The Fifth South Pacific Conference in Pago Pago, American Samoa: *Fale*, Territoriality, and Islander Solidarity

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Under the leadership of Australia and New Zealand, Western nations administering territories in the South Pacific, including the Netherlands, France, Germany, and the United States, established the South Pacific Commission (SPC) in 1947 to promote regional interdependence and cooperation. The SPC deliberately limited its mandate to non-political domains, focusing on economic development, health, and social welfare, with a focus on technical assistance and training for Pacific Islanders.[1] As Greg Fry, a scholar of South Pacific politics and diplomacy, explains, the SPC's mission to improve the standard of living for Pacific Islanders offered a "system of control and a commitment to development of the [South Pacific] islands such that they would be an asset" to Western governments.[2] By framing "native welfare" as a central concern, colonial administrations utilized the SPC as a tool to construct a regionally integrated bloc of territories aligned with Western liberal democracies amid Cold War geopolitical tensions and the rising tide of decolonial movements (**fig. 1**).[3]

A *fale*-inspired auditorium for the 1962 Fifth South Pacific Conference in Pago Pago, American Samoa, operated simultaneously as an expression of US political power embedded in Native land and as a venue through which Pacific Islander delegates advanced shared interests. The Conference reworked a Western-defined, geographically bounded regional ethos into an oceanic, self-determined vision grounded in shared histories and aspirations amid the ideological

Fig. 1. A Map of the South Pacific.
Central Intelligence Agency, 2010.

The SPC formed three distinct bodies to achieve its objectives: a twelve-member Commission, with two representatives from each participating government, responsible for promoting research initiatives and offering technical assistance across its targeted sectors; a Research Council composed of qualified specialists to coordinate studies, surveys, and activities for the Commission; and a South Pacific Conference staffed with educated and skilled Pacific Islanders tasked with making recommendations to the Commission for assistance in economic, health, and social development.[4]

Meeting once every three years, the Conference exerted limited practical influence over SPC operations. Its role was strictly advisory; it had neither its own independent budget nor direct access to the Commission. Although Conference delegates offered a nuanced understanding of local needs gained through direct engagement with their communities, the infrequency of meetings, coupled with the SPC's bureaucratic constraints, significantly restricted the Conference's capacity to facilitate timely or substantive outcomes for Pacific Islanders. As Sandra Tarte observes, the Conference afforded "islanders a token role in the regional movement" crafted by Euro-American colonial governments.[5]

In this article, I examine the Fifth South Pacific Conference in Pago Pago, American Samoa, as a display of Western influence through architectural visibility. The US government initiated a robust building program centered on site specificity and materiality that culminated in the construction of an auditorium, the primary venue for Conference proceedings. The modern auditorium's design and visual references to Samoan *fale* (buildings, houses)

demonstrate how architectural form and aesthetic expression communicated US territoriality on a regional stage, not only as a spatial expression of US power, but also as a reinforcement of that power inscribed within the lands of American Samoa. However, as I demonstrate, many delegates began to strategically leverage Conference meetings in the auditorium to advance their collective physical, social, and economic interests amid rapid global transformations during the Cold War era. Pacific Islander delegates, increasingly aware of their power in holding together the regional ambitions of the West, voiced demands for greater decision-making authority within the SPC. They took steps at this Conference to articulate regionalism not as a Western-imposed framework, but as a dynamic, oceanic-centered vision grounded in shared histories and aspirations for self-determined futures.

Operation Talofa

The United States deliberately operated on the margins of the SPC, slipping in and out of view. US representatives attended Commission and Conference meetings, but contributed the lowest budgetary percentage to the SPC, around 12.5 percent, or $62,700, each year.[6] The US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State acknowledged the return on investment, "…[the SPC] is a thrifty organization with small overhead…[and] an effective instrument of US foreign policy."[7] For the United States, the SPC kept lines of communication with Australia and New Zealand open in an attempt to keep Pacific Island territories from falling into "unfriendly" communist hands.[8] However, the United States' marginal presence within SPC activities came to an end when member states turned their eyes to Pago Pago, American Samoa, to host the 1962 South Pacific Conference (**fig. 2**).

