

James **Cutler** crafts an ocean cottage,
OHANA GUEST HOUSE, for a windy
and lush site at the end of the road
on Hawaii's Big Island



The Ohana Guest House occupies one of three lots in a 75-acre compound. Set near a former sugar mill in the community of Niulii on

the Big Island of Hawaii's windswept north shore, the coastline property lies within a protected conservation zone.





By Robert Ivy, FAIA

A house near the end of the road holds infinite promise. And here, the architectural stakes rise when the route turns past the northern, windward tip of the island of Hawaii, arriving finally at the blustery, sloping site of a former sugar mill. How to respond to such a heroic natural setting?

The Ohana Guest House at Niulii offers a contemporary illustration of the Wrightian notion of organic architecture, in which “the whole is to the part as the part is to the whole.” Take the defining instance of a detail in this windswept house, in which flitched metal supports slice into ovoid wood columns, then cross brace between uprights. Structural integrity—literally holding things down, not mere ornament—underlies the design of this singular joint and, for that matter, the entire house. “Lacing the roof to the massive earth elements with metal,” as Ohana’s architect James Cutler, FAIA, puts it, was essential to creating a viable structure on this particular site.

The wind, unseen but ever present on the Big Island of Hawaii’s lush north coast, helped inform the building’s shedlike shape. Designed to withstand 80-mile-per-hour sustained gales, the pitched roofs reflect the angle and direction of the prevailing trade winds, which blow in both rain and shine—now clearing, now gusting again.

Set on the clean brow of a 75-acre estate composed of three distinct parcels of land, the guesthouse (*ohana* means “extended family”) crowns the hillside site, which drops to spectacular oceanfront conservation property graced with historic, spiky Hala trees, used by native

Hawaiians for weaving baskets and textiles.

After the parcel had provided decades of service as a casual town dump, the current owners, who have taken a position as stewards of the land, set about planning a home on the full acreage, and embarked on six years of manual cleaning (large equipment is banned by local ordinance) to clear the land of buried detritus. With the site finally cleaned up, three buildings, including a private residence for the owners, a retired executive and his wife, will form the ensemble, which is still in the planning stages by the client and Cutler, with only the guesthouse built so far. While solitary in its siting and primary views out to the sea (about a mile away), the guesthouse rests on a lot, which stretches toward the ocean, where it abuts a community of modest homes.

Defying the Wrightian dictum that a house should be “of” but not “on” a hill, the owner asked the architect literally to raise this house on a plinth at least 2 feet high: The additional elevation provided her with a sense of comfort, particularly for the sleeping spaces. Hawaiian precedent lay in the *heiau*, a massive raised stone platform, typically used for religious purposes. Here, Cutler used a type of lava stone called *a’a*, acquired from the nearby mega-property of Parker Ranch, to form a base rising from

Project: *Ohana Guest House, Hawaii, Hawaii*

Architect: *Cutler Anderson Architects—James Cutler, FAIA, principal;*

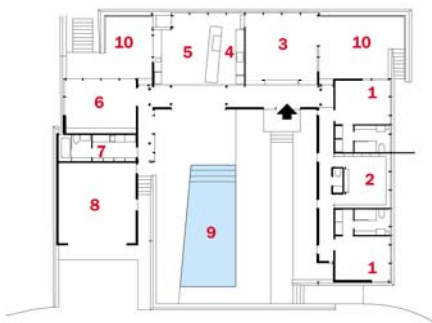
Janet Longenecker, Hiroki Kurzumi

Engineer: *Jerome Madden III (structural)*

General contractor: *Calyton Turnbull*



Modest homes lie over the hill's brow, where the cedar-and-glass Ohana House rises from a lava-stone base (opposite). With pitched roofs angled for wind protection (this spread), the U-configuration (this page, and plan) shelters the pool.



FLOOR PLAN



- 1. Bedroom
- 2. Library
- 3. Living
- 4. Kitchen
- 5. Dining
- 6. Media
- 7. Laundry
- 8. Garage
- 9. Pool
- 10. Terrace





Steel supports (left) tie the structure down to the lava-rock base. Custom details include rolling doors (below left) that open the walls to wide Pacific views, as in the kitchen/dining area (above).



3 to 5 feet on the sloping site, lifting the living quarters from the ground plane and securing this shelter to the earth.

Not just the gusts, but all the elements helped dictate the form of plan. The U-shaped design encircles a linear pool, which faces the southerly sunlight, shielded from the windswept outer elevations. With the house thus anchored and protected, transparency from myriad expansive windows characterizes the rest of its construction, with clerestory windows admitting light and air to interior corridors. Gentle breezes circulate freely from exterior to interior passageways, bringing in outdoor scents and sounds. The permeable residence avoids auxiliary mechanical systems, relying completely on ambient heating and cooling. (Only a small library has a heating system for chilly days.) Light and views open in a 180-degree expanse from the mythic Pololu Cliffs, a few miles away, through operable glass jalousies, screens, and doorways out to the sea.

While the owners will ultimately trade their guesthouse quarters for a permanent home, Ohana House will serve them as a primary residence for several years; it therefore reflects their personal interests, with ample space and provision for cooking and reading. Neither the husband nor wife wanted the ubiquitous “great room,” so the architect separated living and kitchen areas into discrete, yet flowing spaces. Between the house’s democratically equal bedrooms, a small library provides a quiet place for reading.

On the interior, simple detailing pared down to workable neces-



Metal cross bracing, as in the kitchen (above) and corridors (left), helps stabilize the roof structure for high winds and seismic events. Eucalyptus paneling and cabinetry, along with stone floors, add warmth to 16-to-18-foot-high passageways (left).



sity reinforces the sensuous materials. As in other Cutler-designed projects, wood features large in the palette: Tamarind floors, a species introduced into the islands in the late 18th century that has the richness of cherry, and 300 panels of lighter Eucalyptus wood, both typical of the tropical environment, invite visitors to remove their shoes or run their hands along the smooth surfaces. To insure careful assembly, each board was numbered and installed sequentially. In addition to structural bracing, custom steel hardware, some with exposed though refined rolling-wheel mechanisms, as in the sliding doors and panels, renders the house like a working machine that can be boxed up and stored when not in use.

As is typical of Cutler, he got to know the site by shooting the grades himself, much the way an artist “sees” through the act of drawing. Then came the architectural drawings. The clarity and apparent simplicity of the 2,600-square-foot house evolved from his high degree of personal engagement: The finished work required at least 30 site visits by Cutler during construction (trips necessitated not only by this house, but by another in the works nearby) and more than 220 individualized detail drawings. Rather than overwrought, the resulting Ohana Guest House seems honed, pared down to essentials, organic in a Wrightian sense, and windswept, married to the place where it resides and the people it protects. ■

For Sources, go to page 148, and Projects at archrecord.construction.com.