



EAST-WEST CENTER
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EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Alexander Spoehr Interview Narrative

8-26-1975 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

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The **East-West Center Oral History Project** strives to capture the Center's first 50 years as seen through the eyes of staff, alumni, and supporters who have contributed to its growth.

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Alexander Spoehr

8-26-1975 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

Birth of the EWC

Editor's Note: Alexander Spoehr was appointed the first chancellor of the East-West Center in the summer of 1961.

I think what happened is that Clark Kerr and his group came out and made a number of recommendations and the [chancellor] appointment was made by the [University of Hawai'i] Board of Regents. I think generally their feeling was that rather than attempting an exhaustive and very time-consuming search for a chancellor -- and this is partly, I think, the advice of Kerr's committee -- that they should look locally because at that time the Center was under terrific time constraints. There was a great deal of public pressure to get this thing moving. Our big competitor, you will recall, was the Friendship University in Moscow, and it was constantly pointed out that the Russians were walking off with the "show." In many ways, unfortunately, the Center was looked at as an American response to a Russian move in the context of the Cold War.

This, to a considerable degree, was a public perception but it certainly was not a University of Hawai'i perception, or that of anyone who realized that the creation of the East-West Center was going to be a long and difficult venture and would take a good many years.

[Spoehr was asked by the interviewer to comment on federal support, noting the initial budget request from the Executive Branch was for a one-time grant of about \$8 million for three years. Spoehr also responded to a question about what he thought the intention was in Congress regarding EWC support.]

You might take a look at those early hearings before the [U.S. Congress] House Appropriations Committee. There were a number of practical difficulties; one was that

the Center was established as a rider to the Mutual Security Act of 60- ... I can't remember the year, and that the appropriation had not initially gone through the House Appropriations Committee. This posed a bit of a problem but in terms of recalling the hearings that I participated in, it was my feeling that both the House and the Senate committees were quite receptive to viewing the Center as long-term business and on that particular point I can't recall too much difficulty.

You have to realize that the adhering agency in the Department of State was Cultural Affairs (CU). Cultural Affairs was the youngest bureau in the State Department and it was involved in State's internal difficulties because to some degree, the older bureaus regarded CU as a threat. Likewise, the Department of State budget was under constant attack from Mr. Rooney [*congressman*]. It is true, I think, that the State Department was really handed the Center, whether it wanted it or not. My first contact with the assistant secretary of CU was with Philip Coombs who was very much interested personally...and thereafter, [*Luke*] Battle certainly was quite sympathetic to the goals of the Center. There was always the difficulty of the basic structural defect in the organization of the Center as to whom the then-chancellor should indeed be responsible. This defect became very apparent as things progressed.

The Center's Buildings

When I came on board, the buildings were not constructed but the plans had been approved [*when Spoehr was appointed chancellor, 1961*]. The architect was certainly very good but he, in a sense, was working without a detailed plan as to what the objectives of the Center were in terms of utilization of space, etc. So that there is this building here which was really designed as a hotel to serve visitors coming to the

university. The Kennedy Theatre -- a beautiful theater -- is very difficult to envisage as a fundamental aspect of the Center. Things of this sort.

As I said, the plans were approved. So that my general feeling was that right from the beginning the physical identity of the Center was never clear in terms of its programming.

[Spoehr was asked if I.M. Pei, the principal architect, came out to the EWC site.]

Oh, he did.

It was most interesting to see this building *[Jefferson Hall]* constructed. This is all prefabricated concrete, and they had to bring in the structural members at night so that they wouldn't block traffic.

Same with these two buildings. And the same with Kennedy Theatre. They were all poured -- all the structural members were poured off the site. Brought in on huge trailers.

Land for EWC Use

It *[giving the 21 acres to the federal government or the East-West Center]* was vigorously opposed by the university.

There were so many other problems at that time, in terms of organization. The land question, I'd say, didn't really arise.

Now sure, a land deed should have been part of the visibly separate East-West Center but there were so many other things to squabble about.