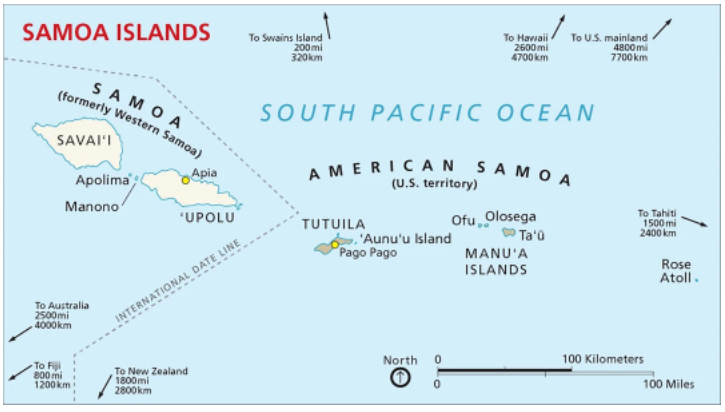

Fig. 2. South Pacific Ocean, Samoa Islands.

SPC planners highlighted that the Conference would be the first in a US territory. It presented an opportunity for the United States to counter claims that it was a colonial power by emphasizing the political consciousness of American Samoans who exercised semi-autonomy within the nation. American Samoa's political positioning emerged in the broader context of Western military engagement in the Pacific during the Spanish-American War of 1898 and it was formalized through pivotal legal milestones, including the Deeds of Cession (1900 and 1904). These treaties transferred Samoan sovereignty over Tutuila and other eastern islands in the archipelago to the United States and they stipulated that "the rights of the Chiefs in each village and of all people concerning their property according to their customs shall be recognized."[9] These agreements aligned with the Native Lands Ordinance (1900) that prohibited "any person who has less than one-half native blood" from owning land.[10] Within this framework, *matai* (local chiefs) retained control of their villages and *fa'a Samoa*, the customs and daily respectful behavior practiced by every Samoan.[11] *Fa'a Samoa* encapsulates identity and culture. It reflects the social organization of society, relationships between individuals, and epistemological understandings about the universe. *Fa'a Samoa* is the foundation of Samoan culture, inherently connecting Samoans to the land and built environment through the *matai* system. It unites the Samoan community together by fostering shared values of obedience, respect, love, and service.[12] Thus, Samoans from the eastern islands, when confronted with US colonial and military pressures, made a calculated decision to strategically negotiate for a territorial framework that preserved Samoan ties to cultural values and ancestral lands within the broader structure of US governance.

American Samoa became an unincorporated and unorganized US territory whose residents were classified as non-citizen US nationals who are theoretically, but not fully, part of the body politic. The Ratification Act (1929) and a series of controversial Supreme Court decisions collectively known as the *Insular Cases* (1901-1914) codified this unique political and legal relationship. These rulings established that US territories are subject to Congress' authority, allowing the federal government to exercise indefinite sovereignty without extending the full protections and obligations of the Constitution. Administrative oversight was first vested in the US Department of the Navy and, after 1956, in the US Secretary of the Interior. American Samoans have fundamental protections, including freedom of speech,

religion, and assembly, as well as due process, access to federal aid, freedom of movement within US borders, and a non-voting delegate in the House of Representatives. Despite this federal framework, American Samoa maintains a degree of internal self-governance through its own political institutions, including a Fono (an elected bicameral legislature), an elected governor, and a cabinet of directors that coordinates the branches of the government bureaucracy.[13] Samoan historian Line-Noue Memea Kruse describes American Samoa's political structure as a "hybrid system that accommodated both Sāmoan culture and custom and Western democratic jurisprudence."[14] For many years, local Samoan leaders and federal officials cited this constitutional adaptability as essential to maintaining the semi-autonomy of the territory.

American Samoa's unique territorial relationship with the United States made it a strategically advantageous location for the Conference, especially in the context of communist nations' Cold War criticisms that identified the moral inconsistency of Western democratic nations acting as colonial powers. American Samoa served as a symbolic counterpoint, an example of a Pacific territory whose inhabitants had ostensibly chosen political alignment with the democratic West. The selection of Pago Pago for the Conference enabled the United States, and by extension the SPC, to present an image of legitimate and mutually beneficial Western oversight in the region that was consensual rather than coercive.

