foundation. (n.d.). Active cultural programs and ‘oli recovery work.

- [8] Library of Congress. (n.d.). Hawai‘i: life in a plantation society. loc.gov.
- [9] Masuda, M. (2014). Chitekishihonron (Intellectual Capital Theory). Kadokawa.
- [10] Mueller-Dombois, D. (2007). The Hawaiian ahupua‘a land use system: its biological resources and the way it was used. Bishop Museum Bulletin in Cultural and Environmental Studies, 3.
- [11] Napier, S. J. (2007). From impressionism to anime: Japan as fantasy and fan cult in the mind of the West. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [12] NIGO. (n.d.). Human Made and Kenzo creative direction, 2020 to present.
- [13] NOAA National Marine Sanctuaries. (n.d.). Ahupua‘a. sanctuaries.noaa.gov.
- [14] Sellers, M. (2017). Advanced game design: a systems approach. Addison-Wesley.
- [15] Sig Zane Designs. (n.d.). Body of work and public record.
- [16] Stanford Freeman Spogli Institute. (2025). The global influence of Japanese content. fsi.stanford.edu.
- [17] Sweetwater. (n.d.). History of the Roland TR-808. sweetwater.com.
- [18] UCLA Ethnomusicology Review. (n.d.). The Roland TR-808 and the tale of the marching anteaters. ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu.