

Pacific Garden
Mall-1967-1979

The Garden Mall: A collision between what's old, what's new

By BUD O'BRIEN

Mix a touch of Rome with a hint of Miami Beach, add a morsel of Carmel to a strong whiff of the Haight-Ashbury, and . . . presto! You have the Mall in Santa Cruz — or, more precisely, the Pacific Garden Mall.

If that description is mixed, it matches closely the attitude of Santa Cruzans toward that six-block stretch of Pacific Avenue that has come to rival the boardwalk as an identifying symbol of their city.

But while the residents regard the Boardwalk fondly if distantly — they leave it mostly to the tourists — the Mall is at the heart of the downtown shopping area and the activities that go on there excite decidedly conflicting emotions among them.

This wasn't exactly what the city had in mind when it decided to convert this section of Pacific Avenue between Cathcart and Water Streets into an attractive mall,

dressed up with flowers and shrubbery, softened by red brick crosswalks, with automobile traffic restricted to one direction, slow-w-w-ly. It wasn't an original idea. Other cities had gone to the mall concept as a way of saving their downtown "cores" from the depredations of suburban shopping centers.

Today, 10 years later, the Santa Cruz Mall appears at a glance to have been an inspiration that paid off. It is pleasing to the eye. In the daytime, at least, it bustles. A stroll down the Mall at noon-time offers something for all the senses.

The old blends pleasingly with the new. You can sit in the outdoor garden of Lulu Carpenter's, sort of Ivy League-ish restaurant-bar, a part of the new scene, and look across the street at the Teacup, an upstairs Chinese restaurant which was in the same location when to most Santa Cruzans the word

"Mall" was half of the name of a brand of cigarettes.

As you walk down the street you may notice that the crazy, mixed-up architectural styles that date from as far back as 1850 or so seem somehow to fit in with the uninhibited nature of the "new" lifestyle that arrived with the Mall.

Presiding over much of the southern end of the Mall is the whitewashed, Italianate facade of the old St. George Hotel, with its odd tower poking up from the roof. Once a semi-elegant hostelry, it now houses senior citizens and just saved itself from condemnation by installing more fire escapes not long ago.

Between that and the other big Pacific Avenue hotel — the Palomar, which has also seen better days — are a jumble of different building styles, some of which haven't changed much in decades but most of which have been disguised with whatever those instant facelifts for buildings are called.

If the Mall has a heart in the daytime, it is unquestionably the Cooper House. Once the county courthouse, it was converted by entrepreneur Max Walden into a shopping-restaurant-bar complex. From about noon until maybe 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the joint swings. Its European-style outdoor cafe, complete

with umbrellas, attracts a big luncheon crowd. While they eat and drink a band belts out a jazz-rock blend that often makes up in volume what it lacks in musical skill.

The music — or the noise — draws a crowd that can truly be called motley: the barefooted, the long-haired, the spaced-out, the business-suited, the Gucci-shod, the . . . well, you name it, it's probably there. On a given day, an old ex-vaudevillian is likely to be tapping along the sidewalk more or less in rhythm to the music; or a woman who has seen more than one music style come and go might be swaying to old memories as well as to a rock beat.

Up and down the street in either direction, the mixture of people keeps the scene alive. It's lunchtime and dozens of people, from chicly-dressed shop clerks and conservatively-attired businessmen to the paragons of the counter-culture sit on the benches and brick planter walls, munching sandwiches, sipping drinks of varying potency, and enjoying the scenery.

The cafes, which offer everything from the Szechwan cuisine of the Heavenly Goose to the tacos and enchiladas of the Acapulco, are mostly full.

For shoppers, the choices approach infinity. There's Leask's for the traditionalists, a store that's to Santa Cruz what Ford's is to Watsonville. The old familiar feeling is also provided by J.C. Penney, Woolworth's and the old-line clothing stores — Schipper-Dillon, Harris Bros., etc. But mixed in with them are a score or more of specialty shops with names like the Yellow Bird, Pacific Trading Co., offering more or less esoteric, if quality, merchandise. There are record shops, book stores and shops offering everything from the funky to the junky, if that's a valid distinction.

In sum, to a casual observer, the Mall is alive, colorful, attractive and entertaining. In a word, a success.



It's not Carnegie hall but it's a living

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But closer examination reveals trouble in Surf City. The very quality that gives the Mall its surface excitement and piquant flavor, that mixture of the old and new, that intermingling of what has come to be called "lifestyles", is also the origin of its problems.

Partly, it's an extension of the collision between the staid and traditional Santa Cruz — the Santa Cruz of genteel retired folks and old values — and the Santa Cruz that has burgeoned almost simultaneously with that institution on the hill, the University. That is the Santa Cruz of the young people (of all ages) whose life view springs from the revolution in values that occurred in the 60s.

But making UCSC the scapegoat, a favorite pastime of Santa Cruz conservatives, is unfair.

The problems on the Mall usually involve a group of people who have no connection with the university. They are part of that army of wanderers, heirs in part to the commune tradition that grew up in the 60s, who set up shop at locations that seem favorable. They are mostly young, generally unkempt, exuding a vague appearance of uncleanness, though this is often an unfair assumption.

They make up a considerable portion of that "colorful" crowd that makes the Mall appear so vibrant.

Some of them play musical instruments with varying degrees of skill for the quarters and dimes the people toss to them. Others just panhandle. Few of them can be accused of being overly polite. Not a few are officious, overbearing and arrogant. They block sidewalks, drink wine and beer, smoke pot, and in general indulge in those kinds of activities most likely to prove offensive to a Santa Cruzan of the old school.

Also, they spend little money, meaning the merchants are unhappy with them, too. They discourage, not encourage, shoppers from visiting the Mall, the merchants believe.

Periodically, the merchants and outraged citizens raise their complaint level to such a high pitch that it catches the attention of city officials. Such a period is here now. A group of citizens poured out their complaints about the situation at a long City Council session a couple of weeks ago.

But the problem is easier to define than to solve. It might have been simple in the old

days when the cop on the beat could run you in if you were a "vagrant" and the judge would then give you a choice of a sojourn in the local jail or a quick exit from town.

The courts have eliminated those alternatives with rulings through the years that have built a wall of protection for individuals against arbitrary police powers.

The members of the "counter-culture" take full advantage of that knowledge. As one who called himself "Rainbow" said at the City Council hearing, they believe that they have a right to practice their "counter-culture" free from police harassment. They exhibit little guilt about accepting food stamps and other welfare handouts while making no pretense at looking for work. They live literally wherever they hang their hats, not infrequently under bridges and in caves lining the San Lorenzo River.

City officials, including the police, recognize the difficulty of the situation. The City Council's "solution" this time was to appoint a committee from its ranks to work with a committee of businessmen and citizens to work on a possible solution.

Meanwhile, life on the Mall goes on as usual. An aged resident of the St. George Hotel, who exists on \$520 a month retirement pay, talking with this reporter the other day, put his own interpretation on the situation:

"Nothing is new except the words we use," he said. "They call themselves members of the counter-culture. We used to call them bums."



Cooper House is a favored meeting place