Beyond Wayfinding

Karla Sierralta, AIA *Associate Professor, Director of Undergraduate Studies*
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Brian Strawn, AIA *Director, Office of Planning & Spatial Experience*
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Kūhaʻo Zane *COO, Creative Director*
Sig Zane Designs and SZKaiao

This interactive system of distributed elements shares Indigenous knowledge across campus and invites participation in Native Hawaiian cultural practices that extend beyond traditional land acknowledgments. This project addresses an institutional need to re-imagine campus signage and wayfinding while physically embodying the university's commitment to being a "Native Hawaiian place of learning."

IMPACTING PROCESS: CO-AUTHORSHIP THROUGH A PUBLIC RFP

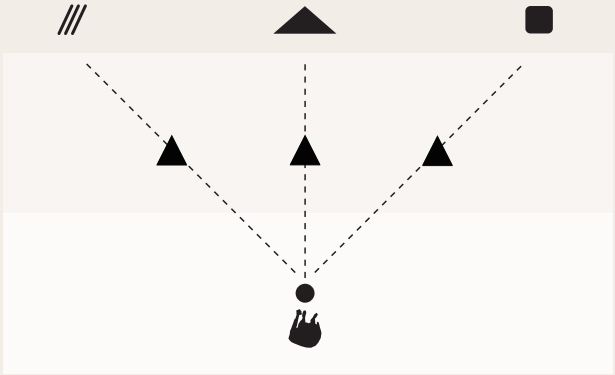
The project began by unpacking the design problem through a layered framework that recognizes the complexity of place. A graduate architecture studio examined environmental, cultural, historical, and Indigenous systems on campus, developing maps that illustrated their interconnections. A multi-phase process followed, shaped by engagement with more than 150 faculty, researchers, and students through interviews, campus tours, and listening sessions. These findings informed schematic designs and prototypes, forming the basis for a public RFP that required the inclusion of Native Hawaiian artists and cultural practitioners with deep knowledge and familial roots in Mānoa Valley. This marked the first such requirement at the University.

POINTS AND MARKERS: FROM SIGN TO SYSTEM

The spatial system includes twenty-one Building Signs and four ʻIli Markers distributed along three primary pedestrian axes that foreground *ʻili*—small land divisions that cross the campus. These architectural elements function as navigational tools while revealing the broader systems of knowledge that shape our understanding of place and culture.

OVERLAPPING REPRESENTATIONS & LAYERED MEANING

A design language merging literal and abstract references bridges Indigenous and Western representational approaches. *Puʻu* pointers direct viewers to specific sites, while hand-cut botanical artworks of culturally significant species such as kalo and kī stand as isolated specimens, contrasting with the artist's iconic aloha shirt motifs. A dynamic watermark pattern, inspired by *kapa* textiles, suggests navigation and movement; its repeated geometric field mirrors traditional stamping processes and symbolizes the motion of water.



Heiau Alignment Diagram

Repeating these patterns across signs, markers, and digital platforms unifies the project. Building names remain interchangeable and adaptable, while ʻili names are fixed, anchoring each element within its cultural and spatial genealogy.

TOOLS, PRACTICES & PLACES

Surrounding the campus are *wahi pana*—storied places rich in ancestral knowledge. The watermark patterns and pointers orient viewers toward these locations, revealing broader networks of history, culture, and ecology. Embedded medallions in walkways link to digital environments for deeper learning. Aligning with the medallions evokes *heiau* orientation and the Polynesian Star Compass—frameworks where physical and celestial alignment guide understanding. Here, *wahi pana* become land-based navigational points, like stars guiding voyagers at sea.

PROTOTYPES AS CATALYSTS

This multi-year effort reached a milestone with two Building Signs fabricated and installed in Summer 2022. The first cluster of ʻIli Markers will follow in Spring 2026, marking the intersection of *ʻili* boundaries at the campus core. These prototypes test materials, fabrication, and maintenance, while ethnographic studies observe how users engage with the design and digital platform. As the project evolves, it demonstrates how small-scale prototypes can drive systemic change. Through slower, more deliberate approaches, it advances culturally grounded design practices. By reframing authorship and procurement, it fosters collaboration over extraction and inclusivity over appropriation. The resulting architectural artifacts serve as instruments for navigating, discovering, and decolonizing the public realm.

7 Years of Development & Co-Design Efforts

A pragmatic need for a campus wayfinding and signage system evolved into an interactive, culturally grounded project that advances the university's mandate to become a "Native Hawaiian Place of Learning." The initiative also celebrates the place-based qualities that make the flagship campus and its community unique.

SPRING 2018
Design & Research
Project Kick-Off

The University-Based Design & Research Team shadowed 12 campus tours for prospective students and their families. 3 families from each tour were interviewed about their impressions of campus and the wayfinding tools they used to navigate throughout their journeys. This effort was conducted in cooperation with the Office of Admissions.

FALL 2018
System Design & Prototyping
21 Building Signs & 4 'Ili Markers

Full-scale physical prototypes and digital experiences were deployed and tested in multiple locations on campus. Intercept interviews were conducted with students, staff, and faculty. Feedback focused on form, scale, legibility, and UX factors.

The selected proof-of-concept design was used as a supplement for an RFP conducted by the university's Office of Procurement, requiring an Indigenous Cultural Consultant & Artist. This was the first time requirement for a construction project at the university.

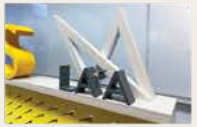
SUMMER 2019
Wayfinding & Signage
RFP Released

FALL 2020
Design Refinements
& Prototyping

Post-RFP award, the Native Hawaiian and university-based design teams joined forces and prototyped evolving design studies. As physical and digital concepts converged, UX features were also tested with campus stakeholders and users.

SUMMER 2021
Receive & Socialize
Full Scale Mock-up

"Gotham Book" and "Inter" were initially selected as the font families for the Wayfinding & Signage system pre-RFP. Gotham Book was ultimately adopted for the system and used for Building Names and other significant places in and around the campus, while the Inter" font family was chosen for print and digital applications.



FALL 2021
UHM WASC
Accreditation Visit

The Western Association of Schools & Colleges visited the campus in 2021 and asked to have the internal design team and other campus representatives present the Wayfinding & Signage project. It was ultimately named as 1 of 5 commendations that the university received for its re-accreditation

SPRING 2022
Pilot Wayfinding
Website Launched

The university team developed the pilot Wayfinding & Signage website to connect users standing in front of the Building Signs at the paired Medallion set into existing sidewalks. This effort kicked off creating and adopting new QR code policies at the flagship university campus.

