

Artist's Waialae home shines with teamwork

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It probably doesn't happen very often where two award-winning functional artists collaborate with a famed master artist to design a distinctive residence. But that is what took place when architects Pete Wimberly and Greg Tong (the functional artists) put their skills together with Hawaii-based artist Jean Charlot to design and build the latter a house near Waialae Country Club in 1957.

To begin, it would be helpful to give background on the cast of characters. The Department of the Interior nomination to place the house on the National Register of Historic Places says Charlot (who was born in France in 1898 and died in Hawaii in 1979) did most of his artistic work in this house during the final period of his life when he reached the peak of his artistic powers. It was here where Charlot "was able to synthesize the esthetics of Europe, Mexico and the Pacific Islands, the places he lived and that influenced his art." Many would agree that the places where he lived and worked — in France, Mexico and the islands — greatly influenced the design of the house.

Wimberly, now deceased, founded one of the most successful global architectural firms that became Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo with offices in Honolulu, London and Shanghai. The firm made its mark around the world for designing destination resorts. In Hawaii, its best known work is Hilton Hawaiian Village.

While Charlot traveled and lived in many places, in 1949 he was commissioned by the University of Hawaii to create a large fresco for Bachman Hall. With that work he and his wife became infatuated with Hawaii and it was here they would spend the rest of their lives.

Several years after his arrival in Hawaii, Charlot decided to build his dream house that would incorporate childhood memories of France (its two-story height), his experiences in Mexico (the brick floors, white entry hall and back courtyard) and living in Hawaii (the open plan, hapu wall and petroglyph tiles).

Tong explains that Wimberly and Charlot would come up with ideas, and as a junior architect he was assigned as project manager to make the ideas a reality.

Tong says Charlot was a very humble man for such a great artist. "He made some very good suggestions such as that the windows in his studio had to face north because that was the best quality light." Because Charlot was primarily a muralist, Tong says when he designed the artist's studio on the second floor it had no square corners, and instead, the walls of the 9-foot-by-10-foot room were curved so he could do continuous work on a 25-foot mural.

"But one of the crazy things he insisted on was an inside-outside dining table. He was the client so we did it," Tong says.

The Charlot residence has been described as a split-level ranch-style house, single story on the south and double on the north with a low-pitched, gable roof continually sloping down from the two-story side.

This creates an asymmetric front facade. The National Register nomination says, "A unique feature of the house was the prominent display of Charlot's and other artists' work." Some were permanently attached to the house while others were portable and changed regularly. At one time the house contained examples of nearly all the media Charlot created in: paintings, sketches, wood carvings, ceramic and metal sculpture and, of course, frescoes.

Today, the Charlot House is owned by UH. It was given to UH by the Charlot Foundation to be preserved in perpetuity. Some of his art can be seen in the small Jean Charlot Collection in Hamilton Library on the Manoa campus.

In 2002, the Historic Hawaii Foundation obtained a preservation easement on the house and property. That easement provides the foundation with an annual site visit to check that UH is maintaining the house per the original gift.

Tong says that when Charlot announced he was leaving for three months at the height of the house's construction in 1958, he left saying he had complete confidence in the firm to make whatever decisions had to be made in his absence.

"That was scary," says Tong, who was in charge. "But when Charlot came back and saw what we had done, his comment was 'Bravo.' In fact, he was so appreciative he gave me a piece of art from his Drummer series. I treasure it to this day."

Keep Hawaii Hawaii is a monthly column on island architecture and urban planning. Robert M. Fox, president of Fox Hawaii Inc., studied architecture in California and Japan. He was one of the founders of the Historic Hawaii Foundation in 1974. David Cheever, owner of David Cheever Marketing, has served on the boards of the Historic Hawaii Foundation and the Hawaii Architectural Foundation. Send comments to keephawaiihawaii@staradvertiser.com.