Mauna Kea kiaʻi place pōhaku on the Mauna Kea Access Road to prevent construction equipment from ascending (with permission from *Honolulu Civil Beat*, 2015).

Against architectures of degradation: pōhaku and protection on Mauna Kea

Caitlin Blanchfield

On Mauna Kea, Hawai'i island pōhaku (stone) is entangled in practices of erasure and resistance. This volcano is both a sacred site of genealogical connection for Kānaka Maoli and a contested landscape, seized as Crown and Government Land from the Hawaiian Kingdom, held in trust, and later leased to the University of Hawai'i to host an ever-expanding astronomy industry. Since Mauna Kea observatories began, Kanaka Maoli kia'i (protectors) and environmental activists have resisted the construction of large-scale telescopes, which degrade land and violate Hawaiian sovereignty. In doing so, they have built architectures of protection with and for the land. Pōhaku registers and refuses attempts to expropriate land and control Indigenous political relationships to place. Interviews and archival research reveal how the stones are erected as ahu (shrines) within the reserve, removed by government officers and discounted by archaeologists, only to be returned repeatedly by kia'i. These stones dialogue with the Hale Pōhaku (stone house) architecture built for the astronomy industry in the 1970s and 80s, which saw direct action against the construction of the massive Thirty Meter Telescope from 2014–2019. During protests, pōhaku became an architecture of protection, blocking construction equipment from ascending the road.

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Introduction

Geographer Kathryn Yusoff (2024) writes that to tell the story of rocks is to see the past surfacing in the present, in a process of coming into view, of other earths. So what pasts do we surface when we tell stories alongside rocks, and what presents? In the well-known song 'Mele Ai Pōhaku', or stone-eating song, originally published as 'Kaulana Nā Pua' in the Hawaiian language newspaper *Ka Leo o ka Lahui* in 1893, the lyrics translate to:

> We do not value
> The government's sums of money
> We are satisfied with the stones
> Astonishing food of the land.
> (Kamehameha Schools, 2023; Nordyke and Noyes, 1993)

This was written in tribute to members of the Royal Hawaiian Band who refused to sign an oath of loyalty to the provisional government that had overthrown Queen Lili'uokalani of Hawai'i. As a result of their refusal, they were told they would have only stones to eat.

In 2015 on Mauna Kea, the sacred volcano on the island of Hawai'i, kia'i (the protectors of the mauna) placed pōhaku (stones) in the roadway to prevent construction equipment from reaching the summit. These kia'i were stone eaters too, putting their bodies alongside the land on the line to protect the mountain from the construction of a massive telescope that would desecrate the sacred summit and degrade a fragile environment, and to which they had not consented. The past they surfaced was one of resistance to colonial land theft; it is a past that is still present.

This paper will tell some stories of pōhaku on Mauna Kea as a contested material and an element for building resistance. By thinking through architectural materials in their relationality, connection to and knowledge of place, I show how pōhaku become 'onipa'a architecture' – a steadfast architecture standing against practices that occupy and degrade the land, such as industrial telescopes.

KEY WORDS
Mauna Kea; stones; environmental protection; sovereignty

Citation: Blanchfield, C. (**2025**) Against architectures of degradation: pōhaku and protection on Mauna Kea. *Landscape Review*, 21(1), pp 4-13.
Received: 2 December 2024
Published: date: 23 May 2025

Approach

This critique offers a critical framework to understand the relationship between landscape, architecture, and political struggles for self-determination in Hawaiʻi through an engagement with the meaning, use and relationships created around materials – in this case, stone. It is informed by theories in critical geography and geology, architectural history, and Kanaka Maoli political thought. The paper draws on primary source research from the State of Hawaiʻi Department of Land and Natural Resources, the Edith Kanakaole Hawaiʻi Collection at the University of Hawaiʻi, Hilo and the private collection of Deborah Ward, as well as interviews I have conducted.

As I have no genealogical connection to Mauna Kea, my knowledge of these pōhaku is limited to what I have been told or is public information; we can foreground the meaning of the land and its materiality without asking to know everything. As a settler scholar writing from outside of Hawaiʻi, I have used my academic training in architectural history to support the work, and follow the kahea (call), of Mauna Kea kiaʻi through testifying to the National Science Foundation and National Parks Service for the protection of Mauna Kea. I have learned from pōhaku volunteering at the Edith Kanakaole Foundation's Hale o Lono fishpond in Hilo.

