

Kaka'ako Our Kuleana: A Free Urban Planning Academy for Everyone

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“Kaka'ako Our Kuleana” was a citizen planning academy created to engage the community in the process of transformation taking place in Kaka'ako. The initiative involved the students of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, led by Chair and Professor Karen Umemoto and Teaching Assistants Annie Koh and Adrienne Dillard, and was sponsored by the Hawai'i Chapter of the American Planning Association.



The format of “citizen academy” seeks to empower people and inspire them to find innovative solutions, by helping them understand the intricacies of the problems. In this sense, the workshops were the opportunity for residents, business owners, and *fans* to build up their knowledge about urban planning, policy and development, and acquire the tools necessary to an informed and effective public engagement. “We chose Kaka'ako given the rising level of frustration and concern expressed over the high price of housing, odors and flooding, along with the stresses of gentrification on small businesses” said Umemoto.

As the title suggests, *kuleana* is the main justification and guiding principle of the initiative. Dr. Manulani Meyer during the first workshop, discussed the concept of '*auamo kuleana*, emphasizing the importance of continuously and joyfully carrying one's responsibility. Accordingly, the ultimate objective of the workshop series was to establish a baseline of information and skills that could serve as a guide and foundation for civic initiatives, enabling the community to advocate for herself.

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The workshops were held every Tuesday for six weeks between October and November 2015, in the community room of the Hawai'i Community Development Authority (HCDA). The audience was varied, including professionals of various sectors (from planning to real estate development), community leaders, business owners, residents, students (graduate, undergraduate and some high school students), and simple Kaka'ako *fans*.



Faculty and students organized six 2-hour workshops and one final trolley tour of Kaka'ako. The general structure of the workshop included a short introductory video (realized by UH student Kelsey Matsu) a brief presentation by two or more guest speakers, some group or pair activity, and a Q&A session. This format was ideal to ensure a two-way exchange of information as well as moments of discussion and networking. As a citizen planning academy, topics were varied and included both key urban issues and insights for community building and civic engagement. In the first case, three different workshops focused on Transit-Oriented Development (TOD), affordable housing, infrastructure and climate change adaptation, providing basic knowledge on these concepts and engaging the audience in activities and conversations. Guest speakers included academics such as UH Professors Daniele Spirandelli and Judith Stilgenbauer; professionals such as planner Matt Hom and the Director of Real Estate Development for EAH Housing, Marian Gushiken; and institutions such as the Director of the Department of Environmental Service for the City and County of Honolulu, Lori Kahikina, or the director of HCDA, John Whalen.

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In the second case, efforts focused on providing motivational and inspirational insights about civic engagement. The first workshop explored the meaning of kuleana, focusing on understanding what this concept means on both a personal and collective level, and how it can be carried and implemented, by visualizing what a “healthy Kaka’ako” is.



Similarly, workshop 4 and 6, explored the diversity and richness of the community in the area, and on its essential and powerful role in building a livable place. The fourth workshop involved a panel of business owners and community leaders (ten in total), who shared their vision and hopes for the future of Kaka’ako. While the last session, led by the Islander Institute with the help of UH student and faculty, was structured as a series of small groups, focused on discussing specific topics, ranging from TOD to open space (see Word Cloud below). The goal was to discover the commonalities both in terms of concerns and kōkua, and spark initiatives and cooperation among the participants.

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Kaka'ako Word Cloud

The trolley tour was the dynamic conclusion of this exciting experience. The 50-minute ride, led by Geography student Adele Balderston, cruised across Kaka'ako (both mauka and makai areas), and provided a personal and immediate experience of the neighborhood.



Overall, students and faculty were enthusiastic about the experience and its participation. Professor Umemoto felt that people were very eager to learn about planning, are passionate about these issues, and that students were able to engage them in activities of sharing and creative problem-solving. After the workshop series and the trolley tour, there have been two follow-up meetings, involving around 20 people. The group also met with the Chair of HCDA to talk about how they could work together.

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This event was also a stimulating experience for the students. The Community Planning and Social Policy (PLAN 610) class had the opportunity to directly experience civic participation, and engage with members of the community. As a student, I learned and applied the basic concepts behind community meetings and fostering my listening and facilitating skills.

The most important takeaway was the passion and commitment of the community. The motivations and civic involvement of attendees will accompany and encourage me in my future career as a planner. As planners, we assign ourselves the kuleana of building a safe, inclusive and livable environment for the community. We strive to find solutions and strategies, often forgetting that the community is also motivated by the same objectives and kōkua. We carry the same kuleana. So, if we want to achieve sustainable and effective results, why don't we carry it together?

Learn more about the workshops at www.manoa.hawaii.edu/durp/kakaako-our-kuleana/