However, American Samoa's territorial affiliation with the United States did little to dispel widespread criticisms across the region regarding the federal government's neglect of its architecture and infrastructure. Crumbling and non-existent roads, inefficient water systems and docks, and retrofitted military edifices characterized the urban context of Pago Pago. After years of neglect following the closure of US Naval Station Tutuila in 1951, Clarence Hall's infamous *Reader's Digest* article, "Samoa: America's Shame in the South Seas," captured the architectural realities of the territorial scene. In 1961, Hall wrote, "…the visitor is shocked to encounter government buildings peeling and rotting on their foundations, beautiful Pago Pago Bay marred and befouled by hideous over-water outhouses, rutty and teeth-jarring roads unrepaired for years, [and] crumbling reservoirs and ancient leaky water mains."[15] Hall blamed the penny-pinching policies of the US Department of the Interior for the country's apathy toward American Samoa.[16]

Knowles K. Ryerson, Senior US Commissioner for the SPC and the 1962 Conference Chair, expressed concern about Pago Pago's appearance, stating that doubts raised by journalists and foreign governments regarding US investment in the territory weakened the nation's security and made the region vulnerable to "unfriendly" communist nations. In a letter to Senator Oren E. Long from Hawai'i, Ryerson surmised, "I still feel very strongly that if we cannot put up some respectable buildings that will be of use so that we can put on a good Conference, that the next session of the Commission might well consider withdrawing its acceptance of the United States' invitation."[17] By emphasizing improvements to American Samoa's architecture and infrastructure, Ryerson underscored the importance of the built environment in asserting the nation's credibility and competence as an SPC member nation and its ability to signal territorial stability to a Cold War global audience.

President John F. Kennedy appointed Hyrum Rex Lee, the Idaho-born, former deputy commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as governor of American Samoa in May 1961. The president charged the aggressive and resourceful governor with establishing operative plans for the Fifth South Pacific Conference. Government officials characterized their architectural and infrastructural objectives in American Samoa as a rehabilitative effort, an unparalleled opportunity to "face up to its responsibilities" and show the world that the United States "will do justice to a minority group, however small and however far away."[18] Governor Lee and Chairman Ryerson collaborated to co-curate a development agenda that would reflect favorably on US politics and shore up regional cohesion as a way to subdue potential Pacific Islander movements for self-determination that might weaken US control over global resources and influence.

Governor Lee secured over $22 million for a robust building program through a protectionist, paternalist appeal to Congress: "For years the South Pacific has been a vacuum. Now our enemies are moving into that vacuum. Here's our chance to show the world how we can help underdeveloped peoples toward a self-sufficient life."[19] He warned that the poor conditions of the territory signaled the failure of US governance and a potential opening for communist penetration into the Pacific. Lee's plan included long- and short-term investments in roads, water systems, docks, power plants, housing units, studios, educational television transmitters, and three new school buildings. The governor envisioned a new auditorium as the centerpiece and emblem

of the US government's newfound commitment to American Samoa.[20]

US military personnel and civilian engineers arrived in American Samoa in late 1961 to support preparations for the Conference as part of "Operation Talofa," a large-scale development project regarded by many as a welcome investment in the territory.[21] Materials and equipment had been shipped from California and Hawai'i to enhance efficiency and accelerate construction. Over one hundred Seabee naval reservists and personnel from the 14th Naval District and Public Works Center based at Pearl Harbor, Hawai'i, trained nearly sixty Samoans to operate heavy machinery, pave roads, transport coral fill, and lay floor tile. Samoans painted their homes and community facilities. Coconut palms were dug from the hills and transported by mobile cranes to complete the landscaping around the Conference's main architectural feature, the auditorium.[22]