Insights

Mauna Kea or Mauna a Wākea, the mountain of Wākea, in Hawaiian genealogy is the child of Wākea, the sky and Papa, the earth (figure 1). It rises 4,206 metres from sea level, and historically the high elevation summit has been a place that humans would go only on rare and special occasions (Maly and Maly, 2005). Mauna Kea is also a unique ecosystem, home to birds, bugs and lichen rarely found elsewhere. Due to its high elevation and porous volcanic stone, the mauna collects water that filters and feeds the island's aquifer (Casumbal-Salazar, 2017).

Figure 1. Mauna Kea from Puʻuhonua o Puʻuhuluhulu (photograph by Danielle Da Silva, 2019 with permission from Photographers without Borders).

The upper reaches of Mauna Kea are also part of Hawaiian Kingdom Crown and Government Lands. These lands were under the jurisdiction of the Kingdom government or belonged to the Hawaiian royal family before a coup, backed by the United States, overthrew Queen Liliʻoukalani in 1893 (Silva, 2004; Van Dyke, 2008). When Hawaiʻi was annexed in 1898, these seized lands were held in trust by the US government and then transferred to the state government when Hawaiʻi gained statehood in 1959. The coup and annexation of Hawaiʻi were illegal – all of the State of Hawaiʻi is stolen land – but because the Crown and Government Lands attained trust status, they are intended to be used for the benefit of Hawaiian people. In this context, their use for the astronomy industry against the wishes of many Kānaka Maoli is especially contentious.

In 1961, the nascent state government designated much of Mauna Kea a conservation district. Then, in 1968, it created a science reserve within this district and leased it to the University of Hawaiʻi to operate a science complex – which involved transferring 5,261 hectares of Crown and Government Lands to the university. This move was an attempt to erase a political designation that reflected this land's former jurisdiction under the kingdom of Hawaiʻi and replace it with a designation that conflated conservation with anticipated scientific development. Soon after, the first telescopes, operated by the United States Air Force and the university, went up. Since then, 13 observatories have been built on the summit, with a total of 20 telescopes if one includes the multiple telescopes in array observatories.

Within this history of land use as a tool of settler colonial occupation, my focus on pōhaku is intended to locate ongoing practices of architectural steadfastness and show how ʻike (knowledge) of and with materials is critical to the politics of their use. In this way, I aim to contribute to a conversation around materials in architecture, and bring a built environment approach to conversations on the protection of Mauna Kea.

Hoʻokupu

The first story of pōhaku is that of a hoʻokupu (offering) stone that Kealoha Pisciotta, Kanaka Maoli cultural practitioner and former telescope systems specialist, found next to the security kiosk at the Hilo town dump. Her family had placed the hoʻokupu near the summit of Mauna Kea four-and-a-half years earlier. But, as she wrote in a letter to the Hawaiʻi Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR), when she and another cultural practitioner had ascended the mountain for ceremony and Hawaiian astronomy practice, they discovered the stone was gone (Pisciotta, 2011). Days later, taking her household trash to the dump, she spotted it: the sacred object had literally been thrown away. Amplifying the shock of finding the stone among bags of waste and discarded goods was the revelation as to *who* had brought it there – a tour guide for the Mauna Kea Science Reserve. When questioned, the guide claimed, 'it came from where it did not belong' (ibid). But the summit of Mauna Kea is precisely where the stone does belong, because Pisciotta put it there, as part of a living landscape of Kanaka Maoli cultural and astronomical practice that has existed for millennia.

After returning the stone from the Hilo dump to Mauna Kea only to find days later that it was missing again, Pisciotta confronted the guide. This time it was sitting in the back of his truck. The guide still contended that the stone did not *belong* on the summit or, to be precise, in the reserve. But he finally conceded to her argument and returned the stone to Pisciotta, who brought it back to the mauna. 'What other cultural or historic sites', she asked in her letter, 'have been disturbed, desecrated or destroyed on Mauna Kea, by IfA [Institute for Astronomy] employees?' (ibid). The presence of the stone on the mauna, and the people and practices attached to it, troubled the narrative that the DLNR and University of Hawaiʻi were advancing – that the summit was mostly empty and therefore open for telescope construction.