FALL 2022
'Ili Marker Design
Refinement

'Ili Marker design refinements and content production for the printed didactic panels and digital screens became the teams' focus after the fabrication details and shop drawings for the building signs were approved.

The curated content focuses on informing viewers about the Hawaiian Land Division System, surrounding significant locations, and the use of the Polynesian Star Compass.

FALL 2023
Chicago-Based Grad School Partner
Communication Design Workshop

An inter-institutional collaboration between the Hawai'i-based university team and a Chicago-based graduate design program explored potential future digital interactions for the digital screens on the 'Ili Markers.

The Chicago-based faculty and graduate students developed design concepts focused on strategies for highlighting place-based activities that campus visitors can directly interact with.

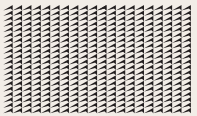
2025+
University Brand
& Marketing Element

Inspired by the dynamic watermark pattern's ability to gesture toward significant locations, the pattern system for is now being leveraged across mediums to highlight focal objects. This currently includes marketing assets, environmental graphics, bookstore products, and digital applications.

SUMMER 2018
Course Integration, ARCH 750G
Expert Interviews, Field Research
& Cultural Constructs

The Graduate Architecture Design Studio students worked in parallel with the Design & Research Team. The studio interviewed experts across diverse fields and leadership at the university. They also conducted field research about wayfinding through a lobby exhibit at the historic Waikīkī hotel, the Moana Surfrider. Students presented their final projects to university leadership and experts.

SPRING 2020
Selected RFP Team
Indigenous Cultural Practitioners & Artists
Fabricators, Wayfinding Consultants
& Construction Team



A public, design-build Request for Proposals resulted in a multidisciplinary team anchored by one of the most revered Native Hawaiian family of artists in Hawai'i. They conducted cultural research on the indigenous perspective on wayfinding and developed a custom watermark pattern and a concept for integrating a cultural practice into the design system.

SPRING 2021
Design Refinements
& Digital Design Explorations

Explorations utilizing the watermark pattern as a dynamic element were conducted through scripting exercises and provided a learning experience for Student Project Assistants under an external Computational Designer who was a former student of the faculty Co-Principal Investigator.

The cultural practitioner enthusiastically approved the use of digital technologies to affect the watermark pattern, in order to illustrate how indigenous knowledge systems can be translated with modern technologies.

FALL 2021
Sign Detailing
& Campus Map review

One of the most significant outcomes of the project was the development of the new "official" campus map. The inclusion of the boundaries of the Hawaiian Land Division System aligns with the university's goal of being a "Native Hawaiian Place of Learning". This design feature can be traced back to the early student work of ARCH 750G and from other, separately funded research efforts undertaken by other university experts.

SUMMER 2022
Building Sign Installations
Bilger & Life Sciences

The first two Building Sign prototypes and their paired Medallions were installed along McCarthy Mall below the allée of beloved Monkeypod Trees in late summer of 2022.

The "Beyond Wayfinding" project has since been awarded with:

- *2023 Fast Company's World Changing Ideas Award (Category Winner)*
- *2023 AIA Honolulu Distinctive Detail Award*
- *2023 SEGD Global Design Award (Wayfinding Category Winner)*
- *2023 Graphic Design USA's Digital Design Award*

SPRING 2023
'Ili Marker Didactic Panel &
Digital Screen Design

The university team selected a design communication approach, with feedback from the Native Hawaiian partners, after multiple rounds of graphic design studies.

The final didactic panels feature a high-resolution composite image of the ridgeline that surrounds the Mānoa Valley campus alongside mo'olelo that explain the meaning of the place names of both the 'ili the verticals are located in and the wahi pana they are paired with.

FALL 2025
'Ili Marker Fabrication
& Shipping to Hawai'i

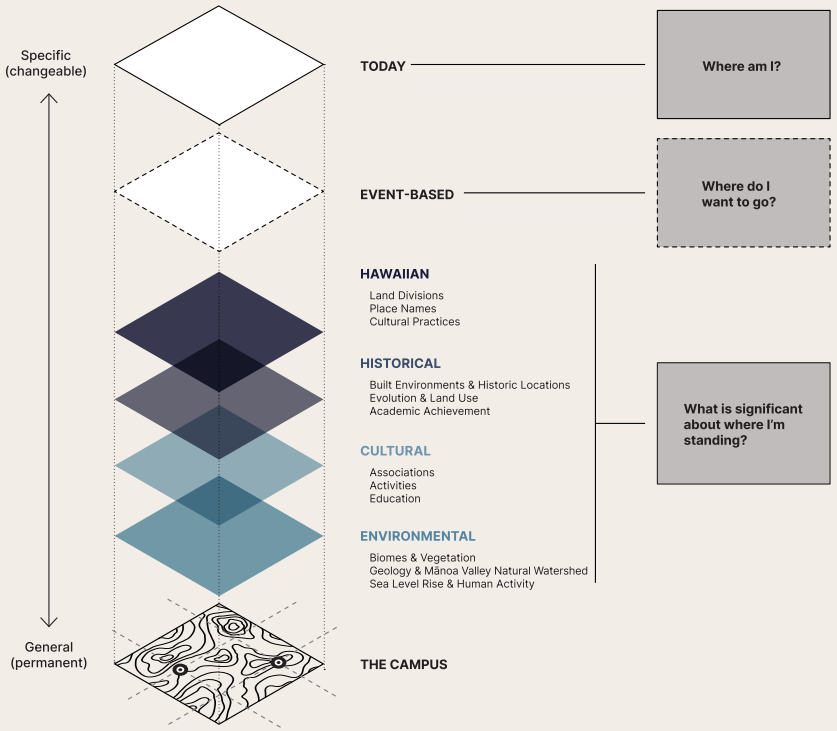
The first 'Ili Marker was fabricated in Seattle and will be shipped to Hawai'i for installation in spring 2026 as part of a larger campus design project re-imaging the student experience along McCarthy Mall.

