

**YOU CAN'T
MISS IT** *The E.C.
Rittenhouse Building
at Pacific Avenue and
Church Street.*

Power Structure

The real story behind the E.C. Rittenhouse Building proves fact is stranger than fiction **BY JACOB PIERCE**

Above a row of cement wreaths, 20 ram heads stare down over Pacific Avenue and Church Street in downtown Santa Cruz. Just below them are two balconies—and below that, a couple white columns, hollow on the inside. Yellow-lit lamps line the grey, graffiti-proof walls. The face of a grey sheet metal clock juts out over the sidewalk's corner, under the words "E. C. Rittenhouse."

It's a busy Saturday night for the normally empty fourth floor of the iconic Rittenhouse building, 46 feet above the street. People file into the elevator carrying empty beer glasses, while others lean against the outdoor balcony on a chilly February evening. These are the closing minutes of the third annual Twisted Tasting, produced by Santa Cruz Mountain Brewing. Vendors have been serving Cocoa Puff porters, kombucha IPAs, flaked wheat stouts with Verve coffee

and serrano chiles—flavors altogether tantalizing and mysterious.

But not as mysterious as the building where it's all happening.

Though its official name is the E.C. Rittenhouse Building, it's known to most simply as the "Rittenhouse Building." Part of its allure comes from the fact that the lot on which it sits was nothing more than a hole in the ground for 15 years after the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake. For the last five, the building has fascinated locals with its confusing mix of beaux arts and Greco-Roman architecture, its breathtaking views and, most controversially, its 62,000 square feet of vacant space.

"I've never been here before, but I need to find an event to throw here because it's super, super classy," says Ona Stewart, guitar player for the bluegrass-picking Naked Bootleggers. "It feels like I'm in D.C. or New York. It's got that vibe—not a lot of buildings

in Santa Cruz have rooftop lounges."

"It's nice, but it's languishing because nobody has money to rent the space," says Xavier Baker, Stewart's friend.

This is exactly how the mythology of the Rittenhouse Building has grown and spread—hearsay, tidbits and gossip. Its architecture is so audacious, and its emptiness so tantalizing, that no end of tall tales have risen up about it. But the real story of the Rittenhouse building is stranger than any of them.

For years, rumors have floated around Santa Cruz that new tenants are just months away, but lately they're more convincing. Talks to fill the top one-and-a-half floors have excited Santa Cruz Development Director Bonnie Lipscomb, among others. But Louis Emmet Rittenhouse—the former city councilmember who is not just the building's co-owner, but also the man at the center of many of the stories that swirl around it—is skeptical.



Chip Schauer

OUT OF THE RUBBLE The lot on which the Rittenhouse Building now stands, immediately after the earthquake in 1989.

"Bonnie's far more optimistic than other parties involved," says Rittenhouse, who also served as head of the Downtown Association. "Unfortunately, it would be nice, but I don't think so. I'll be hoping."

In five years Rittenhouse hasn't rushed to settle for just any tenant.

"He doesn't want to compromise that, and good for him," says Billy Tysseling, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Chamber of Commerce. "It has to do with his expectations and his vision for the building. He has patience. His sense of what that represents as heritage is really important, and he's going to hold onto it."

The Rittenhouse building is a cornerstone of Santa Cruz politics—old money, big political egos, swirling small-town rumors and a changing economy. And the story behind the lot where the slab sits is gripping and at times tragic. In some ways, it's the story of downtown Santa Cruz.

Michael Bethke, the Rittenhouse building's architect, says this is more than a building. It's a memorial—not only to one of the older and more established families in Santa Cruz, but to E.C. Rittenhouse, Louis's

grandfather. A likely connection, but Rittenhouse calls it an overstatement.

"It's what the downtown plan envisioned for the corner," Rittenhouse says. "The fact that it's named after my grandfather—the fact is that if it weren't for his acquisitions on the corner, the plot wouldn't have been there."

But who was E.C. Rittenhouse anyway? That's where our story of the Rittenhouse building begins—in a different decade, inside a different building, on that very same corner.

1948: Attorney Emmet Cloyd Rittenhouse, a Stanford University grad originally from Ohio, was at work in his law office on the corner of Church Street and Pacific Avenue. Rittenhouse, husband of adored violinist Josephine Rittenhouse, was, for better or for worse, a fixture in town. He had run for Congress in 1930 on a "Keep California White" campaign and lost.

One day, 73-year-old Charles Wildey walked into the reception room, according to a historical column in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* by Carolyn Swift, and asked to speak to Emmet in his corner office.