Here land-as-property is maintained by ongoing theft (Nichols, 2020). Insistence on returning the stone, the act of creating the hoʻokupu, building it again and then again, is an architectural practice that refuses erasure. It does so through knowledge of exactly

where this stone belongs and how it relates to a larger landscape of Mauna Kea and the entire archipelago. In contrast to this precise and intimate knowledge, the policies the guide was enacting operated through colonial unknowing; the stone could only be understood as out of place through intentional ignorance (Vimalassery et al, 2016). It is this unknowing and boundary-making around belonging that I will trace in archaeological practices on Mauna Kea.

Figure 2. An ahu (shrine) on a puʻu (cinder cone) on Mauna Kea (image by author, 2021).

Archaeologists have identified many of the ahu (shrines) (figure 2) and pōhaku used in Hawaiian astronomy on Mauna Kea, marking them for state protection (Izaki, 2023; McCoy, 1977). In 2000, the Hawaiʻi State Historic Preservation Division listed the Mauna Kea summit as a state traditional cultural property. In 2024, this designation was expanded to include an area from 1.98 kilometres upward and then, in 2025, the mountain was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. But telescope developers have also instrumentalised archaeology to reify a division between ancient and modern astronomical practices. What Kanaka Maoli archaeologist Kathleen Kawelu (2015) calls ‘compliance archaeology’ is used to confirm a historical timeline that, by and large, only marks ancient and precolonial sites for protection on the summit, putting at risk the contemporary built landscape, which includes sites for Hawaiian astronomy.

This division would imply that the hoʻokupu stone – and the lele used to calibrate star alignment that Pisciotta (2011) also testified as having been destroyed – were out of place because they were out of time. The State Historic Preservation Division entrenches this divide by separating archaeology, architecture and cultural heritage into distinct branches of preservation.

This epistemological demarcation has real effects. As E Kalani Flores (2022) – a Kanaka Maoli kiaʻi, cultural practitioner and professor of Hawaiian studies – explains, the surveys and reports needed for telescope construction require archaeologists to complete one report and anthropologists to complete cultural impact assessments; while the cultural impact assessments do involve consultation with Hawaiian cultural practitioners, archaeological reports do not, leading to a deficit of knowledge on the Indigenous built environment and a distancing of archaeological findings from contemporary cultural

practices. Moreover, even in instances where archaeologists have tried to protect contemporary sites, their efforts have been deliberately blocked by the University of Hawai‘i. In 1986, archaeologists Ross Cordy and Buddy Neller tried to have all summit shrines listed on the National Register of Historic Places. However, the university prevented this in the belief that the listing could jeopardise federal grants for telescopes in the future. In exchange for making this decision, it pledged to develop a historic preservation management plan, which never happened (Ho and McEldowney, 1996, from personal collection of Deborah Ward, no date).

The two major archaeological surveys of the Mauna Kea summit in the 1980s identified about 40 sites for protection. ‘Modern’ properties, such as ahu and lele still in use, were discounted or even removed from the map after initially being recorded (McCoy and Nees, 2010). A 2010 survey done for the proposed Thirty Meter Telescope found 263 sites, as opposed to the mere 40 found 30 years before (ibid). It also identified 339 ‘find spots’, meaning locations of modern use or locations where the historical period could not be determined; find spots were not taken into consideration when siting the telescope. The discrepancy between surveys from the early 1980s and in 2010 suggests that many cultural sites and stone structures were not protected during the construction of previous telescopes and may well have been disturbed. The exclusion of 339 find spots suggests that this disturbance would continue with the Thirty Meter Telescope, because find spots do not merit protection. These omissions are symptomatic of the shortfalls of compliance archaeology, which relies on existing reports and excavation instead of oral history.

Flores (2022) describes the problem further and more specifically to Mauna Kea. Archaeological surveys, he explains, are ‘very narrow in what they know … It’s more like what they don't know. Because on Mauna Kea, not on the summit, but surrounding the summit, there are hundreds of these shrines. They have no idea what the shrines are for.’