George (Pete) J. Wimberly designed the auditorium. Wimberly trained in Washington, California, and Arizona before arriving in Hawai'i in the 1940s to work as a designer for the Contractors Pacific Naval Air Bases and the Public Works Design Section, Pearl Harbor. After renovating the famed Royal Hawaiian Hotel (1927) in Waikīkī, he opened an architectural firm in 1945.[23] Wimberly swiftly garnered a reputation as a contextual architect whose designs were deeply rooted in their surroundings by merging communities and their histories. The Polynesian-themed resorts at Honolulu's Coco Palms (1956) and Tahiti's Hotel Bora Bora (1961) defined his design approach that integrated modern construction techniques with local materials, forms, and decorative motifs. Wimberly famously stated: "The most successful project… will be the one with the strongest sense of place."[24]

Wimberly's auditorium took the form of *fale*, a Samoan architectural structure composed of wood and thatch construction, open sides supported by posts, and high vaulted roofs (**fig. 3**). It had an in-between quality–neither a fully actualized *fale,* nor completely devoid of cultural reference points. The concrete, glass, and stone auditorium stretched along the main thoroughfare of Utulei village. The structure's long profile sat atop a slightly elevated base set back from the street. Thick columns along the exterior supported the high-domed, double-ovoid roof, while descending eaves and pillars framed the curved entryway a few feet below. The auditorium's shape and form provided an ample, open interior space with exposed structural elements (**fig. 4**).

Fig. 3. Traditional House (Fale), 1890–1910.
Te Papa, Museum of New Zealand (O.001296). Photograph by Thomas Andrew, Gift of Alison Beckett and Robert McPherson, 1996.

Fig. 4. Auditorium, cars, bus, and main road from Pago-Pago Harbor, 1962/1963.
Feleti Barstow Public Library, American Samoa. Polynesian Photo Archive, PH-BC-55, Photo Box #21.

However, a Samoan *fale* is more than a shelter or an artistic expression connotative of a singular place. As explained by Albert Refiti, a scholar of spatial design and architectural environments in the Pacific, a *fale* connects to the spiritual realm and "shows how space originally emerged in Samoan thought."[25] Solo o le Vā, the Samoan creation chant, as Refiti recounts, describes the expulsion of several *tufuga*—descendants of the god Tagaloa-a-lagi—from heaven for defecting from their assigned duties. Tufuga were relegated to roaming Samoa, offering their services as master carpenters or house builders, utilizing their technical knowledge and skills to lead construction within familial settlements.[26] This Samoan narrative reflects how and why the *fale* building process is a collaborative effort between *tufuga* and family members. Gift-giving ceremonies, rituals,

and negotiations precede and follow the erection of *faletele* (round meeting house) and *faleafolau* (large oval guest or meeting house), the most complex forms of congregational spaces for permanent and temporary community members to gather. Felled timber is stripped and smoothed for use as posts, beams, crossbeams, and ridgepoles; the wood is punctuated with joints and grooves to determine the shape and height of the *fale*. Long ropes made of natural fibers, woven tightly in complex and ornamental patterns around the wooden frame, lash together all of the components. A thatched roof and a platform base covered with gravel, basalt, and/or pebbles complete the design.[27]

Samoan poet and writer Albert Wendt describes *fale* architecture as a linguistic and societal worldview entrenched within *tā-vā* (time-space) dynamics that "bind entities together" in forming relational, Oceanic cartographies.[28] Samoan architecture, as Refiti explains, orders space to engender awareness about "the ever-moving present" between the ancestors and those who are becoming ancestors.[29] The manner of becoming occurs over a duration —a "woven time"—not bound by separate notions of past, present, and future. Instead, the concept of *tā*, as anthropologist Micah Van der Ryn elucidates, denotes time as a rhythmic beat—as a "momentary intersection" or "bracketing of events" that produces harmony and beauty in art and architectural forms.[30] *Vā*, "the co-openness or space between," complements harmonious and beautiful social spaces because it influences relational behavior between "beats, things, and people" within *fale*.[31] Refiti describes how the *tā-vā* paradigm manifests in architectural form and use:

> Each person sits around the circle's circumference equidistant from the center, which is the place of the divine. Yet the circle is oriented by axes of value which divide the circumference into clearly differentiated arcs. Within these arcs, each point is different from the next … these points are represented by the posts holding up the conical roof of the ceremonial house, itself comprised of a circular base, a circle of posts and a roof without internal partitions.[32]

He identifies the *fale* center as the most sacred space; it is the realm of the ancestors. The *fale* facilitates the engagement of people and objects within a constantly shifting time-space continuum. In this way, Samoan architecture is not static or fixed in time.[33] Samoan architecture is generative; it is, as Van der Ryn explains, "a

meaningful, tangible metaphor, and mnemonic tool—a kind of model for society and the system of relations and principles that form its structure."[34] The physical form of *fale* and the actions by humans and more-than-humans within it suggest that Samoan architecture is organized within the framework of social connections and complementary relationships that extend beyond contained space and eschew quantifiable boundaries.

Wimberly's auditorium did not replicate Samoan epistemological imaginings of *fale* as interdependent, relational constructs; instead, the auditorium's shape and function enfolded a stripped-down *fale* design within an aesthetic of mid-century Western architecture. The architect prioritized function and simplicity, using an architectural rubric that expressed a sensitivity to location to capture the "spirit of things" in Pago Pago. [35] Newspapers published images of the auditorium alongside text lauding American Samoa as the "Cinderella of the New Frontier," a title that alluded to the US government, its people, and its manifold political, diplomatic, and architectural interventions as a transformative savior in the so-called Third World.[36] The New Frontier embodied an American ethos popularized by President John F. Kennedy that presented democracy and freedom as benevolent US exports that did not benefit Empire, but upheld the nation itself.[37] This language incorporated American Samoa into the New Frontier and reconfigured the mythic narrative of Manifest Destiny. Discursively, Americans were no longer pioneers violently acquiring land from Indigenous communities but, as communication scholar Leroy R. Dorsey describes, mythological heroes "fighting for world order" and "the development of human culture" within and beyond the nation's continental boundaries.[38] In this way, the *fale*-inspired auditorium functioned not only as a physical structure, but also as a symbolic vessel for American imperial mythmaking, reframing architectural form as a tool for asserting colonial authority under the guise of regional order.

Mutual Benefits

The Conference opened on July 18, 1962. Holding a microphone, Chairman Ryerson delivered his opening remarks on a platform in the auditorium behind a podium facing rows of seated delegates under the vertical sweep of the roof's exposed beams (**fig. 5**). Ryerson emphatically stressed the SPC as a force for good and its Conference as the

most important activity of the commission.[39] He positioned the Conference as an interlocutor to negotiate the varied interests of member states and territories, a perspective belying the actual influence of SPC in securing 'native welfare' and exaggerating the role of Pacific Islanders within it. Ryerson's words from the elevated stage overlooking the seated delegates reinforced the SPC's mandate to remain apolitical.

Fig. 5. Interior view of the auditorium facing the stage, 1962/1963.
Feleti Barstow Public Library, American Samoa. Polynesian Photo Archive, PH-151-23, Photo Box #21.

A letter to Conference attendees read on behalf of President Kennedy by Stewart Udall, US Secretary of the Interior, reinforced Ryerson's public statements about the SPC's importance and its territorial commitments. The president declared:

> We in the United States feel very much a part of the Pacific family… . It is especially gratifying to me that you, the representatives of the Pacific Islanders, have come together here to discuss problems of common interest and look for common solutions. In the last analysis it is you who must solve the area's problems, with the help, of course, of the participating Governments. We live in an increasingly interdependent world. In a very real sense the problems of one island or territory are of concern to all. The South Pacific Conference offers the opportunity for all of you to bring your abilities to bear on the problems of the area … economic, educational and social. The sharing of knowledge and experience will build a firm foundation for their

> societies and permit them to participate more fully in the developments of the 20th Century in all fields of human activity.[40]

The president emphasized Pacific Islander shared knowledge(s), a sentiment appealing to Indigenous ontologies about oceanic boundlessness, but shrouded in a veil of paternalism. Kennedy downplayed Western geopolitical strategies by stressing nonradical institutional and economic objectives. He skirted colonial narratives of oppression and domination, allowing for discourses about the political consciousness of Pacific Islanders to enact changes through purposeful alignment with the West.

