

Rebuilding In Disaster's Path

ANOTHER RISE AND FALL OF THE SANTA CRUZ MALL?

BY LISA LEVINSON

TROUGHOUT ITS 200-year history, downtown Santa Cruz has been beset by floods, fires and earthquakes. Now in the aftermath of the latest catastrophe, city planners are yet again rebuilding on the same fated spot.

"Natural disasters are nothing new to Santa Cruzans," says Cabrillo History Professor Sandy Lydon. "When you build a town next to a fault line on a flood plain, what... do you expect?" Lydon says the history of Santa Cruz is an endless cycle of construction and destruction. After each natural disaster, the city was rebuilt just in time for the next one.

Some say Santa Cruzans suffer from a compound illness: short-term disaster memories, hazard denial, and delusions of permanence. UCSC Earth Science Professor Gary Griggs says nobody expects disasters because they forget about them once repairs are made. In addition, younger generations that haven't lived through disasters are shocked when they happen.

Lydon diagnoses a similar phenomenon. He says current conditions like the drought encourage denial, "because it's dry and warm people can't imagine water flooding downtown," as it has in the past. He says people assume that buildings are permanent if they look permanent. "But the San Andreas [fault] eats brick buildings for lunch," he warns.

As the memory of the October 17 earthquake fades, city planners are forging ahead with the redevelopment process. New buildings tailored to withstand the next earthquake will line the mall and the levies will be designed to hold the 100-year flood (a swelling of the river caused by rainfall only experienced on the average of once every 100 years.) Plans to build restaurants and cafes along the San Lorenzo River are even in the works. But some people question the planner's decision to rebuild downtown on an unstable floodplain.

"The soils in this area are not solid," said Bruce Van Allen of the San Lorenzo River Restoration Committee, a group working to make the river safer for indigenous wildlife and its human neighbors. "There's always a liquefaction danger during a quake." Silt deposited by the meandering river liquefies, causing the ground to "shake like jello," said Van Allen. Given Santa Cruz's ominous location in a river basin bordered by earthquake faults, he expected city planners to consider the option



A Santa Cruz policeman directs traffic on lower Pacific Ave. during a flood in the early 1900s.

of relocating downtown.

But Vision Santa Cruz did not even discuss relocation. "The power of economics dominates everything else," said Van Allen. He says he was "laughed out of the room" after proposing that Santa Cruz set up a trust fund to gradually transport downtown businesses and dwellings out of the flood plain. Although Van Allen still believes downtown should be moved, he says relocation will not happen while it sits on real estate worth \$500 million.

To determine whether or not to rebuild on the floodplain, city planners multiply flood and earthquake damage costs by the probability of a natural disaster occurring within a certain time period. If the resulting number is less than the economic benefits earned during this time, then they rebuild. In this way, business owners factor the cost of periodic quakes and floods into their investments.

"It is crass and cynical to factor in the cost of human lives and property from flood damage without doing something about it," said Lydon. He thinks people should consider the option of relocation before they "throw good money after bad money." Unlike previous reconstruction periods in the history of Santa Cruz, this time businesses can move to nearby regional shopping centers like those on 41st Avenue, says Lydon.

New economic competition may make relocation a feasible option, but it also increases the pressure on downtown businesses to rebuild quickly. "The city is a dynamic force," said City Planner Joe Hall. "It can't lie fallow for years." He thinks the idea of relocation is not fair to local businesses. As the trail

of businesses leaves downtown, those remaining would risk bankruptcy because shoppers will go elsewhere.

Although economic "analysis" may support rebuilding downtown on the same spot, historians and geologists warn that floods and earthquakes will continue to threaten its safety unless protection is provided.

Planners also use cost-benefit analysis to decide how much to spend on flood protection. Federal law requires cities located on flood plains to protect for the 100-year flood. Most cities opt to protect for the 100-year flood because it costs more to protect for the larger 200- or 500-year floods.

But no protection plan is foolproof. "You can protect for the 100-year flood, but the 105-year flood may do us in," said Griggs. Van Allen also questions the reliability of estimating flood probabilities. He says the 100-year flood can happen two years in a row because climate is unpredictable. "It's a number game," he said. "Every year is like a new role of the dice."



forewarned by UCSC scientists that downtown buildings would not withstand a major earthquake. No buildings were retrofitted. "I told you so' doesn't help after the fact," said Griggs.

He is concerned by the lack of communication between scientists and city planners. "Some scientists don't feel comfortable getting involved in society's decisions," he said, "But I think it's our responsibility to share our knowledge." City planners don't exactly ask for scientists' advice either, waiting instead for a disaster to decide what changes should be made, Griggs says.

Despite warnings from geologists and historians, the downtown will be rebuilt on the same spot. Hopefully, businesses will take the necessary precautions to protect their buildings from flood and earthquake damage and not put too much faith in cost-benefit analysis. Lydon thinks such analysis would work "if you could hold mother nature to the contract." Unfortunately, city planners are bargaining with a force that will not negotiate. ✓

Downtown's Broken Record

Historian Sandy Lydon says Santa Cruz's native Ohlone Indians must have laughed when settlers built downtown in the floodplain. Reviewing the city's history, it is easy to see why:

- 1791 Spanish found mission
- 1792 Massive floods
- 1793 Mission relocated
- 1848 Entrepreneur Elihu Anthony bought riverside land for a mere \$3.62 and sold each plot for \$100 despite local opposition to founding the town in the floodplain.
- 1862 Massive floods
- 1865 7.1 earthquake destroyed town
- 1868 Major earthquake; town rebuilt with wood for earthquake protection
- 1870-80 Series of floods
- 1894 Fire destroyed town; ordinance issued to rebuild with bricks for fire protection
- 1955 City spent Christmas under water; levies built for flood protection
- 1982 Levies almost overflowed
- 1989 7.1 earthquake devastated mall, killing three.

The town's history suggests that the Ohlone Indians knew something modern Santa Cruzans have yet to learn.