

WELCOME TO THE NEW SANTA CRUZ

Earthquake - City of Santa Cruz Rebuilding 5Jm 4.507

Downtown rejuvenation in final stage after '89 quake

By Jeff Thomas
Mercury News

With construction beginning on two major downtown buildings, Santa Cruz soon will be whole again for the first time since the Loma Prieta earthquake hit almost 20 years ago. But this is not the same funky Surf City that tumbled in 1989. The mellow, alternative-lifestyle vibe has been muted by the incongruent trappings of a city cruising in the fast lane — luxury condos, pricey restaurants and boutiques galore.

Sort of like downtown Los Gatos, if downtown Los Gatos were emerging from a cloud of pot smoke.

And much as some residents miss the old Santa Cruz, they seem to like what's become of their town.

"Oh, I think it has been enormously successful," said Mardi Wormhoudt, who was mayor at the time of the quake. "One of the ways you measure the success of a downtown area is by the number of people who use it, and by that measure it certainly has been successful."

For a picture of just how much downtown has

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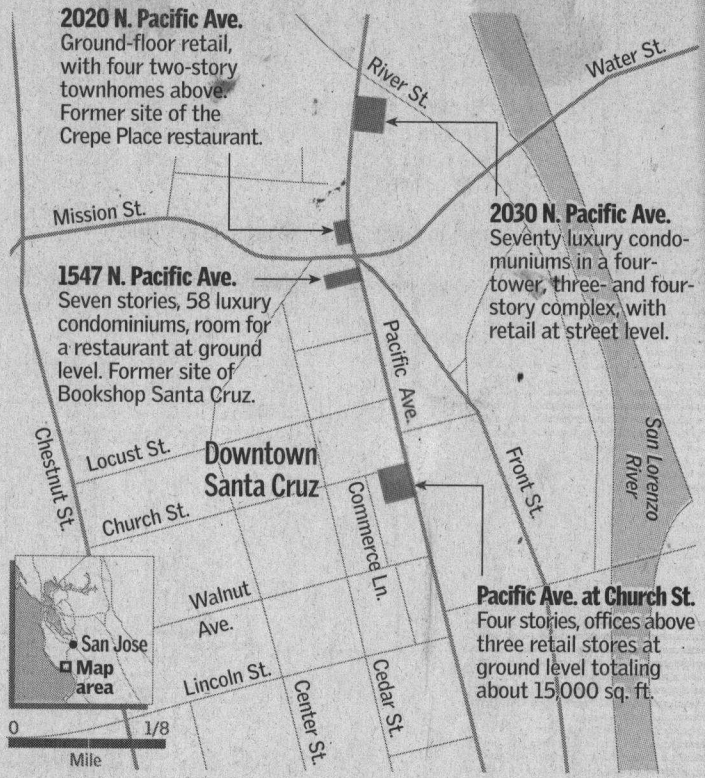
Before a quake left much of Pacific Avenue in ruins, downtown Santa Cruz was a funky hippie haven with not much to do after dark. With redevelopment, that vibe hasn't entirely disappeared.



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

NOW: BOUTIQUES, BISTROS AND CONDOS

Redevelopment has been slow and steady since the quake. Soon, the last of the vacant lots left in its wake will be replaced by several more upscale projects — high-rise condos, retail (above) and offices.



SANTA CRUZ | Post-earthquake revival seen mostly as success

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changed — and for a clue to the direction the city is heading — one needn't look beyond the north end of Pacific Avenue.

Two construction projects are under way and a third has been approved that will offer something not exactly in sync with the town's hippie-tolerant persona: a total of 132 upscale condominiums.

Extensive ruins

It would be difficult to overstate the extent of the ruins the earthquake left. Three people were killed downtown — six countywide — when unreinforced brick buildings toppled. Almost 30 downtown buildings were destroyed or razed because they were so badly damaged, including the historic 1894 Cooper House, a former courthouse, in the heart of downtown. More than 200 of the 600 downtown businesses were either shuttered or forced to relocate.

Gone as well was the slower-paced downtown Santa Cruz, where traffic was restricted on tree-lined Pacific — then known as the Pacific Garden Mall — and there wasn't much to do after sunset.

Rebuilding got off to a slow start because of a recession at the time. Commercial real estate was in a nose dive, and businesses were having a hard time getting loans. That did, however, allow more time to think things through. A group called Vision Santa Cruz formed to hash out a master plan.

"One of my concerns was that the property owners not act precipitously," said Ceil Cirillo, head of the redevelopment agency.

The progress was slow, but steady. By limiting growth in outlying areas, and focusing on downtown development, Wormhoudt said, city leaders were able to breathe new life into the city's core. Sales tax revenue figures reflect the comeback. Downtown had already taken a hit when auto dealerships folded in the mid-80s. The earthquake brought the downtown economy to its knees, with sales plummeting by 25 percent in 1990-91. Only in the past few years has revenue surpassed pre-quake totals.