Despite the president's rhetoric suggesting that connectedness among Islanders fosters productive regional relationships, Ryerson anticipated questions from Conference delegates about the inconsistency of US actions regarding decolonial efforts and sovereignty movements in the region. Before the Conference, he requested clarification from the Kennedy administration regarding the US vote at the United Nations in support of Angolan independence, but its refusal to send representatives to support the newly elected New Guinea Council in April 1960.[41] This decision by the United States disregarded the progress made by the Papuan people in the South Pacific, who called for referendums to determine their political status amidst competing Dutch and Indonesian claims to the territory. Harland Cleveland, Assistant Secretary of State, replied to Ryerson's inquiry with claims about a US "policy of neutrality" to maintain friendly relations with the Dutch and Indonesian governments. Ryerson judiciously challenged Cleveland's neutrality, accusing the United States of succumbing to political pressures from Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, because of his growing relationship with Nikita Khrushchev, premier of the Soviet Union.[42] Historian David Webster argues that this US directive was evidence of the Kennedy administration's practice of realpolitik, the idea that specific circumstances and factors, rather than ideological or ethical standards, dictate political and foreign policy.[43]

The federal government's non-action in the South Pacific, paired with Kennedy's proclamation to the Conference, revealed that the United States claimed to support self-determination and self-government in principle, but wavered in applying those principles.[44] The neutral statements by Ryerson and Kennedy in the Conference auditorium exposed the contradiction between the nation's stated ideals and

selective actions, revealing the limits of American support for decolonization and exposing a regional policy shaped more by geopolitical expediency than by democratic commitments to freedom and equality.

The United States and the SPC worked to maintain access to the people and spaces of the Pacific. The auditorium was a territorial venue for Western colonial powers to promote Pacific Islander engagement on shared regional issues, thereby fostering and reinforcing a sense of security and strategic alignment during the Cold War. Gone was the sacred center of the Samoan *fale* reserved for the ancestral divine; in its place, a podium occupied by representatives of colonial powers who articulated a vision of regional cooperation that ostensibly served mutual interests, but reinforced asymmetrical power dynamics between Pacific Island communities and Western states.

(Re)Claiming Pacific Spaces and Places

Territoriality complemented this rhetorical maneuvering at the Conference, revealing fluctuating positions on dispossession, occupation, and colonialism with the United States and the SPC. Geographer Robert Sack defines territoriality as "an attempt to affect, influence, or control actions, interactions, or access by asserting and attempting to enforce control over a specific geographic area."[45] Territoriality operates as a framework of power that organizes space, shaping both the physical environment and the sociopolitical dynamics within it by facilitating inclusion for some while reinforcing exclusion for others. The auditorium, in this context, symbolically expressed the spatial order that the United States, and by extension, the SPC, aimed to project on the global Cold War stage. Colonized Pacific territories were discursively integrated into the ideological systems of democracy and capitalism, serving as a counter-narrative to communist-supported decolonial movements that challenged Western hegemony. The auditorium mirrored and amplified the intentions of the United States and the SPC: it presented modernist space that ostensibly welcomed Pacific Islanders yet delimited the scope of acceptable discourse.

The visible cracks in the United States' foreign policy and the lack of explicit recognition from SPC officials about changing political tides toward decolonization and Indigenous self-determination created an opening for Pacific Islander delegates to test institutional norms. Delegates challenged what Tongan-Fijian scholar Epeli Hauʻofa

characterizes as attempts by regional organizations to render Pacific Islanders "forever dependent and indebted."[46] Through discursive and strategic interventions, delegates actively disrupted the rhetoric of colonialism, reclaiming Pacific spaces and pursuing island-specific agendas aligned with their collective aspirations. They did so within a *fale*-inspired venue conceived to serve the interests of Western governing powers in shaping a unified Pacific regional identity.