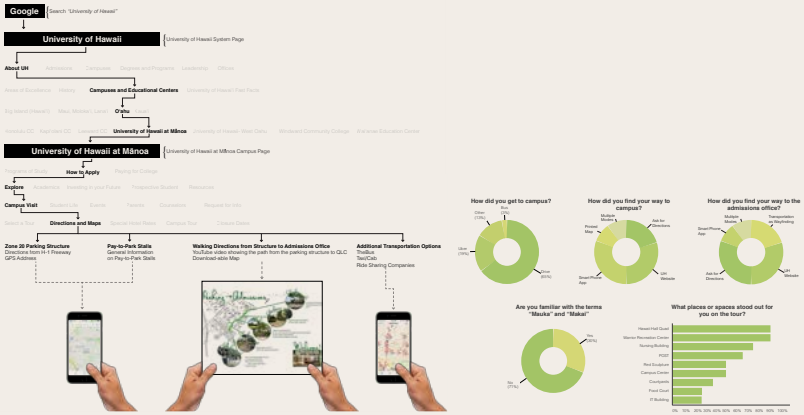
A total of 21 Building Signs and 4 "'Ili Markers are planned for deployment on the campus.

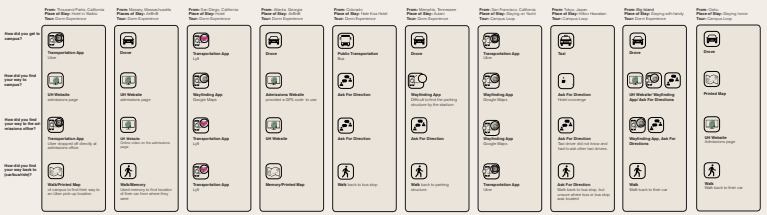
Map Verticals are also being installed across the campus, with the first two already being fabricated for 2026 installation.

Expanding Collaboration Between Academia & Administration

Nearly 240 people have contributed to this project, including 15 administrative offices and 8 academic departments. Fifteen paid student project assistants contributed more than 4,000 hours, 10 of whom continued for at least a year after graduation as full-time university employees. The project was reviewed by the System President, Vice President, and all Deans.







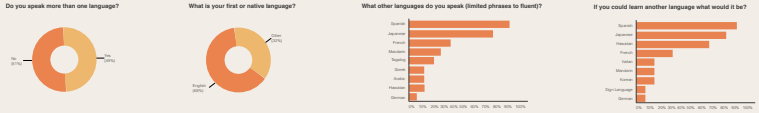
WAYFINDING SUMMARY: Tracing a complete journey among users, from arriving on campus, finding their destination, and then leaving campus, most people used at least two types of media to find their way around.

Layered Places Framework & User Research

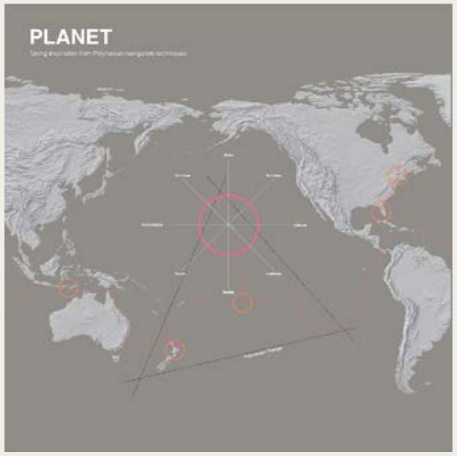
This project began with a series of interviews, campus tours, cross-departmental conversations, and the input of more than 150 faculty, researchers, and students. The Layered Places Framework served as the basis for subsequent phases.

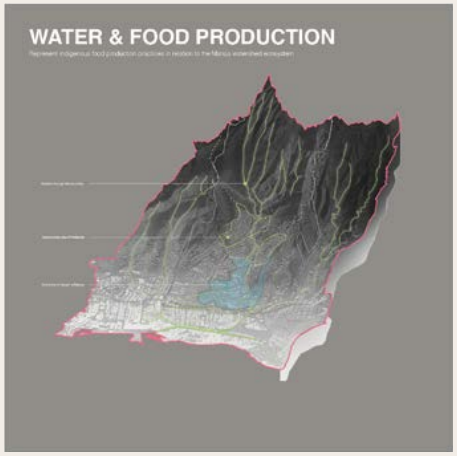
PARTICIPATION LEARNINGS: Information dissemination and activity participation is primarily a measure of convenience

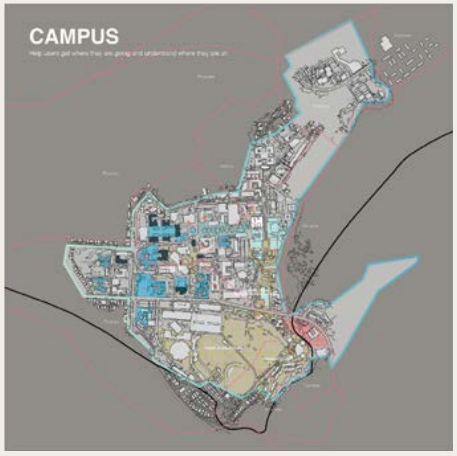
EDUCATION LEARNINGS: About half of respondents are bi-lingual or multi-lingual and most people were interested in learning another language including Hawaiian



ASSIMILATION LEARNINGS: People find their way around using a combination of wayfinding media and the choice depends on "high touch" versus "high tech" preferences







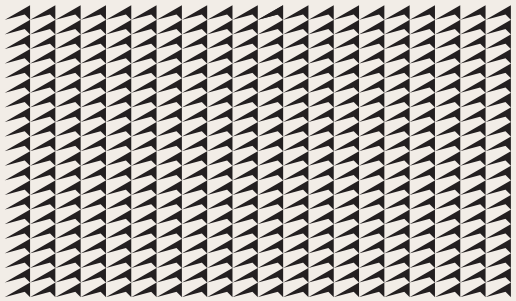
ARCH 750G Course Integration

This graduate design studio, conducted in Summer 2018, integrated research and design through collaboration with university experts in academia, leadership, and planning. Students developed proposals for installations across campus and collectively produced a series of maps that spanned from regional to local scale, informing later design phases.

Native Perspective on Wayfinding

"The Hawaiian perspective of wayfinding will always be from the seated position in the canoe. The *wa'a* is the navigational compass on land."

Nalani Kanaka'ole, *Seventh Generation Kumu Hula & Cultural Practitioner*



Watermark Pattern

The custom, geometric artwork represents navigation at sea and the directionality of ocean currents and wind patterns.