The changes over the years have been both subtle and striking. Wider sidewalks and cleaner, mural-adorned alleyways with rear entrances to Pacific Avenue stores have made the downtown friendlier and more accessible. A proliferation of restaurants and a gradual shift toward more upscale shops have drawn more people with more money to spend.

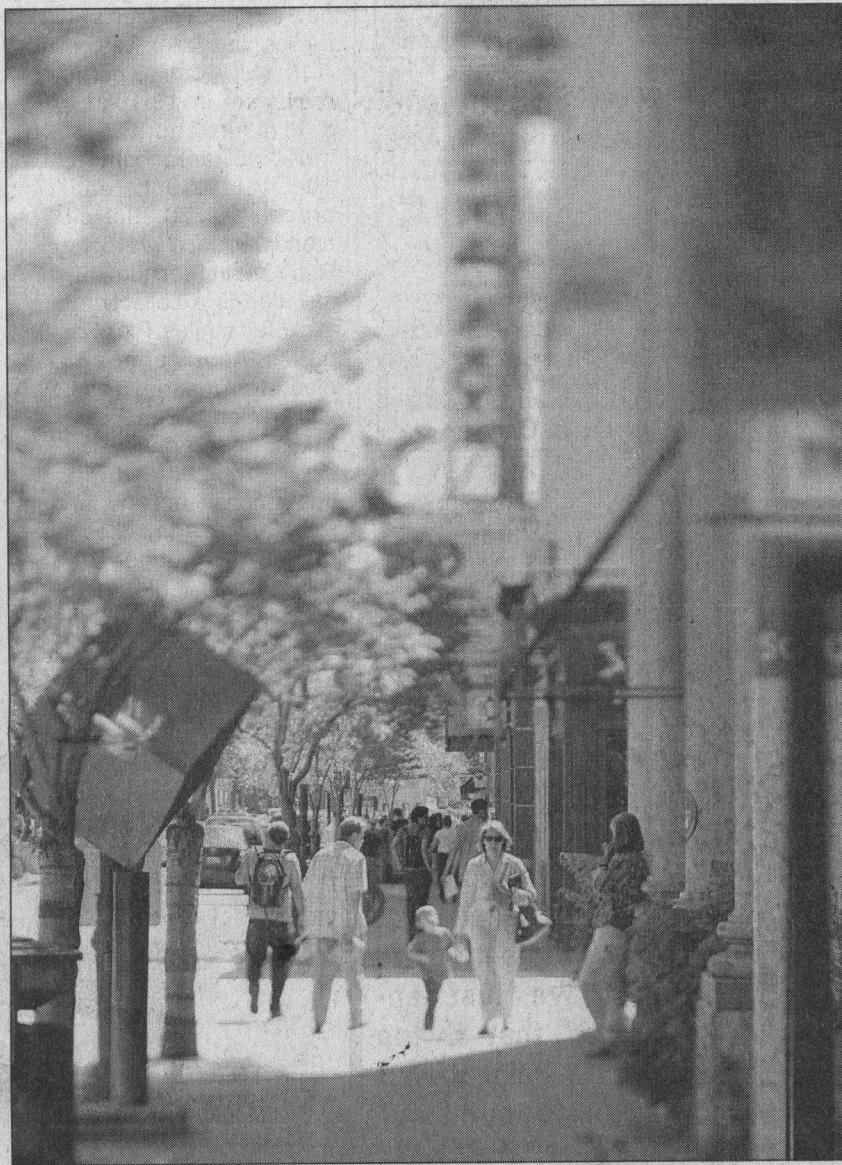
Hulking buildings

Other changes are more obvious. Hulking new buildings at both ends of Pacific housing retail space and offices have gone up. The addition in 1995 of the Cinema 9 theater complex, across the street from the site of the old Cooper House, has become the anchor for a nexus of activity on the north end of the avenue.

"It's become an 18-hour day," Cirillo said. "That, I feel, is one of the big successes of downtown. We really achieved a mix of uses. There are shopping opportunities during the day, and lots of things to do at night."