Conference delegates cautiously navigated politically adjacent topics beyond the dedicated scope of the SPC's mandate. They suggested restraint by the SPC's member nations in matters related to the stewardship of island lands and waters. In the places and spaces of American Samoa where *matai* had strategically negotiated for indirect rule amidst Western political and military encroachment in the early twentieth century, Conference delegates suggested that "any moves to change existing land tenure systems be made with caution and with proper recognition of the rights of the people of territories concerned."[47] This recommendation served as a discursive interruption of entrenched colonial practices of Indigenous dispossession enacted in service of economic, military, and tourism interests. Delegates implicitly challenged dominant paradigms of coercion and consent by advocating for legislative mechanisms that would safeguard the "dignity, culture and customs" of Indigenous communities. [48] By aligning the protection of Pacific Island lands with the discourse of "rights," delegates mobilized a Western political vocabulary to signal democratic principles while resisting the portrayal of the Pacific as a residual zone of colonial exploitation.

Conference delegates also requested that the SPC appeal to its governing nations and international organizations for financial resources to achieve their economic objectives. They requested credit, price stabilization, price differentials, and bonuses to enhance the cash return to producers in the agricultural sector.[49] These propositions signaled a willingness to engage with regional and international financial markets as a means of integrating more effectively into the global economy. Tomasi Simiki from the Tongan delegation declared, "We live in a money economy. Whether we, Pacific Islanders, like it or not is beside the point. We simply have to accept the fact, and then set about finding ways and means to enable us to participate somewhat more effectively in our new world as we find it."[50] Simiki's statement reads as a reluctant acknowledgment of the power of foreign institutions and systems over the lives of Pacific

Islanders; however, his statement may also be interpreted as a strategic call to action encouraging Pacific communities to develop locally appropriate methods to work within, around, and through colonialism's hidden and visible violence to navigate both the overt and covert structural systems associated with capitalist economies.

The SPC's mission to facilitate a regional identity was predicated on the continued participation of Pacific Islanders. *Pacific Islands Monthly* reported delegates' "behind the scenes" conversations in Pago Pago about the potential for an organizational restructuring to move Pacific Islanders from advisory positions to active regulatory involvement. Discussions among delegates prompted two specific proposals: allowing delegates to introduce and debate political topics during the Conference and giving Conference delegates the opportunity to evaluate and comment on the Commission's work. Island leaders framed their lack of say and authority in the SPC as a performative act by governing nations to maintain control of the territories.[51] To this end, language in the Conference report was direct and to the point: the SPC governing structure should include Pacific Islanders at "all [SPC] levels in planning and decision-making, in policies and projects designed for their benefit."[52] Politics had become deeply embedded in Pacific Islander life, such that their demands could not be ignored by the SPC nor obscured by modern architectural upgrades and urban development projects.

Ryerson's closing address at the Conference was attuned to the shifting mood and recommendations made by the delegates in Pago Pago. He described the Conference and the auditorium as a "symbol of the best of the old and the new," commenting that delegates had, in his view, learned how to communicate better with each other and make recommendations to the Commission.[53] The chairman publicly asserted that Pacific Islanders should participate more in SPC leadership and events, but he did not interrogate the SPC institutional structures; instead, he put the onus squarely on "trained and qualified" Islanders to take "an active part in the direction of Commission activities."[54] While not speculating as to the potential form of an SPC reconstituted with increased Islander participation, the chairman notably used language alluding to an American ethos of individualism and self-initiated ambition. Ryerson's speech described:

> a dream of a South Pacific Commission … whose members may be quickened by common endeavor to

> take their full places alongside free men and women everywhere, in a world where each individual could have opportunity to develop his talents to the full, if he so willed, so long as he injured no one else in the doing. The power for that enterprise was the power of faith. If they hoped and believed in something they took off their coats, rolled up their sleeves, and really worked until it was achieved.[55]

Ryerson's proclamation underscored the coexistence of American paternalism and an ethos of rugged individualism. The SPC, cast as a "benevolent" regional institution, reinforced the conviction that individuals shape their destinies through self-reliance and the pursuit of upward mobility within a free-market system.