Traditionally, a carved *i'e kuku*, as seen on the opposite photo, is used to beat plant fibers into textiles for making clothing. The subtle embossed pattern is unique to each artist and serves as the background for applied patterns made of natural dyes.

Botanical Specimens

A collection of hand-cut, plant species endemic to Mānoa Valley was chosen for its meaning to, and relationship with, *kanaka 'ōiwi* as many of these plants are also recognized as *kinolau*, one of the many embodiments of *akua* (elemental forces).

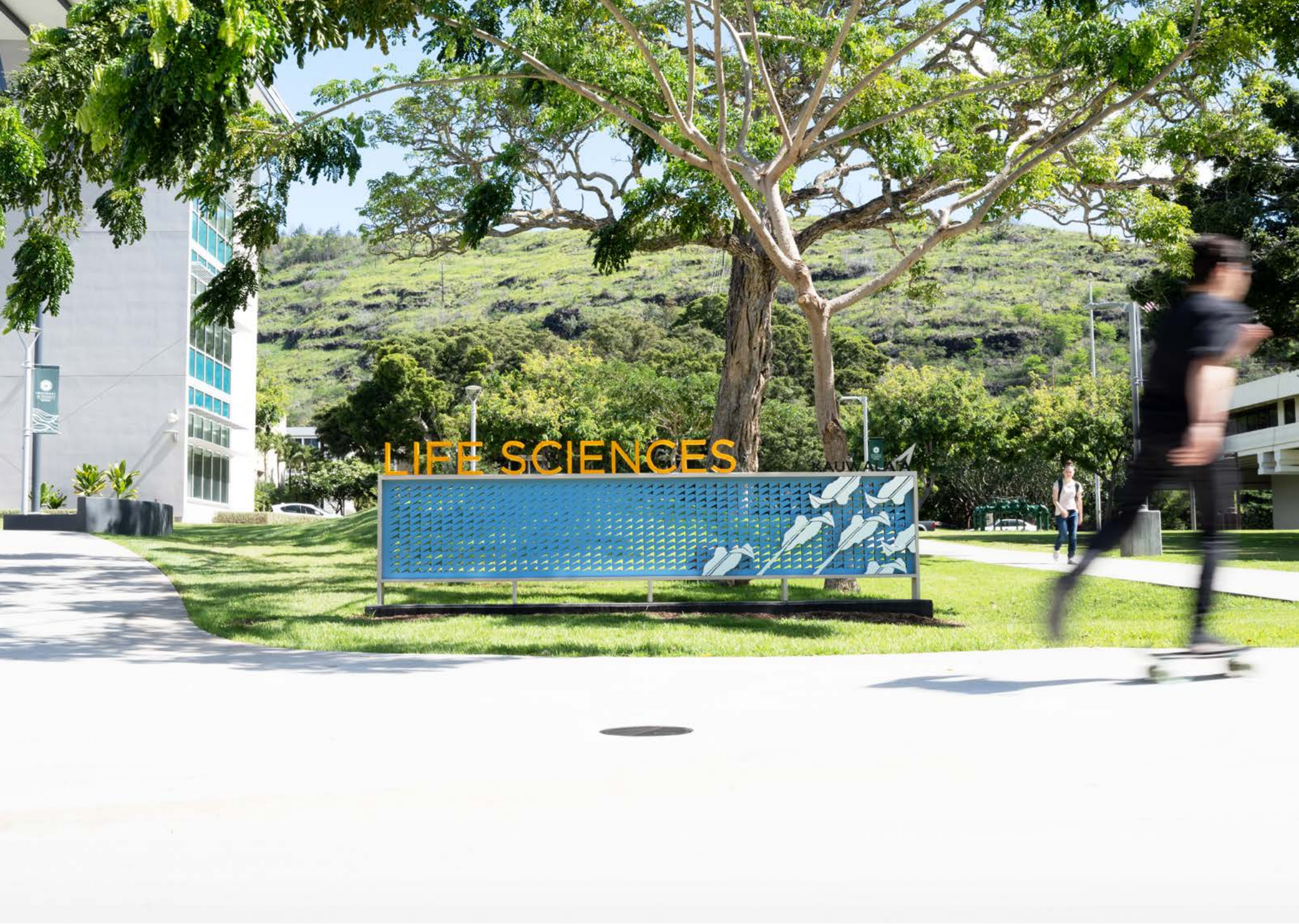
Kī *Kou* *Kukui* *Kalo* *'Ōhia*

Kumu leading a *kapa* making, team workshop with traditional tools and materials

I'e kuku beat the plant fibers into *kapa* textiles, their embossed patterns serve as signatures for the artists

Native Hawaiian Co-Designers & Cultural Practitioners

A renowned family of Hawaiian artists and cultural practitioners joined the university-based team through a public Request for Proposals. The mother, father, and son share familial connections to Mānoa and ancestry in Hilo extending back more than seven generations. Their artwork and culturally grounded concepts bring a multi-generational, place-based perspective to the project.



