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[Sports calendar](#)
[On the Air](#)
[Golf report](#)
[AP sports](#)

ARCHIVE

[Back issues](#)

FEATURED NEWS

[Nation/World news](#)
[Movie showtimes](#)
[TGIF calendar](#)
[Special projects](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Columnists](#)
[Photo gallery](#)

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Complex a little less fortresslike

By [Andrew Gomes](#)
Advertiser Staff Writer

The Brutalist architecture of Royal Hawaiian Shopping Center is gradually being chipped away.

Three months into an \$84 million facelift, the project's largest demolition job — removing three massive concrete bridges above the center's main pedestrian entrance — is largely complete.

The bridges, now mostly a pile of rubble, are making way for the Waikiki mall's cultural centerpiece, The Royal Grove gathering place heavily landscaped with coconut palms that decorate a more open view to the oceanfront Royal Hawaiian hotel.

Mall owner Kamehameha Schools provided the media with a construction tour yesterday to help update the public about the project, which drew complaints two weeks ago when contractors cut down some trees deemed unhealthy.



The Royal Hawaiian Shopping Center's three massive concrete bridges, which gave the mall a fortresslike look, are no more. In its place will be the mall's cultural centerpiece, The Royal Grove. The \$84 million project is the first since the complex opened in 1981.

GREGORY YAMAMOTO | The Honolulu Advertiser

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The renovation is the first since the four-story complex in the middle of Waikiki opened in 1981. Renovation work began in August on the 'ewa end of the mall, which will feature more upper-level open lanai spaces, decorative wood beams and new facades.

New phase-one tenants are to include popular Mexican restaurant Senor Frog's, a bookstore, coffee house and an undisclosed tenant that mall representatives said has an attraction level on par with Cheesecake Factory, which opened at the mall two years ago.

The first phase of construction is expected to be finished by March, allowing the tenants to open at about the same time.

Phase two work recently began on the bridges and will extend to the middle building. Phase three will follow on the diamondhead wing after phase one work is complete. Total project completion isn't expected until the end of next year, when most new tenants should open.

Among mall newcomers will be local retailer Hawaiian Island Creations, trendy women's bag designer Kate Spade, fine watch retailer Tourneau, a nine-tenant food court and a Waikiki-themed show by Paradise Cove lu'au producer Roy Tokujo.

When renovations are finished, more than half the tenants at the mall are expected to be new to the center, which had been as much as 40 percent vacant last year.

The empty space is allowing Kamehameha Schools and mall manager The Festival Cos. to relocate tenants as construction progresses.

During construction there have been business disruptions for many of the mall's roughly 150 tenants. After renovation work, rent will typically be 10 percent to 50 percent higher.

Mall officials said new and existing tenants largely support the upgrades, and are collectively investing about \$80 million to improve their interior and exterior spaces in addition to what Kamehameha Schools is spending on renovations.

Leigh Tonai, chief executive officer for Hawaiian Island Creations, said the renovated mall presented a unique place for the company to open a store selling surf apparel, equipment, lessons, and board rentals. A surf museum also is planned as part of the store.

"We wanted to provide a resource for local and visiting surfers to get the equipment they need, while also helping to educate anyone who is interested in surfing and its longstanding tradition in Hawai'i," Tonai said.



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Mike Yee, president of longtime mall tenant Royal Hawaiian Shooting Club, said construction cut his customer traffic in half. But he's excited about improved pedestrian access, better views and more lively tenants at the mall when the renovation is finished.

"It was kind of a monolithic structure," he said of the original mall design. "Now it's going to be more tropical and inviting. We'll be known for our entertainment."

Since Royal Hawaiian center opened, the property has largely been a financial success but has long been dogged for its very un-Hawaiian architecture style known as brutalistic.

Other elements of the mall to be demolished include escalators with their tunnel-like canopies, and exposed exterior elevators that partially obscure ground-level entries and contributed to the mall's fortress-like look.

The makai side of the center will better connect with the neighboring Sheraton Waikiki and Royal Hawaiian hotels.

"We've pretty much turned our back in the past," said Susan Todani, commercial development and planning director for Kamehameha Schools. "Now we're really welcoming our neighbors back in."

At the mall's Royal Grove centerpiece, a slimmer single bridge closer to the neighboring Royal Hawaiian hotel's lush courtyard will replace the three concrete spans being removed.

Reach Andrew Gomes at agomes@honoluluadvertiser.com.

▲ Top



MINI SITE MAP

- LOCAL NEWS** : Education | Obituaries | Weather | Traffic hotspots | Town Hall | Military news | Discussion boards | L
- SPORTS** : Surf report | UH sports | High school sports | Recreation | Sports calendar | On the Air | Golf report |
- ISLAND LIFE** : About Men/Women | Taste/Recipes | Faith calendar | Health/Fitness | Comics | TGIF calendar | Tube
- ENTERTAINMENT** : TGIF weekend calendar | 4-week guide | Movie showtimes | Dining | Visitors | National arts & leisure
- BUSINESS** : Hawai'i stocks | Hawai'i mutual funds | Hawai'i mortgage rates | Island bank rates | Stock quotes | Mc
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