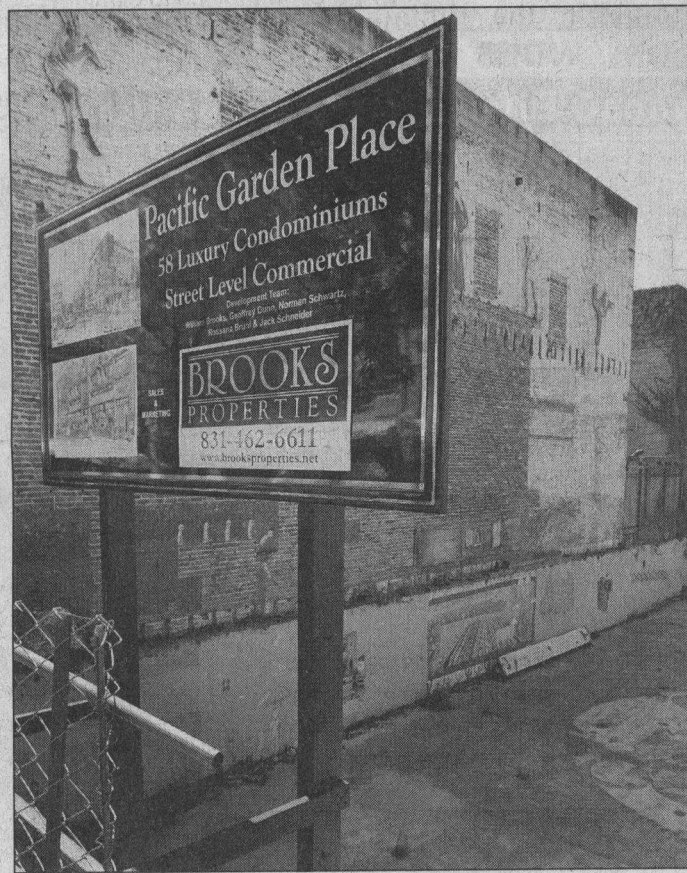
Not everyone is entirely sold on the changes, however. Even Wormhoudt, who retired last year after serving 12 years on the county board of supervisors, believes some things could have been done better.

"There was an opportunity for some significant architecture, and I



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Wider sidewalks and cleaner, mural-lined alleys are among the changes that have come with redevelopment of Pacific Avenue after the earthquake of 1989.



This big hole in the ground on Pacific Avenue has been approved for the building of luxury condos. Work may begin by the end of the year on the building, which will be seven stories. How well will the wealthy owners blend with the area's defiantly offbeat characters?

can't say that we got that," she said. "It's pretty generic, not great. And the size of some of the (newer) buildings is not in keeping with what we had in mind."

The passing of the old-school Santa Cruz is not without its mourners. Bruce Bratton, a vocal and opinionated — not to say curmudgeonly — longtime civic commentator and historian, acknowledges that the downtown renaissance has been a success by most objective measures, but at a

cost.

"Economically, it's doing just beautifully," he said. "But as for the heart and soul of it, it's changed immensely. There is a lot to do downtown, but there's nothing there that you really need."

By which he means, you can't get a ball-peen hammer downtown (the hardware store and department stores are gone), but you can get a \$3.50 ice cream cone (Cold Stone Creamery) or a \$40 citron-scented

pedestal candle (Bunny's).

Others view the earthquake as a jolt that forced Santa Cruz to look forward.

"I've been coming over to Santa Cruz forever, so I remember what it was like before the quake," said Kevin Long, who was sitting outside the Starbucks on Pacific Avenue on a recent afternoon. He moved to town from Silicon Valley a couple of years ago, and commutes back over the hill to work. "I loved the feel of the town then, really laid-back. It's different now, but I have to admit it's better. It's livelier, and there's a lot more to do."

Norman Schwartz, a longtime Santa Cruz resident who is a partner in the group developing one of the condo projects sees the positive effects of the tragedy.

"The loss was devastating, of course," he said, "but ultimately it was a wonderful thing for the community. It changed the community; business had been kind of the enemy, in an old '60s way. Rebuilding after the quake forced people to work together."

Someone on the other end of the spectrum, affordable housing advocate Paul Brindel, agrees.

"I really like what's happened downtown," he said. "It has an inviting feel to it, a sense of openness that wasn't there before," the longtime resident said.

Which isn't to say Brindel is happy about the upcoming profusion of luxury condos. His advocacy group, Community Action Board, opposes any new housing that isn't built for low-income people.

Embarrassing eyesore

The most visible addition to the downtown skyline under construction so far is a new retail-office structure to replace the old Rittenhouse building in the heart of the business zone, finally filling a weed-choked pit that had been an embarrassing eyesore for almost two decades.

And the Bolton Hill condo project, to be named Park Pacific, has been approved to fill another highly visible vacant lot — on the site of the old Bookshop Santa Cruz, where two people were killed during the quake when a wall crumbled into the Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting Co. next door.

Groundbreaking may begin by the end of the year on the building, which will be seven stories high and house 58 one- and two-bedroom condos, as well as a ground-level restaurant.

"The biggest interest group is in people who are move-down buyers," Schwartz said. "They're relatively well-off, have a lot of equity, approaching retirement. The median age is probably over 60 — and they really want to come downtown."

How that new dynamic — wealthy retirees cruising Pacific Avenue along with knots of teenagers, amateur musicians, street-corner philosophers and the other ingredients that make Santa Cruz such an eclectic stew — remains to be seen.

Because while the core of Santa Cruz may be gentrifying, it still proudly sports its weirdness vibe. These days, that vibe is personified most eloquently, perhaps, by Umbrella Man, an elaborately made-up fellow who dresses in frilly pink outfits, carries a plastic umbrella and makes his way up and down Pacific Avenue ever so slowly, taking baby steps and smiling sweetly at all passersby.

Chew on that, Los Gatos.

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