Paired Elements

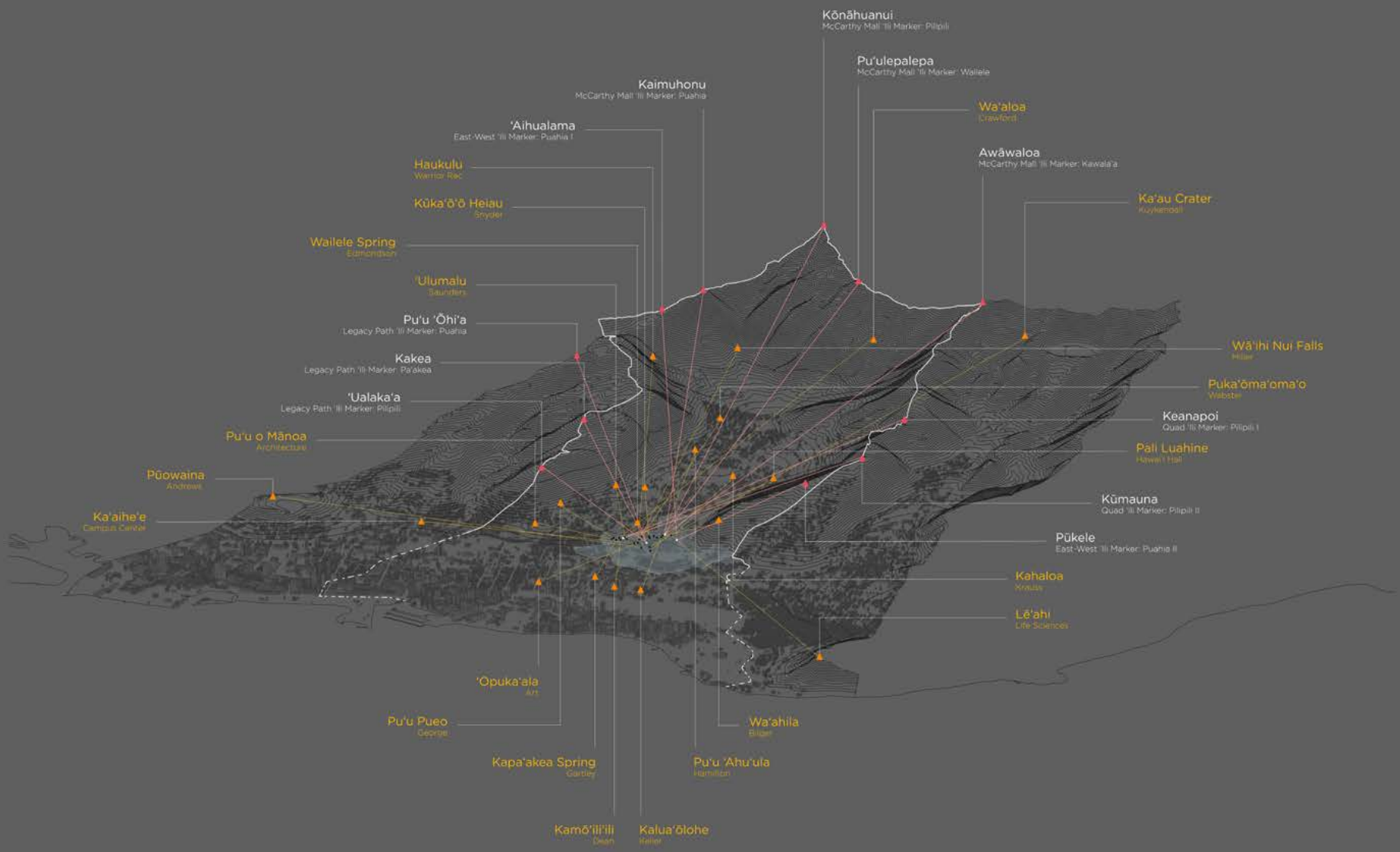
Building Signs set into the landscape are paired with bronze **Alignment Medallions** inlaid into campus pathways. Each construct layers information and cultural meaning, connecting viewers to online content that reveals the significance of pattern, color, botanical artwork, Hawaiian land divisions, nearby *wahi pana*, and details about the building and its occupants.

Alignment Medallion with Polynesian Star Compass

Alignment Medallions invite viewers to participate in a body alignment protocol associated with certain types of Hawaiian *heiau*. This practice heightens awareness of the direction of nearby significant sites. Each medallion is outlined by the Star Compass, which many Polynesian voyagers use for traditional ocean navigation.

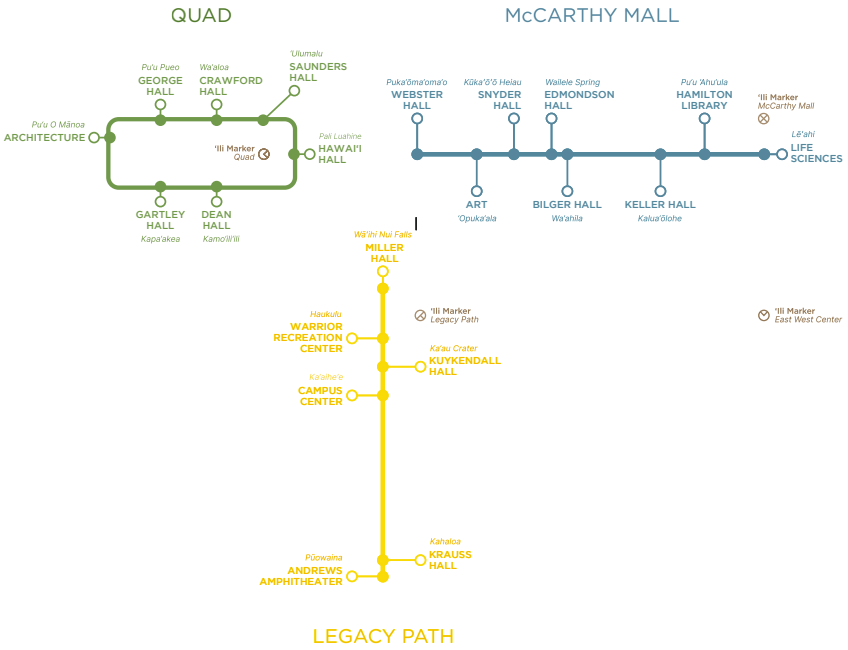
Body Alignment

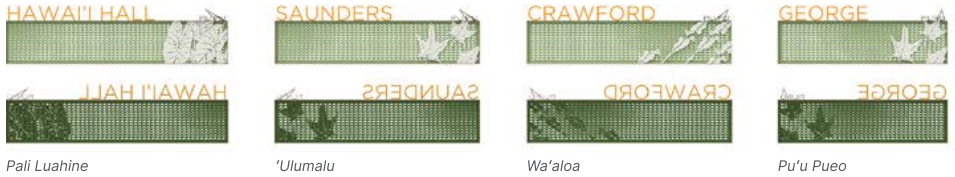
Certain Hawaiian *heiau* incorporate body alignment as a ritual practice connecting individuals to land, sun, and stars. Standing in relation to specific stones or sightlines, participants align their bodies with celestial movements and/or surrounding *wahi pana*. This embodied orientation reaffirms ancestral knowledge systems, linking spiritual awareness, environmental observation, and navigation through place.



Network of Wahi Pana

Wahi pana—storied places connected to Mānoa Valley—are paired with 21 Building Signs and 4 'Ili Markers composed of clusters of vertical blades. *Mo'olelo* (stories, myths, and legends) associated with each site allow campus visitors to understand the larger natural and cultural context that surrounds them.

