When the sun is high in the central Pacific, visitors often wander near downtown Honolulu along the mountain side of ʻIolani Palace, past the iron fence, past the statue of the queen, and into the open-air rotunda of the capitol of the State of Hawaiʻi. These landmarks say that Hawaiʻi once was a kingdom, and now it is a state of the United States. If the visitor were to return for a long night of storytelling, he or she might acquire a more intense feeling for their significance, because in Hawaiʻi there is a story for every niche, stream, stone, and passage. Through storytelling, a sense of the past lives, even as details are lost.

There are many stories about the spirit of the last queen and about the dance of candlelight beneath the closed door of her upstairs room in the Palace, where she was imprisoned by her usurpers. A more recent story of the Palace is about its degenerate condition in the last days of the American territorial government, when rattling air conditioners hung from the arched windows and plywood partitions jutted from the Victorian porches. Members of the Territorial House huddled at tiny desks in the royal throne room, and senators met in the royal dining room. The appointed governor labored in the personal office of the monarch, and the territorial secretary held forth in the royal bedroom. With the approaching transformation to statehood, the people of Hawaiʻi agreed on at least one thing: The need to build a new capitol.

WHEN THE ARCHITECT John Carl Warnecke uttered the word symbol, the “s” whistled like a sharp wind through his imagined structures. Of all the designers who clamored for the commission, Warnecke likely won because of his passion for designing buildings that symbolized a time and place. In American society he was soon to become known as John F. Kennedy's
favorite architect and then as the designer of the fallen president's grave site, but when he was awarded the commission to design Hawai'i's new capitol he was not yet burdened by celebrity. He opened an office in Honolulu and immersed himself in what for him was a wonderful, new place. After studying the pre-Western society of Hawai'i, he attempted to organize his design entirely around the rectangular stone platforms of the native Hawaiian temple. Failing to perfect that idea, he pursued a temple of another sort, a synthesis of the Hawaiian world with East and West.

When the Democrat John A. Burns was elected governor of the State of Hawai'i in 1962, Warnecke wondered if Burns would support the continuation of the capitol project. It was elaborate for a small state, and it had been started under a Republican administration. Burns was known for peering sternly at even the smallest budget items, but he had an expansive side. On the playing field, he had been the little boy who demanded the ball, and in his maturity he was driven by the idea that everything in Hawai'i be first class. Warnecke told Burns that the new state needed a symbol the way Notre Dame needed a great football team, and with that he returned to his work.

During the period that John F. Kennedy was calling his administration the New Frontier, the Burns regime in Honolulu was the New Hawai'i. In ways that transcended slogans, the story of Hawai'i seemed not merely to blend in with the evolution of American society but also to influence its development. When Kennedy visited, America was passing into its conflict over civil rights. Inspired by the multiracial community that he saw at work, Kennedy said, “Hawai'i is what the United States is striving to be.” In 1961, Dr. Lawrence Fuchs published his widely read social and political history, titled Hawai'i Pono, which means Hawai'i the good or Hawai'i the righteous. The people of Hawai'i, he believed, “present the world's best example of dynamic social democracy.” It was a utopian moment, in which policymakers talked seriously of curing the problems not only of race but of ignorance, poverty, disease, and oppression. If there was a party with a live band, someone was almost certain to belt out “Impossible Dream,” from *Man of La Mancha*.

Not only Burns but many others spoke unselfconsciously of the dream of Hawai'i. James Michener, who was peripherally involved with Burns in creating the modern Hawaiian Democratic Party, described a Golden People in his novel *Hawaii*. The U.S. State Department was pleased by the propaganda value of Hawai'i, because more than half of its people originated from Asia, where much of the Cold War was occurring. At its best, America was determined to compete internationally by improving on itself, and a multiracial state in the Pacific manifested America's claim to being a special nation. Hawai'i was not merely a state but an idea.
Governor John A. Burns often inspected construction of Hawai'i's new capitol.

At the capitol's dedication, the orchestra played "The Age of Aquarius."

Courtesy of The Honolulu Advertiser
As part of the euphoria, there was a widespread perception that the issues of Hawai‘i’s history had been resolved. The power of Hawai‘i’s business oligarchy had been tempered by the organization of labor. The strong showing of the Democratic Party suggested a viable two-party system far into the future. As a sovereign state, Hawai‘i would elect its own governor, as well as two senators and as many representatives as its small but enthusiastic population warranted.

THE CAPITOL DESIGN that grew from this environment was pagoda-like in the roofline, neoclassical in the supporting columns, and Hawaiian in the interior. To the left and right, huge volcano-like forms rose from a reflecting pool, one creating a chamber for the House of Representatives and one for the Senate. In the middle was a courtyard, open to the trade winds that blow down from Punchbowl National Cemetery.