EWC Clerical and Non-Professional Staff

Differences of opinion but not really squabbling. There were -- for instance, the Center's clerical and non-professional staff were Hawai'i civil service. One of the first things that

happened is that applicants for those positions from the mainland were denied on the basis that every employee of Hawai'i civil service had to be a resident of the islands for at least two years. So, what then happened was that these people would write their congressmen and their senators and say, "We understand that the Center is a national institution and yet we've been denied consideration for employment at the East-West Center on the basis of this residence rule and the Hawai'i Civil Service Act. One of the disastrous things which I attempted to do was to pull the whole Center out of the Hawai'i civil service system.

It was approved by the regents of the university. What then happened, of course, the heads of the union, civil service union, immediately took up the cudgels with real – oh brother! -- and the regents had to back down. They had the whole power of the labor union.

What did come out of it is that they did, for Center employees at least, remove the residence requirement, but they still had the civil service.

Now, you might speak to Takaaki Izumi. He's a marvelous person over in the Finance Office of the University. He was the Center finance officer.

International Advisory Committee

[Spoehr responded to a question about attempts to have the Center reflect greater State Department or national interests.]

This led to my own attempt to get some sort of international advisory committee established. That was really in a response to all these conflicting opinions that the Center should be under the State Department. It should have a greater national interest. It should have greater international interest. It should be more carefully under the control

of people in Hawai'i and things of this sort. The purpose of that was to try to move the Center more firmly into an international area and away from these conflicting ideas.

I think most of the people who knew something about the Center realized the structural problem and with the Kerr Committee report -- as I recall -- the advice I received was to try to get an international committee established *[and]* that the Center have a greater measure of independence. They also, I think, were appreciative of the fact that it was, at the time, very difficult to do this drastically.

EWC-UH Relationship

When I came on board I was the only permanent employee.

We lived over in Hale Aloha. We didn't have the staff and you couldn't put together an American Studies program and Asian Studies program without staff. You can't get good staff inside of 18 months.

[So] The staff for these institutes were basically university personnel and faculty and some of them were very good. But, as I mentioned, there was a **terrific** time constraint. The show had to get on the road so it seemed the most sensible thing to do at the time.

Setting Up the Original Institutes

We were under these time constraints and there was the question, "Should the organization *[of the]* Center be programmatic?" But if it was to be programmatic, what kinds of programs? Or would it not be simpler to simply take a look at the potential clientele and to set up the initial organization of the Center on the basis of the clientele? And then let the programs develop at a later date. That was the thinking behind it. Thinking back on that, I personally prefer the programmatic approach. Even with the programmatic approach we still have, no matter how you divide the thing up, you have

the problems of communication and maximum facilities for development of the kinds of people you bring. And they inevitably are going to break down into students, trainees, and senior fellows regardless of how you put it together. You always are going to have communication problems between any division that you set up for administrative purposes.

Sure, it's going to be a continuing problem. But it would be a problem, you see, regardless of what pattern of administrative organization you devised.

[Spoehr discussed the basic objectives of the three institutes: Institute for Student Interchange, Institute for Advanced Projects, Institute for Technical Interchange.]

Well, the students, graduate students essentially -- graduate student training. And here, we also had to make the point that in this program, we wished to utilize institutions both in Asia and the Pacific area and on the mainland and not have the training concentrated in Hawai'i to eat up the entire period of student scholarship.

As far as the Institute for Technical Interchange, this moved quite nicely because, by and large, these were technical characters who were not really interested in enrolling in university classes. Baron Goto had a great deal of freedom and opted for both short- and long-term training projects of one sort or another. This did not, in any way, get in the way of student business, but there was the difficulty again of communication back and forth. Then, finally the senior specialists deal was to some degree based on the think-tank pattern.

The general feeling was that each institute should present, in terms of its budget, its program, and these allocations would then be made in as equitable a fashion given the program needs of each institute.

Yes, they did [*operate autonomously*]. The criticism was, of course, that the autonomy was too great. The students complained that they didn't meet and interact enough with the senior fellows. And the technical trainee people desired having greater contact with the Institute of Advanced Projects.