Minutes later in that office, the lawyer turned, bending over his desk to sign a paper. Wildey pulled out a .38 six-shooter and put a bullet in Emmet's back. As he turned around again, Wildey fired three more times and killed him. Wildey later testified Emmet had called him "one of the dirtiest names"—a communist—and it appears the life of one of Santa Cruz's best-known community members came to an end because of a joke. Secretaries testified that Emmet had made an audible wisecrack about communism as the two men walked through the office door.

1989: It took the Loma Prieta earthquake 15 seconds to turn a third of downtown Santa Cruz's buildings to rubble on Oct. 17. Another third of the structures would suffer such irreparable damage they'd have to be torn down, too.

The Rittenhouse family owned a few buildings downtown—including the flat-iron, now home to the building housing Jamba Juice—as well as both the "old" Emmet C. Rittenhouse building, home to the family law offices on Church and Pacific, and the

Josephine J. Rittenhouse insurance building right next door.

Initial inspections showed the Josephine building might be saved, but the others would be history.

In the time of tragedy, city leaders, volunteers and activists pulled together. One afternoon, former Mayor Mike Rotkin—then between terms on the Santa Cruz city council—was sitting at city hall answering phones near city manager Dick Wilson's office.

"Louis Rittenhouse, and his father Emmet [the son of E.C.] come in, and they're sitting on the couch outside waiting to meet with Richard Wilson," Rotkin says. Emmet is rubbing his hands together, Rotkin recounts, saying, "What an opportunity! What an opportunity! This is going to be my chance to rebuild this the way it should have been built in the first place. Get rid of these goddamn trees."

"And he's saying this to Louis, and I'm hearing the whole thing. Then they go in. And they come out smiling," Rotkin recalls. "Everyone else is crying. For them, it's like a business opportunity to build the kind of city they wanted to build. Anyway, that's Emmet."

"None of that took place. That is complete fabrication on the part of Michael," says Rittenhouse. "We're the ones that took the financial loss, not Mr. Rotkin. It was tenants of our buildings that had damages, not Mr. Rotkin. The employees that had no jobs—those are the people that got hurt."

1990: Louis Rittenhouse ran for city council on his business experience and a promise to rebuild downtown. He won, but the real estate mogul never got to be part of many downtown discussions.

"The huge irony was that as soon as he got elected, he had a conflict of interest because he owns property within 300 feet of everything," says Rotkin, who served with Rittenhouse on the council from 1992 to 1994. "Not only could he not vote on the matters that he cared about, but he couldn't even be a part of the discussion. He had to leave the room. One of the biggest ironies was him running for city council to rebuild downtown, because he could be involved in almost everything except downtown discussions."

1991: Just a year into Louis' term, the Rittenhouse family filed a lawsuit

against the City of Santa Cruz and Granite Rock Construction for \$250,000.

Granite Rock workers had brought in a wrecking ball to tear down the Rittenhouses' family law offices in 1989, but, the Rittenhouse case alleged, they also destroyed the wall it shared with the insurance building—which had been deemed salvageable soon after the quake. And after the demolition job, the insurance building had to come down, too.

As the case was going on, the Rittenhouses were also taking heat for hesitating to rebuild on Pacific Avenue.

In their legal suit, the Rittenhouses won \$52,250⁰⁰—enough to cover the family's legal costs and tick off Louis's fellow city councilmembers.

"I think the Rittenhouse family has the means and ability to provide leadership among the property owners downtown," councilmember Neal Coonerty told the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* at the time. "It's almost adding insult to injury to not rebuild and then sue the city and Granite Construction in a frivolous lawsuit... While other people are struggling to build, they're speculating on the value of the land... They're going to reap more value for their property. To me that's not providing leadership; it's speculating on the future of downtown."

Says Coonerty now: "That was along time ago. Louis ran for city council the same race that I ran. Part of his platform was that he really knew how to rebuild downtown. That's part of why people voted for him, so I thought he had some responsibility to them. I'm still annoyed the building hasn't found a tenant yet."

1999: Environmentalists never got their downtown park, but the idea did arise to turn the old Rittenhouse lot into a plaza if the city or fundraising activists could afford to buy it. City planning experts blasted the idea as something that would create dead space downtown, but activists stood their ground.

"The Downtown Plaza will be used, seen and appreciated by local residents every time we go downtown," wrote Bruce Bratton, a former columnist for *Metro Santa Cruz*, now *Santa Cruz Weekly*. "Of course, our visitors will love it, too, but the plaza is the very heart of our community."

Rittenhouse showed interest in

selling the corner parcel before changing his mind.

2001: After 11 years, a hole in the ground taken over by chin-high weeds and trash and graffiti got a chance at new life.

Louis Rittenhouse submitted plans for the new E.C. Rittenhouse building—four stories, plus a basement and a flag pole that would put it over the 75-foot limit and require an exception from city council. The top story was recessed to make it look smaller and allow more sunlight to slant onto Pacific. The ground floor would be retail, and could be divided by three stores or rented by one large one. The rest would provide office space, more than 40,000 square feet of it.

