

AHL OpEd – Final

State Capitol Water Pools Renovation Honors Original Concept

By Dan Sullivan

Hawai'i's State Capitol has long stood as a symbol of our cultural identity and Hawai'i's natural beauty, with its open-air design and water features reflecting the interconnectedness of our islands and the ocean. This building was first designed in 1964 by AHL and John Carl Warnecke and Associates. Today, as the Capitol undergoes a significant renovation, AHL is now leading a transformation that addresses maintenance and deterioration issues while breathing new life into this iconic building. This project marries sustainability, innovation and cultural respect to ensure that the Capitol remains a centerpiece of Hawai'i's heritage and a gathering space for generations to come.

Spearheaded by the Department of Accounting and General Services (DAGS), this ambitious renovation underscores the state's commitment to preserving and revitalizing its architectural treasures. The project also benefits from the partnership of the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts (SFCA), which is facilitating the integration of art into the Capitol's redesign, ensuring a seamless blend of creativity and function.

The centerpiece of the renovation is the redesign of the Capitol's reflecting pools, which, for 55 years, have served as a visual reminder of Hawai'i's maritime roots. However, these pools, each holding 90,000 gallons of water, have also been a source of chronic maintenance challenges, leaking into hallways, bathrooms and offices below. Instead of restoring the water-filled pools, AHL is introducing an innovative design: expansive glass tiles that simulate the look of water while conserving our islands' precious resources.

This shift represents a monumental step toward sustainability. By eliminating the need for water, the new glass pool design will conserve more than 5 million gallons annually—an essential consideration in an island environment where every drop counts. Hawai'i's future depends on resource stewardship, and this project sets a benchmark for thoughtful design in public spaces.

The new design is also a celebration of art and community. Featuring one of the largest public art installations globally, created by Native Hawaiian artist Solomon Enos, the glass tiles will incorporate contributions from O'ahu and neighbor island residents, who were invited to make their marks on canvas over recent months. This community-driven approach ensures the project reflects the collective spirit and cultural pride of Hawai'i.

Lighting throughout the space will be thoughtfully restored to its original design, while introducing new features to illuminate the glass surface and perimeter walkways, enhancing safety and accessibility. To add a modern touch, an interactive lighting system will simulate movement and offer programmable options for special events and activities. Once completed, the pools will host monthly light displays, transforming the Capitol into a dynamic, family-friendly destination. These displays will celebrate Hawai'i's profound connection to the ocean, with patterns, colors, and elements reminiscent of water, reflecting a deep respect for local heritage.

While sustainability and aesthetics are at the forefront, the project also pays homage to the historical significance of the Capitol. Designed in the 1960s, the building embodies Hawai'i's transition to statehood and serves as a testament to the fusion of modernist architecture with symbols of Hawai'i's natural elements. The new design thoughtfully incorporates patterns and materials that honor this legacy, ensuring the revitalized space remains true to its roots. Through close collaboration with the State Historic Preservation Division, a careful balance has been struck between modern innovation and the preservation of historical integrity.

The updated Capitol also will serve as a hub for public engagement and civic pride. By creating new glass plazas and concrete terraces, the design enhances accessibility and encourages community gatherings. This transformation reinforces the Capitol's role as a central space where kama'āina and visitors alike can connect, reflect, and celebrate Hawai'i's history and culture.

Critically, the renovation prioritizes environmental sustainability at every turn. The reflective properties of the glass tiles reduce the need for additional lighting, lowering energy consumption. High-durability materials minimize environmental impact by reducing the need for frequent maintenance and replacement. By integrating these materials thoughtfully, the project reduces reliance on new resources, further supporting environmental stewardship.

The design is also reversible and intentionally not permanently connected to the existing structure. If future technologies or priorities make water-filled pools feasible again, the space can be restored to its original structure. This flexibility underscores a commitment to preserving the Capitol's legacy while embracing innovation.

This project means more than a simple renovation because of what Hawai'i's State Capitol represents to the community. By addressing practical challenges such as leaking pools while introducing sustainable, community-focused elements, this renovation ensures that the Capitol remains a beacon of our values. It is a testament to the idea that preserving history and embracing progress are not mutually exclusive but can coexist to create something extraordinary.

As we look ahead to the Capitol's completed transformation, it is clear that this iconic landmark will offer new opportunities for Hawai'i's people to appreciate and engage with its history and significance. It will stand not just as a seat of government but as a symbol of Hawai'i's resilience, creativity, and collective aloha. Through careful stewardship and visionary design, the renovated Capitol will inspire pride and connection for decades to come.