An annotated map drawn by papa kilo hōkū (Hawaiian astronomy) practitioner Michael Kumukauoha Lee overlays administrative boundaries and archaeological find spots with a rich cartography of star movement, hydrological cycles, physical sites, and their meaning. This map demonstrates that ‘find spots’ are in fact part of the built landscape with a known use and meaning. That it was introduced as evidence in a contested case hearing is testament to how practitioners turned these proceedings into affirmations of the meaning and use of Mauna Kea in terms the state had wilfully overlooked and ignored.

Additionally, a map that University of California, Berkeley planning students created in collaboration with Mauna Kea Aniana Hou (the president of which is Kealoha Pisciotta) shows how ahu and lele are aligned with star formations and with heiau on other islands. These maps, or counter-maps, reinscribe the meaning of the land and the meaning of pōhaku. This return and reinscription represent an architectural act that refuses erasure and that insists on a continuing, evolving relationship to the very substance of place as a mode of building. These processes of reinscription are forms of landscape making.

Hale Pōhaku

Another story – another examination of materials as knowledge, as contested meaning and as sites of contestation – is that of Hale Pōhaku (which translates to stone house, though there are now several structures on this site). This collection of buildings illustrates how, through the appropriation of materiality and historical narrative, architecture was used to try to naturalise the Mauna Kea observatories. Located at an elevation of around 2.74 kilometres, midway up the mountain, Hale Pōhaku serves as both a visitors’ centre and a lodging site for telescope employees, astronomers and construction crews when they are working on the mountain. In addition, it has been used as a staging area for telescope construction. The facility is named for the stone cabins built there in the 1930s, first used by Civilian Conservation Corps crews installing boundaries for the Mauna Kea Forest Reserve, and then by hunters and those travelling to the summit.

During the 1970s, when these base facilities were constructed, they became important nodes for infrastructural expansion up the mountain. At that time, many who opposed the expanding observatory were hunters, voicing their opposition through hunting associations even when their concerns went beyond access for hunting. It is ironic then that the hale that sheltered these hunters would be the site and namesake of an operational base for the expanding observatories they opposed (Tulang and Inouse, 1980).

In the 1980s the University of Hawai‘i proposed an expansion of the Hale Pōhaku complex to include additional dormitories as well as common buildings for cooking, dining and lounging. The facilities, designed by Chapman Desai Sakata Inc, comprised up to 17 ‘cabin like structures’ that were ‘nestled in the trees’ (MCM Planning, 1985) (figure 3). The profile of the buildings and their exteriors ‘blended into the surrounding environment’ with earth-toned paints and stains and avoided ‘visual impacts’ (ibid). With a ‘rustic’, efficient use of wood and stone in the dormitories and visitors’ centre, Hale Pōhaku evokes the ‘parkitecture’ of the American conservation movement – trying to make the astronomy industry blend in with the mountain while aligning with an aesthetic of environmental management and reflecting a national design sensibility strongly associated with historical ideas about the frontier and the wilderness (Carr, 2007).

Pōhaku were used in walls and foundations as part of this aesthetic contextualisation and appropriation. In the eyes of the design firm, their materiality suggested historical connecting to place, implying that the mid-elevation facility was a simple extension of existing structures on the mauna, thus downplaying its footprint, its exclusive use by telescope users and staff, astronomy tourists, and construction workers, and the way in which it enabled further development of the summit for telescopes. At the same time, the Hale Pōhaku Master Plan wrote of the new designs as an ‘improvement’ over the present appearance of the area – evoking a Lockian language of property appropriation (State of Hawai‘i Department of Land and Natural Resources, 1980).

(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 3. (**a**) Cabins at Hale Pōhaku. (**b**) Hale Pōhaku visitors’ centre (images by author, 2021).

Yet it was the mobilisation of pōhaku by kia‘i at this very site that proved pivotal in the movement to protect Mauna Kea from the Thirty Meter Telescope. In 2015, when protectors learned that construction equipment was slated to ascend the mountain, several hundred people mobilised to block the road at Hale Pōhaku, encamping across from the visitors’ centre (Casumbal-Salazar, 2019; Flores, 2022). This was the first wave of direct action to protect the mauna, with people blocking the road and risking arrest to stop the construction vehicles that were going up to grade the summit.