During construction, Warnecke often escorted the widow Jacqueline Kennedy, who appreciated Hawai‘i in part for the privacy accorded to her and her children. One night over dinner at the governor’s mansion, Mrs. Kennedy remarked to Burns that his new chambers might benefit from a higher ceiling. When Burns stopped work on the fifth floor, the press created a storm. By this time, Burns was renowned for reorganizing the Hawai‘i Democratic Party, for standing up against the plantation oligarchy, for guiding the statehood bill through congress, and for winning election to a position more akin to the presidency of a small country than the governorship of a small state. Raising the ceiling was a minor problem.

Legislators who had previously labored in plywood shacks on the porch of the Palace now occupied ample offices on the second, third, and fourth floors of the new capitol. None had back doors; all were accessible to the visiting public. The fifth floor was organized around blue mosaic arms that reached upward, creating an opening in the center that allowed sun and rain to fall on the courtyard. On one side of the portal was the office of the governor, and on the other side the office of the lieutenant governor.

When the capitol was dedicated in 1969, Burns pulled aside a billowing white canvas in the middle of the courtyard, revealing the signature art: A large mosaic circle of mysteriously overlapping blue, aqua, and green, representing stone, sea, and sky. The band played “The Age of Aquarius” from the rock opera Hair, as if to summon once more the idea of a new age, but in truth the moment of harmony and understanding, in which Hawai‘i and enveloping America seemed one, was passing. Between 1965 and 1968, Lyndon Johnson had come to or passed through Hawai‘i repeatedly, attempting to make the war in Vietnam work. “Each time that I return from your lovely island,” he wrote to Burns, “I wonder how I can ever repay your hospitality.
Happily, I will have many years to try. I look forward to the long and good days of friendship that wait ahead for both of us." Together he and Burns had strategized the statehood bill and construction of the East West Center at the University of Hawai'i. As the presidential champion of civil rights and the new social legislation, Johnson had appeared to be invincible. When he fell politically, he took the national Democratic Party down with him, and it seemed possible and moreover likely that the spreading turmoil might deal Burns the same fate.

Why this did not happen had to do with Hawai'i's separate history. While obviously Hawai'i was an extension of national trends, it was also a place unto itself. It was both periphery and center. In the electoral campaign of 1970, the glow of statehood was displaced by allusions to earlier times in Hawai'i that were, if partially forgotten, sufficiently remembered by an effective majority of the voting public.

The most consistent reminder of history emerged from the campaign of a then relatively obscure candidate for lieutenant governor named George Ryoichi Ariyoshi. At forty-four years old, he was the youngest of the Japanese American political figures who had transformed the postwar period. Week after week, month after month, Ariyoshi painted a picture of Hawai'i as a place where his three children could share fully in society's opportunities, for which he was uniquely obligated to Burns. In this discourse, Burns re-emerged not as one trapped in the turmoil of the moment, but as the extraordinary figure of history. In the excitement of the campaign, Daniel K. Inouye, by then one of the better-known senators in the United States, claimed that Burns was the only person in Hawai'i—meaning the only white person—who had stood up for the Japanese community when Pearl Harbor was bombed.

The past was not merely the past, but a dynamic force that could be reworked. The purpose of statehood, Burns had always argued, was to create a more open society. The purpose of politics, in its “widest, almost Aristotelian sense,” was to secure for each citizen the opportunity to develop to the best of his or her abilities. An open system would lead to an “aristocracy of talent,” as described by Thomas Jefferson. If statehood fulfilled people's hopes, it was also “only the first step toward realizing those hopes.” If statehood reflected the emergence of Hawai'i's people, “it signified also their first real opportunity for full, genuine emergence.”

In retrospect, 1970 was the moment when Burns' conception of history—described most clearly on the passage of statehood—began to be realized more visibly. Where the essential story of the New Hawai'i had been about how neatly the islands fit inside 1960s America, the rising tide of events and feelings had to do with Hawai'i's self-discovery in the statehood period.
It had to do with Hawai‘i being different. What was past became prologue not merely to Burns’ re-election but also to what followed across the twentieth century—the continuous unfolding of a multiracial, multicultural regime without parallel in an American setting. In partisan terms, Hawai‘i continued to be uniformly Democratic, despite the national resurgence of the Republican Party. In the vague terminology of -ism, Hawai‘i remained a bastion of traditional liberalism. In the description of Forbes Magazine, it was the People’s Republic of Hawai‘i, while in the racially loaded words of The Wall Street Journal, the politics of Hawai‘i was conducted behind a Bamboo Curtain.

Although statehood had created a kind of end-of-history sensation, it clearly was not the end of history, but was rather, as Burns had said, the end of a long struggle and the beginning of a new openness, the possibilities of which were by definition unknown.