For instance, one of the most successful projects Baron [*Goto*] had was to bring out 12 or 15 of the most eminent landscape architects in the country. He likewise brought a group from Japan. Now they would have appreciated having greater contact with the Institute of Advanced Projects, except that we had nobody in the Institute of Advanced Projects with whom they could really interact in the business, but their interests were not just, you know, landscape architecture per say, but also a whole series of human problems: space, crowdedness in cities, things of this sort. And then from here, they went to Japan and [*inaudible*] down in Australia. This was fairly costly, but it was an extremely well-run show.

Early Student Selection Process

The students were here for a purpose. They were really hard-working. Most of them were hard-working. One of those initial problems was in our student selection, particularly in Asia. Here we did use the Fulbright selection process for the East-West Center students, but there were a great many headaches.

One of them was rather amusing in that, being new in the game, we were not aware of the "international career student" -- the student who takes one fellowship to a foreign country, completes that and takes another one, etc. etc. And we had, for instance, about five or six or maybe seven charming Laotians who were real party boys and were a delight to be around, but they saw no reason for serious study. One of them had been to

Russia, etc. We suddenly realized that we had been taken on this thing. So we shipped them all home.

We had a number of others who were serious, but were nevertheless simply career students. It was with considerable amusement that I saw them next pop up in Canada where the Canadians had started a student program quite similar to what the East-West Center was doing. So it was things of this sort that constantly occupied our minds.

This [*using the Fulbright selection process*] was a budgetary consideration, too. To set up our own selection committees in these countries would have been very difficult indeed. By and large, they worked out quite well, but we had our student problems, of course. [*It was a*] very small percentage.

East-West Center Library

At the time the Center was started, the university library was so small and so inadequate for graduate training or for any research function that it seemed to us necessary to go into a kind of a crash program. Now here I withdrew all support for the university library due to the fact that we had no control over the acquisitions. They were faced with the problem of undergraduate instruction. We were faced with the problem of developing sources that could be used for the Center itself, and here, if anything, I wished that we had put more money into that library because I think we've got -- what? -- 70,000 volumes in two years?

We then developed the idea that within the area of the Center's interest, we would build a building and run that as a graduate library and that this would be attached to the Hamilton Library and that we could coordinate this thing but still keep our own acquisitions -- control over our own acquisitions.

Now the way it worked out in the end I think is fine because the university did receive legislative support for expanding their library primarily due to the hard-working [*UH President*] Tom Hamilton, so the way things are going now, I think is fine. But at that time it was absolutely essential that a massive injection of money be put into it.

The way the budget worked, we simply provided a lump sum to the university.

It was rectified, I simply stopped it. All funds.

We just started our own library. Hired Ray Nunn and some librarians.

Best Memories/Major Accomplishments

The first thing was to get the show on the road, so that there was something operating with a program which could be changed. We had no feelings that it shouldn't be changed. On the contrary. Secondly, I think one of the gratifying things to me has been to have gone through Asian countries and to meet people who have been at the Center in those years, and though indeed their experience was not perfect, I do think they got something out of it that was quite unique.

I've been in Japan and the Philippines, etc., and talked to Asian students who've said that this is the first time they had had any real understanding of other Asians. So I think the Center served a function in terms of the personal enrichment, not necessarily through courses, or through research or training projects, but rather of meeting like-minded people from other countries and I think the impact was greater on Asians really than on the Americans. But I would say, getting the show on the road.

Resignation as EWC Chancellor

Somewhere there's my letter of resignation which is published in full and it was [*about*] the impossibility of operating without clear lines of responsibility. The structural

problems in the organization *[whether the EWC is responsible to the university or the federal government]*.

Or the government of the State of Hawaii or to the State Department or to what was then the Budget Bureau or to the various committees of Congress, etc.

Oh yeah sure, *[Congressman]* Rooney was out to get me. Oh sure, absolutely. What he did at that particular budget hearing was to cut out the senior fellow program completely. So what we did is, with a great deal of effort, get the Senate Committee to restore the cut the House had made. 'Cause it would have been the end of the Center. It definitely would have been. Oh, there would have been nothing to operate on.

And it was *[U.S. Senators]* Margaret Chase Smith and Mike Mansfield who saved the Center that time. And members of that committee. They had a lunch and they restored the funds. At lunch.

[In December 1963, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee for the Department of Commerce, Justice, and State restored funds previously cut by the House.]