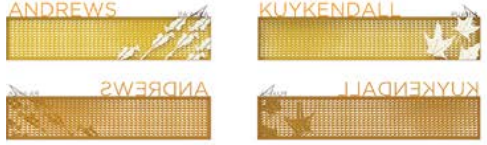




Pali Luahine *'Ulumalu* *Wa'aloa* *Pu'u Pueo*

Pu'u O Mānoa *Kapa'akea Spring* *Kamō'ili'ili*

Ka'aihe'e *Haukulu* *Wā'ihi Nui Falls* *Kahaloa*



Pūowaina *Ka'au Crater*

Lē'ahi *Pu'u 'Ahu'ula* *Wailele Spring* *Kūka'ō'ō Heiau*

Puka'ōma'oma'o *'Opuka'ala* *Wa'ahila* *Kalua'ōlohe*

Navigation Paths as Campus Infrastructure

When complete, the Wayfinding and Signage System will unify the campus's three main pedestrian axes, with brass inlays tracing navigation lines that link the medallions into a continuous, legible network.

PU'U
Pointer gesturing toward significant location surrounding Mānoa Valley.

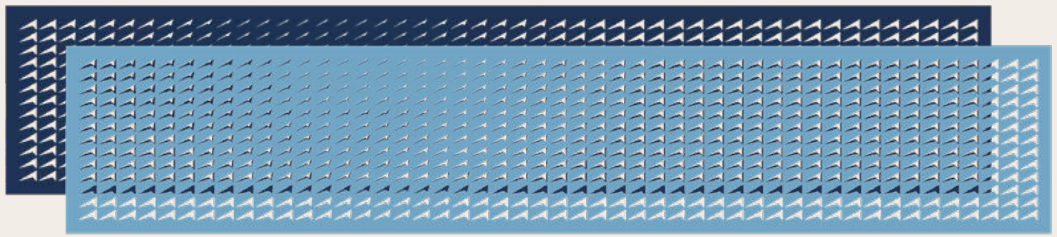
KAUWALA'A

'ILI
Small subdivision of land within the Native Hawaiian land division system.

KINOLAU
Representative botanical from Mānoa Valley's ma uka to ma kai (mountain to ocean) ecosystem.

LIFE SCIENCES

BUILDING NAME



WATERMARK & COLOR
Each building sign has unique geometric pattern, inspired by kapa textiles and ocean navigation, that gestures toward the same significant location surrounding the campus as the pu'u. Colorway related to Native Hawaiian understanding of place.

MEDALLION
Alignment object, paired with a building sign, includes Polynesian Star Compass, QR code, and pu'u labeled with name of significant location.

Components & Meaning

The building signs are viewable from all sides. The relative "flatness" of each sign is retained by closely spacing three separate layers. Two identical watermark panels are spaced a few inches apart from one another, creating a subtle moiré effect as the viewer moves past. Botanical specimens float in front of the counter-shaded panels sending deep shadows across the face in the sunlight.

‘Ili Markers & Map Verticals

Full-scale mock-ups, scale models, and digital prototypes were used across the entire design and development process.

Map Vertical
Student Success Center

‘Ili Marker
McCarthy Mall

‘ILI	WAHI PANA
Puahia	Kaimuhonu
Pilipili	Kōnāhuanui
Wailele	Pu‘u Lepalepa
Kauwala‘a	Awāwaloa

‘Ili Marker
Quad

‘ILI	WAHI PANA
Pilipili	Keanapoi
	Pūkele

‘Ili Marker
Legacy Path

‘ILI	WAHI PANA
Pa‘akea	Pu‘u Kākea
Puahia	Pu‘u ‘Ōhi‘a
Pilipili	‘Ualaka‘a

‘Ili Marker
East West Center

‘ILI	WAHI PANA
Puahia	‘Aihualama
	Kūmauna

Map Vertical
Legacy Path

‘Ili Markers & Map Verticals

Four ‘Ili Markers will be installed in key campus locations, with the first positioned near the convergence of four ‘ili boundaries. Additional single-blade verticals will be deployed through future capital projects, featuring campus maps on one side and digital screens with stories from the university’s communications office on the other.

Mānoa Valley Ridgeline

WAHI PANA CALL-OUT
The triangular icon and interpretive peak outline are utilized to draw attention to the topographic feature as a narrative element.

Repetition of color and geometry of these graphic elements are used to make a visual connection to the Unfolded Valley Diagram.

WAHI PANA NARRATIVE
The meaning of the place name is shared alongside related mo'olelo or stories passed through generations.

Information in this area of the didactic panel is meant to make a direct relationship to the underlying photo and the adjacent content.

'ILI BOUNDARY AS CAMPUS OVERLAY
Knowledge of the Hawaiian Land Division System is not broadly known on campus. This is especially true for those new to Hawai'i.

Overlaying the campus with 'ili lines is meant to regenerate and normalize this indigenous knowledge system.

PAIRING INTRODUCTION
Each vertical blade is paired with a wahi pana, or significant location. Each blade calls out the name of the 'ili, land division component, that it stands in.

This statement provides a glanceable, high-level summary of the content on the didactic panel.

RIDGELINE ZOOM
A photo of each referenced wahi pana is featured on each vertical blade. Composite images were stitched together from high resolution photos of the ridgeline surrounding Mānoa Valley.

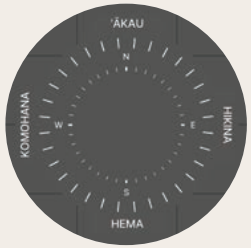
Photos provide views of the ridgeline that are frequently obscured by buildings and trees on and around the campus.

UNFOLDED VALLEY DIAGRAM
An illustration was created from geospatial data to show accurate elevations of the significant cultural sites that define this portion of the Ko'olau Range.

This drawing was created to highlight the dramatic elevation changes of the surrounding topography.

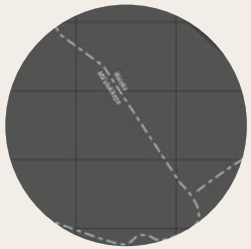
'Ili Marker Didactic Panels

A high-resolution image of the Ko'olau Range serves as the background for eleven didactic panels, each linked to the peaks and *wahi pana* surrounding the campus. These panels also identify the *'ili* in which the viewer is standing at each marker.