Conversations about the SPC's future and the role of Pacific Islanders within it did not end with the closing plenary session in the Pago Pago auditorium on July 27, 1962. In a post-Conference letter to President Kennedy in August of the same year, Ryerson departed from his tempered remarks at the Conference. He explicitly recommended that the organization modernize through "the admission [to the SPC] of additional independent and quasi-independent states such as Samoa and Tonga."[56] Ryerson evoked claims by High Chief Fiame Mataʻafa Faumuina Mulinuʻu II, the first prime minister of the Independent State of Samoa, wherein he stated, "This Conference has special meaning for my country, marking as it does the first time that our delegates have taken their places as representatives of an independent South Pacific. Undoubtedly, this heralds a new phase in the development of the Commission."[57] The prime minister articulated the importance of the SPC in evolving with the region's shifting politics. In response, Ryerson noted, "If Western Samoa gets the feeling that she is not wanted by the nations of the South Pacific Commission, she may well turn to non-Western nations for cooperation, sympathetic consideration and for aid."[58] The voices and actions of Pacific Islanders fueled this word of caution, which was a call for a more inclusive regionalism.

The Conference exposed the muddied relationship between the SPC and Pacific Islanders amid competing pressures from the Soviet Bloc. Pacific Islander delegates not only resisted imposed narratives of dependency that underscored territoriality, but also began conversations about redefining regional engagement on their own terms. Their actions revealed the cracks in colonial and institutional frameworks, carving out space for more representative political discourse.

By asserting their voices in both formal and informal arenas, they laid crucial groundwork for future movements toward self-determination, demonstrating that Pacific leadership was neither marginal nor passive but central to shaping the region's political future. Failure by Western governing nations to listen to Conference delegates risked the breakdown of the SPC and, therefore, the breakdown of the Western regional alliance during the Cold War.

Conclusion

The *fale*-inspired auditorium constructed for the Fifth South Pacific Conference (SPC) in Pago Pago, American Samoa, served as an architectural expression of territoriality and Western authority in the region. The United States government and the SPC jointly mobilized the event to affirm the legitimacy of Western democratic norms, particularly as the region became increasingly entangled in the ideological and strategic contestations of the Cold War. While SPC nations sought to instrumentalize Pacific Island nations as geopolitical assets, Conference delegates utilized the forum to articulate specific demands and explore frameworks for Islander-led regional cooperation within the SPC. Their demands began to shift the power dynamics within the SPC from European and American colonial powers toward Pacific Islander networks. The delegates embodied the "openly searching, inventive and welcoming" oceanic identity that Hauʻfa describes as rooted in historical patterns of interconnection that constitute "our waterway to each other … [and] our route to the rest of the world."[59] In this regard, the 1962 SPC Conference held in the Pago Pago auditorium marked a critical inflection point in the organization's evolution. Within three decades, reflecting broader decolonization processes, all twenty-two independent Pacific Island countries and territories had secured full and active membership in the reconstituted and renamed Pacific Community.[60]

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1 Note on language: Samoan is a rich and complex language. It uses two key diacritical marks in written form: the glottal stop [ʻ] and the macron [¯]. In this article, I retain these diacritics when they appear in primary and secondary sources. However, I omit them in English-language contexts (e.g., American Samoa). I am not a native speaker, and any errors in spelling or usage are my own.

"Our South Sea Neighbours," *The Sydney Morning Herald* (July 23, 1962): 2. See also: Greg Fry, "The Politics of South Pacific Regional Cooperation" in *The South Pacific: Problems, Issues and Prospects*, ed. Ramesh Thakur (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 172. ↑

2 Fry, "The Politics of South Pacific Regional Cooperation," 172. ↑

3 Epeli Hauʻofa, "The Ocean In Us," in *Understanding Oceania: Celebrating the University of the South Pacific and its Collaboration with the Australian National University*, eds. Stewart Firth and Vijay Naidu (Acton, Australia: ANU Press, 2019), 397. ↑

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by people who were interested in problems to a greater or lesser extent, but with no experts and no conclusions being reached which could be implemented." Carlton Skinner oral history interview: "JFK #1," November 17, 1970, John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, JFK Library, Boston, MA. ↑

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