2004: Developers took a hit with the recession that followed the terrorist attack on New York City's World Trade Center, and the Rittenhouses had a big deadline approaching.

With Rittenhouse yet to break ground, city council voted 5-2 to give him a three-year extension to build, with councilmembers Ed Porter and Tim Fitzmaurice dissenting—both of them skeptical anything would ever get built. The council was, meanwhile, pressuring Ron Lau to sell or develop his empty spot (once home to Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting and Bookshop Santa Cruz) next to LuLu Carpenter's, and threatened to seize it if he didn't. Geoffrey Dunn, Bill Brooks and Norman Schwartz bought the land for a 60-unit condominium project that never broke ground due to the housing bubble bursting in 2008.

2006: It's 4am in December, and the building's architect Bethke was standing on the sidewalk above the Rittenhouse pit. Louis Rittenhouse met him there as concrete trucks started lining up along Church Street.

The earthquake hole below them was about to disappear and get filled because planners had decided to scrap the basement and instead fill the gap with concrete. The flagpole idea was out too, because the city council didn't grant it a height exception.

Bethke calls working with Rittenhouse "a real treat," adding that his old boss was a fun, no-nonsense kind of guy. "He just wants results," Bethke says. "Don't tell me what you do. Just do it."

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"We're all getting ready to go, and Louis's walking around, checking out everything and seeing how things are going in his real unassuming way," Bethke says. "We go, 'Hey, Louis check this out. We've got everything dialed in. We even got Jesus supervising it.' It was one of these homeless guys that I know who was up on the parking lot behind there with his robe-like blanket over his head, and he's standing there watching."

The trucks came with their loads of concrete all day and into the night, leaving over 3,000 cubic yards of it, making it the largest concrete pour in Santa Cruz history for a project Bethke and his crew finished two years later.

2010: Nothing like a little window dressing to make the best out of an unfortunate situation: after two years of letting his finished four-story building sit empty, Rittenhouse began showing art in the windows—some of it from nonprofits like Roots and Wings, which provides support services to foster parents. Rittenhouse also started renting the top floor out for private parties.

Around this same time, the four-story slab's look was coming under attack. Even architect Mark Primack, a former city councilmember who had supported the building because he was eager to see something go in, shared some choice words publicly about the building's kitchen-sink aesthetics.

"Louis wants to be the client who tells his designer to do this or that. He started adding faces here, columns that don't go anywhere there, an ostentatious clock," Primack says looking back now. "It turned into a wedding cake of ideas."

2014: Tom Petty said waiting is the hardest part, but he's no economic developer. Looking for quality tenants for a four-story building with both office and retail space might be even harder.

The rent is listed at \$1.65 a square foot, according to the city's website, not far from the going rate downtown. But the Rittenhouse building would need improvements that someone would have to pay for. For starters, either the tenants or Louis would have to pay to turn the floor into offices.

There has been a long list of close

calls for the first story, the most well-known one being REI.

Bethke says the outdoor adventure store wanted to take part of the second floor to put in a rock-climbing wall that went a few dozen feet into the air. "Man, we thought that was going to be really cool," Bethke says, but REI found a place in Marina instead that opened in 2008. The business bet on a proposed Monterey County housing development nearby that never panned out.

There were other names, too. Before the building was finished in 2008, columnist Bratton and the *Silicon Valley Business Journal* both named Old Navy as a likely tenant. Bethke says Walgreens was "champing at the bit" to sign a lease before setting up on Front Street next to Saturn Café in 2008.

"Louis's just very particular about tenants," Bethke says.

"I really didn't see Walgreens on Pacific Avenue with toilet paper stacking up, signs in the windows," Rittenhouse says. "So that was a no,"

If the building is going to have a good year, it should start right about now. In the wake of the holiday season's aftermath, Rittenhouse says, March is when businesses figure out if they're growing or scaling back.

Trying to picture anyone actually moving in after so much time gone now feels a little strange.

"It's almost like we're getting used to it being there, vacant," says Chip, executive director for the Downtown Association.

To some extent, the Rittenhouses have been plagued by odd timing and bad luck. Rittenhouse submitted building plans around the time the dot-com bubble burst in 2001, and workers finished in 2008, just before the housing bubble burst plunging the country into the worst economic recession in a generation.

Assuming Rittenhouse wants to fill the first floor, the typical strategy is to put in a big business like a department store that could serve as an "anchor" downtown. But Primack says that in general, the rules are changing, and old-school department stores are on the way out. "There's a model that you're after, and the reality is Amazon.com. It's an interesting time for real estate and for the economy," Primack says. "That building was built on an old model." 🐼