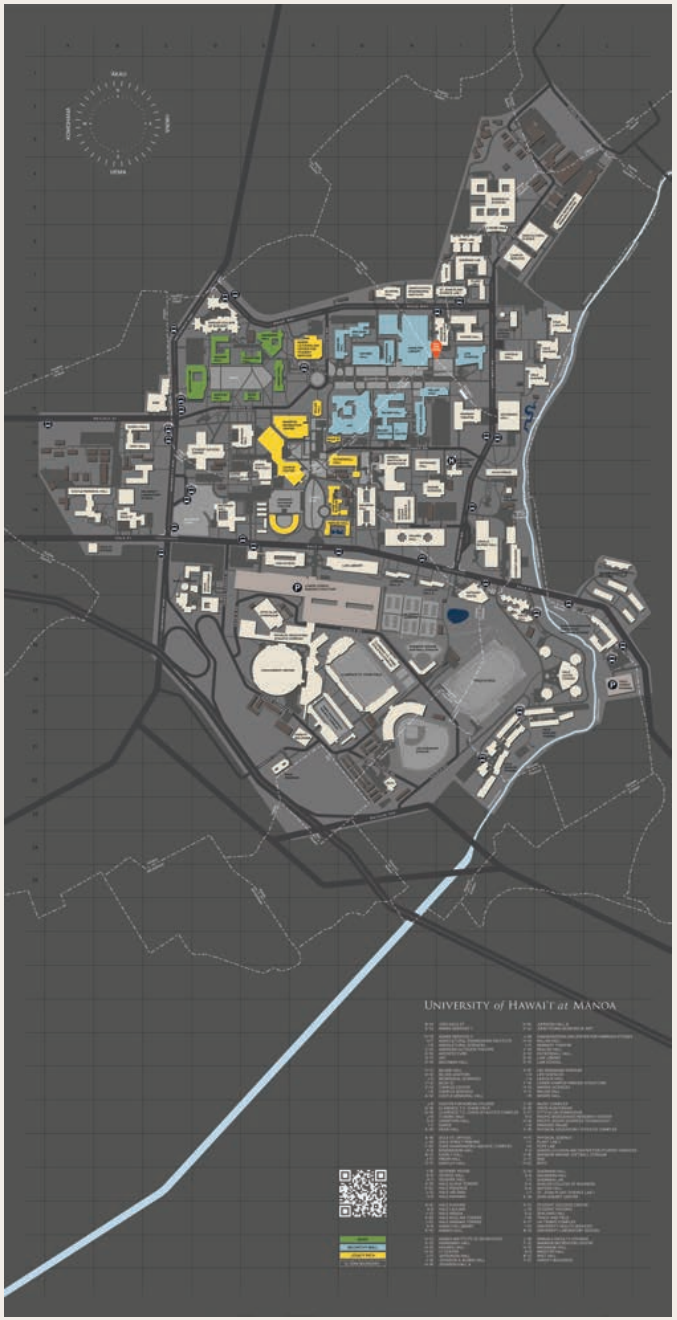


Polynesian Star Compass introduced as wayfinding tool

Watermark Pattern forms campus map's underlying structure

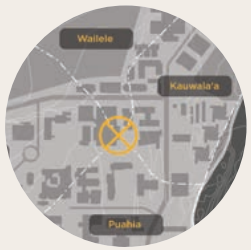


Overlay of ʻili lines from the Hawaiian Land Division System

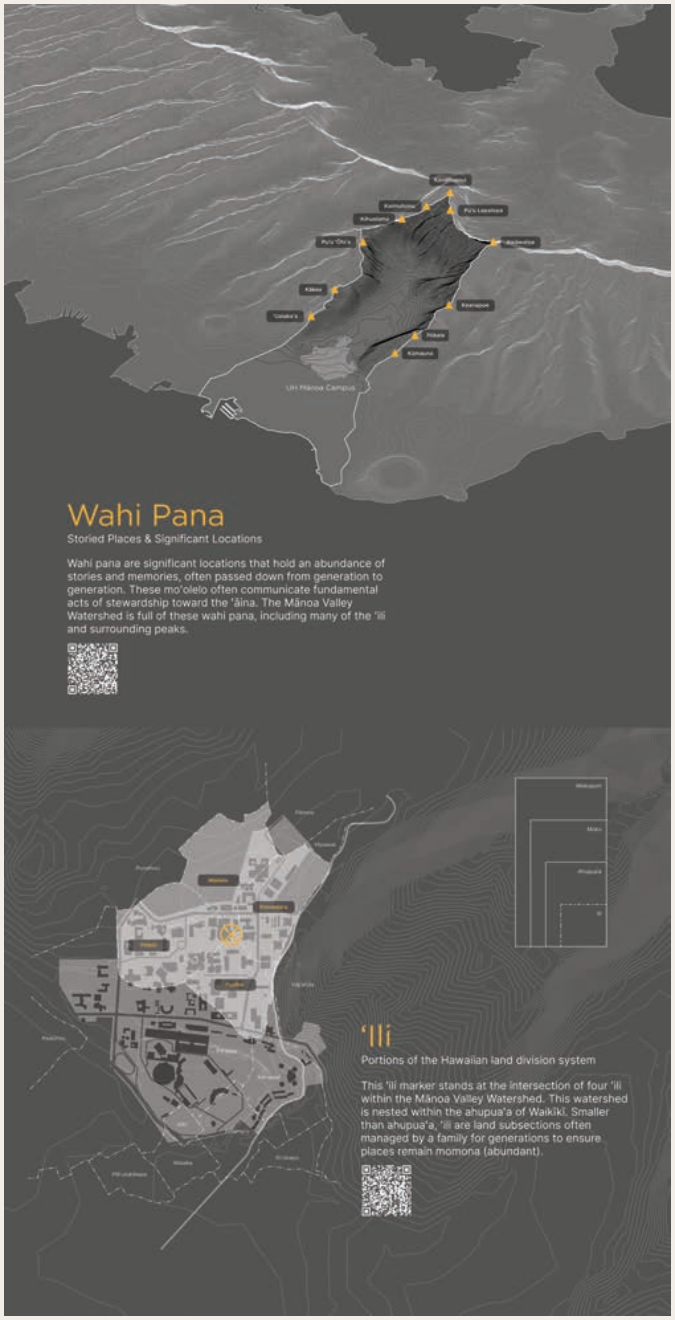


Wahi pana surrounding Mānoa Valley

Hawaiian Land Division System visualized as a nesting diagram



Key Hawaiian land divisions highlighted by ʻIli Marker installations

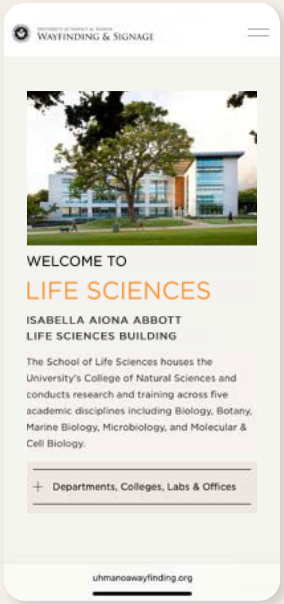


ʻIli Markers & Map Verticals

When the campus opened in 1912, its north–south orientation followed federal funding requirements, contrasting with the natural alignment of Mānoa Valley and the Koʻolau Range. The new campus map overlays *ʻili* boundaries atop this grid, using the watermark pattern to reconcile these spatial logics.

