

Cooper House hit with growing pains

By JOAN RAYMOND

Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Only a few stores are still open at the Cooper House, the historic landmark building that in the '70s was the most unique and popular shopping complex on the Pacific Garden Mall.

The building's interior is being remodeled to give it a more contemporary look, but the reconstruction period — lasting many months now — has resulted in a half-empty building as struggling shopkeepers move to other locations.

During its heyday, the Cooper House teemed with shoppers streaming up and down the marble and oak staircases of the three-level building to engage in boutique consumerism at its best.

Since then, the shops have had their ups and downs. The ones that didn't make it either closed or moved.

The ongoing remodeling is designed to fast-forward the Cooper House from the oak-and-fern era of the '70s into a more contemporary, lighter and airier mode of the '80s. More "high-quality" shops are planned.

While plans are made, the restoration goes on and businesses move out.

"We're in a transition. It's just now starting to take shape. We're

trying to let it evolve, but everyone wants to know what's happening," commented Leif Leathers, a local craftsman in charge of the renovation project.

A few faithful shopkeepers say they plan to stick out the changes.

Still loyal to the Cooper House are Patti's Bloomers flower shop, Game Alot toy store, Collage novelties and Act Five apothecaries.

"The Cooper House is such a beautiful landmark. It's hard for us who have been here for such a long

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'Star Wars' deployment

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger on Sunday continued to press for phased deployment of the "Star Wars" anti-missile shield starting as soon as possible.

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Cooper House

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time to leave," said Marianne Buckley, manager of Act Five.

"We're planning on staying unless we're driven out," said Frank Kaehler, who owns the Game Alot store with his wife, Stephanie. Last week they said the whole building was closed during regular shopping hours, even though they already had employees scheduled to work.

The entire top level is barren — revealing wide deserts of tiled floors, long, picture-less walls and high Victorian ceilings.

The main-floor restaurant and bar are closed for remodeling. The outdoor music of the band, Warmth, that for many years has been both a delight and plague — depending on the musical ear of the passerby — has been discontinued until the re-opening of the restaurant.

Warmth will be back, but to play only once a week, says the building's owner, Steve Sanchez. More "contemporary, easy-listening" music will replace the boisterous Warmth on other days, he said.

The outdoor cafe is currently out of service. The table umbrellas are rolled up.

"The whole front looks so deserted," commented Stephanie Kaehler.

The most-recent casualty is Morrow's nut and candy store.

Saturday's going-out-of-business sale at Morrow's Nut House marked the end of a commercial era at the Cooper House.

Morrow's debuted 15 years ago as one of the first shops to open in the Cooper House following a major restoration by former owner, Max Walden. It was Walden who first recognized the business potential of the handsome, old building — a building that was used from 1895 to 1967 as the county's courthouse.

In the early '70s, it was chic to turn historic buildings into shopping complexes, and Walden did just that at the Cooper House.

At its opening, Morrow's wowed the public with its art-nouveau facade of beveled and stained-glass.

On Saturday, the main attraction at the candy stand was a "50percent off, going-out-of-business" sale. The Cooper House entrance was marked with a sign to lure customers into the building for a last chance at gummy worms, peanut brittle and jelly beans.

The current owners, Sanchez and

his family, bought the Cooper House last spring. The Sanchez' also operate Anastacio's restaurant in Santa Cruz.

"We want to give it a cleaner and lighter look, so it doesn't look so drab," said Sanchez. For instance, the dark awnings will be replaced with lighter ones. The main foyer was recently remodeled to make it lighter. Even natural oak walls were painted over in a light tone to the shock of some purists.

Commented Leathers, "It's a very heavy building — oak, marble, iron bars and grates." In fact, without the remodeling, the Cooper House looks very much like what it once was — a courthouse.

Exterior changes are strictly limited by the city's historic preservation laws.

Interior plans call for moving the bar across the hallway into the former restaurant space.

At the height of its popularity, the saloon — called the Oak Room for its decor — was a crowd-pleaser, featuring brass rails and outgoing bartenders who playfully barked at passing tourists to lure them in for a drink with a certain amount of success.

Plans call for the Oak Room to be turned into a lounge, with a fireplace and possibly a winetasting room. "We're trying to get away from the rowdy saloon energy. We want a kind of English club feeling, a place where you can go and have a conversation," said Leathers.

There will still be a restaurant across the hall, but it will feature "lighter, simpler food, not heavy meals," said Sanchez.

Sanchez said the owners will open a chocolate, candy and nut store to replace Morrow's, maybe an ice cream stand featuring homemade waffle cones; possibly an antique shop to replace the Angelica's women's shop that has moved.

Some shopkeepers who have stayed say the remodeling is taking too long, but in the long run they say it will be for the better.

"It's changing for the better now. For awhile I had my doubts. Things were going too slow," remarked Carol Valmy, an owner of Collage, a shop featuring soft sculptures, hand-made marionettes, apple dolls and eye-catching ceramic masks made by members of the San Francisco Association for Retarded Citizens.

"I think we're going to do very

well," added Valmy, who moved her business to the main floor from the Cooper House basement about a year ago.

"I figured if I could make it in the basement, I could make it up here," she added.

But Valmy and other shopkeepers say customers wonder if all the businesses are moving out.

"It's always negative when people leave, but we believe the Cooper House has its good and bad times. It's going to be great when it's finished," said Buckley. "It's taking longer than we'd like. But what can we do?"

"Are we behind schedule? I think it just always happens that way," commented Sanchez.

Leathers acknowledged the project is slow going, but he says it will be worth it.

He notes the work is being done in the winter because business is slowest then. The fact that the work crew is small and the building is so old also contributes to delays and expenses. For instance, he said the recent replacement of a water heater cost \$2,500 because the plumbing was rusted out.

Leathers says no deadline has been set for completion.

"Most people's idea of completion would be to have all the shops full, but the idea is not to pack it full.

"There's enough money to do the project right but not millions and millions to be spent."



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Customers took advantage of Morrow's Nut House half-price sale Saturday.

The Kaehlers seem less patient. Their shop is in the basement where — even at the best of times — it's hard to lure shoppers down a flight of stairs. One plus, of sorts, is that the building's restrooms are located in the basement.

"A certain number (of Cooper House visitors) have to go to the bathroom," said Frank Kaehler with a smile.

But they say periodic maintenance

and management problems are a drawback. Maintenance problems typical in an old building do not bring smiles to the toy shop or to its cash register.

Kaehler surmises the owners "don't seem to be oriented towards a profit." His wife, Stephanie, notes there is no sign outside the building "that says there are shops in here. Since the owner gets a percentage of the sales, you think he'd be

interested in that." Sanchez, said a sign will be erected — "something tasteful" — and conforming to the city's sign laws.

He knows shopkeepers "get upset ... but we have to get the work done."

If Sanchez accomplishes his task, he will be doing in the '80s what Walden did in the '70s — updating a beautiful old building and making it a commercial success.