No vehicles passed that day, but two months later the Thirty Meter Telescope corporation tried again. And again hundreds came to protect the mountain (KAHEA, 2016; Lum, 2015). Lines upon lines of kia‘i, holding hands and carrying ti leaves, filled the road, crossing it and preventing movement. Alongside their bodies, kia‘i placed pōhaku in the roadway, and at the summit they built ahu and lele. Testifying to the Bureau of Lands and Natural Resources, Kaleo Keli‘ikoa (2015) talked of the relationship between the summit ahu and the pōhaku that were placed on the road:

> when I saw how DLNR was behaving themselves … for me what I had to do was, I was just going to run up the mountain to the top, to the summit, and make a pule [prayer] at the ahu. As I was running I just started grabbing pōhaku and put them on the road.

Bodies and pōhaku came together in an architecture of steadfastness against bulldozers. In doing so, they transformed the relationship between infrastructure and access. A throughfare had been leveraged in the 1970s and 80s to facilitate more telescope construction by transporting digging machines and Caterpillars; the DLNR had closed it when it wanted to limit access. Now this road became a site of collectivity. 'Kapu aloha, pule, and oli' moved up and down the mountain and steadfastness held it, in the words of kiaʻi Kuʻuipo Freitas (Ōiwi TV, 2015).

Conclusion

Thinking with pōhaku opens up ways that architectural and landscape historians might engage with materiality and place to understand how knowledge and land are co-constituted through use, and to consider the politics of that knowledge. This invites a certain kind of learning from the land. In this learning, I am reminded of a line from a poem 'No Wai, No Waiwai' by Loke Aloua (2020), a kiaʻi and trained archaeologist who writes:

> These stones we stack no wait for permits and permission to act
> We are *Kaiāulu*
> Taking our Hawaiʻi back.

We might learn from stones precisely to circumvent and ignore the process and protocols that often enact colonial jurisdiction and land theft. Returning to steadfastness and the ways that together pōhaku and people resisted colonial boundary-making and appropriation, architectural historian Mahdi Sabbagh (2024) writes of how architectural *sumud*, steadfastness, when at a communal scale, can build political consciousness and develop politically active communities. He writes of and from Palestine, but with an invitation to think about how tactics of steadfastness may be used in other instances of decolonial struggle. Continuing to inscribe and build the stories that materials hold, as both a narrative and a physical return, is part of this steadfastness.

In this paper, I have argued that together pōhaku and people resisted colonial boundary-making, jurisdiction and appropriation through acts of rebuilding. This is evident in Kealoha Pisciotta's hoʻokupu and in reinscriptions of erased histories such as Michael Kumukauoha Lee's papa kilo hōkū mappings. It is demonstrated through the use of Indigenous building materials as a physical infrastructure of protection, such as in a blockade that connects the people to the land through acts of construction and offering. This steadfastness – through rebuilding, repetition, holding a line – builds knowledge of resistance that is fed by stones. Erasure and removal are spatial strategies to make Indigenous lands available for architectures that degrade environments to advance settler colonial ownership and profit; we might instead look to practices of building for and alongside land as architectures of protection.

About the author

Caitlin Blanchfield is a historian of architecture and landscape whose work examines the infrastructures of settler colonialism and material practices of resistance. Her research addresses the role of modernist land management and design practices in projects of dispossession and colonisation in North America and across the reaches of US empire, as well as the anticolonial architectures that unsettle them. Caitlin received her PhD in architectural history and theory at Columbia University and is a postdoctoral fellow at Princeton University.

Acknowledgments: Mahalo nui to those who shared their stories of Mauna Kea with me, particularly to Deborah Ward for sharing her personal papers with me and to E Kailani Flores for discussing histories of archaeology and activism on the mauna. Mahalo nui to Ikaika Ramones for his comments on an early version of this paper and to the peer reviewers for their generous feedback.

Research for this paper was approved under Columbia University Institutional Review Board Protocol IRB-AAAU0773.

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