LIVE PILOT WEBSITE
Developed by the Hawai'i-Based, University Design Team

Building Info & Department Links



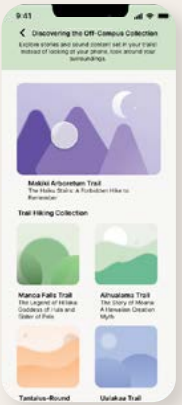
Place Names & Land Division System

Body Alignment Practice & Star Compass Tool

Endemic Species and Mo'olelo

MOBILE APPLICATION CONCEPT
Developed by a Team of Chicago-Based Graduate Students

Personal Welcome to Social Experience



Exploring Cultural Sites Via Parks, Trails & Hikes

Interactive Education Activities

Local Flora & Fauna Database

Nature-Based Photo Journal

Reflection & Contemplation Moments

Place-Based, Contextually Relevant Content

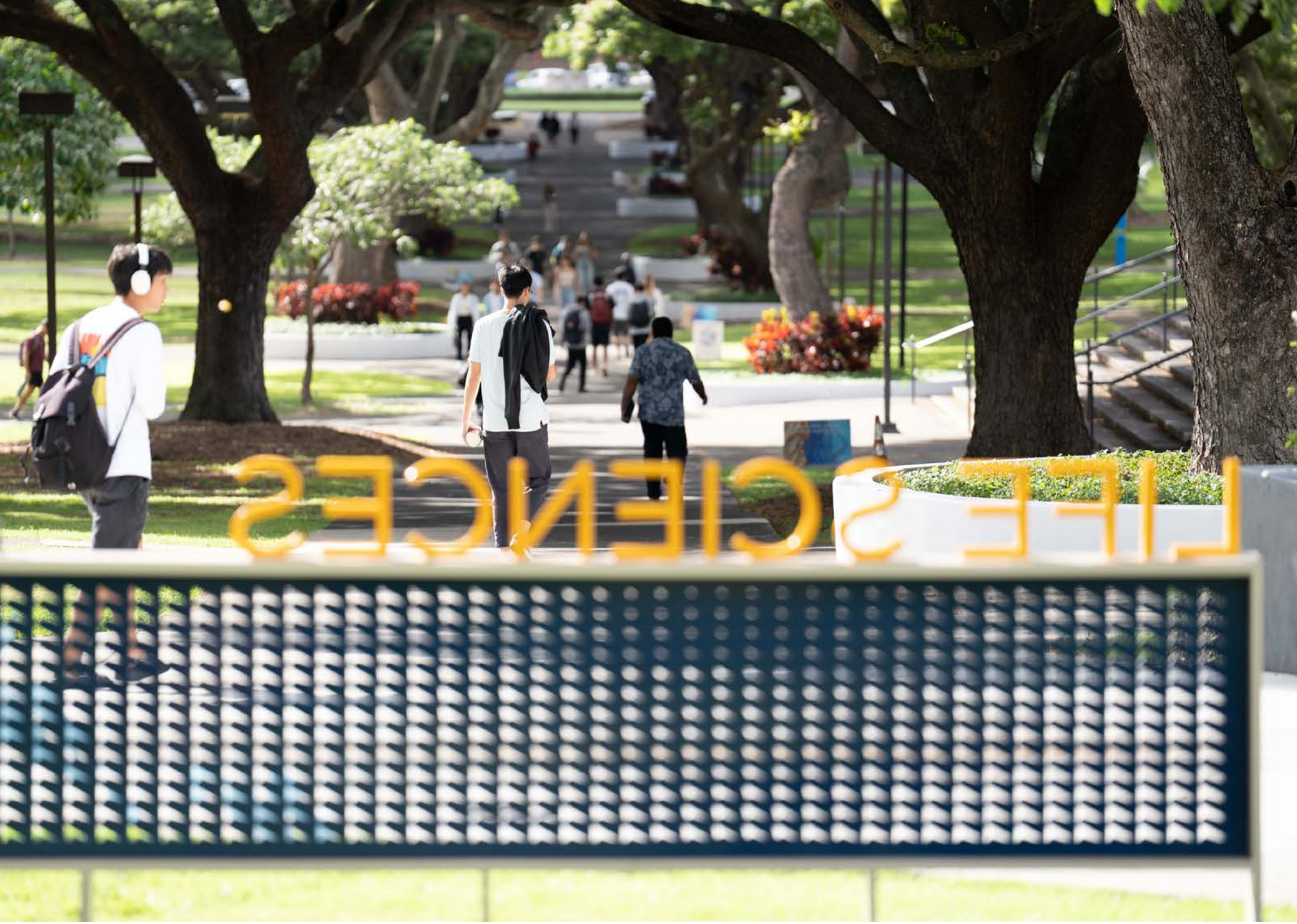
In partnership with university IT, the team launched a pilot Wayfinding & Signage website to collect visitor data and track place-based engagement. A collaboration with IIT's Institute of Design in Chicago extended this work, challenging students to envision digital interactions that deepen connection between physical and virtual systems.

Bilger Hall & Wa‘ahila Ridge

Bilger Hall, completed in 1950, is a prominent mid-century modern building on campus, originally designed to house the departments of Chemistry and Physics along one of the university’s main pedestrian axes.

Bilger Hall & Waʻahila Ridge

Wāhilā Ridge rises above Mānoa Valley, forming part of the Koʻolau Range, and is known for its native forest ecosystem, panoramic views, and deep cultural significance.



1 of 5 University Accreditation Commendations

This project was recognized as one of five commendations the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa received during its 2022 WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) accreditation review.