

EARTHQUAKE '89 - City of Santa Cruz ✓

The Epicenter

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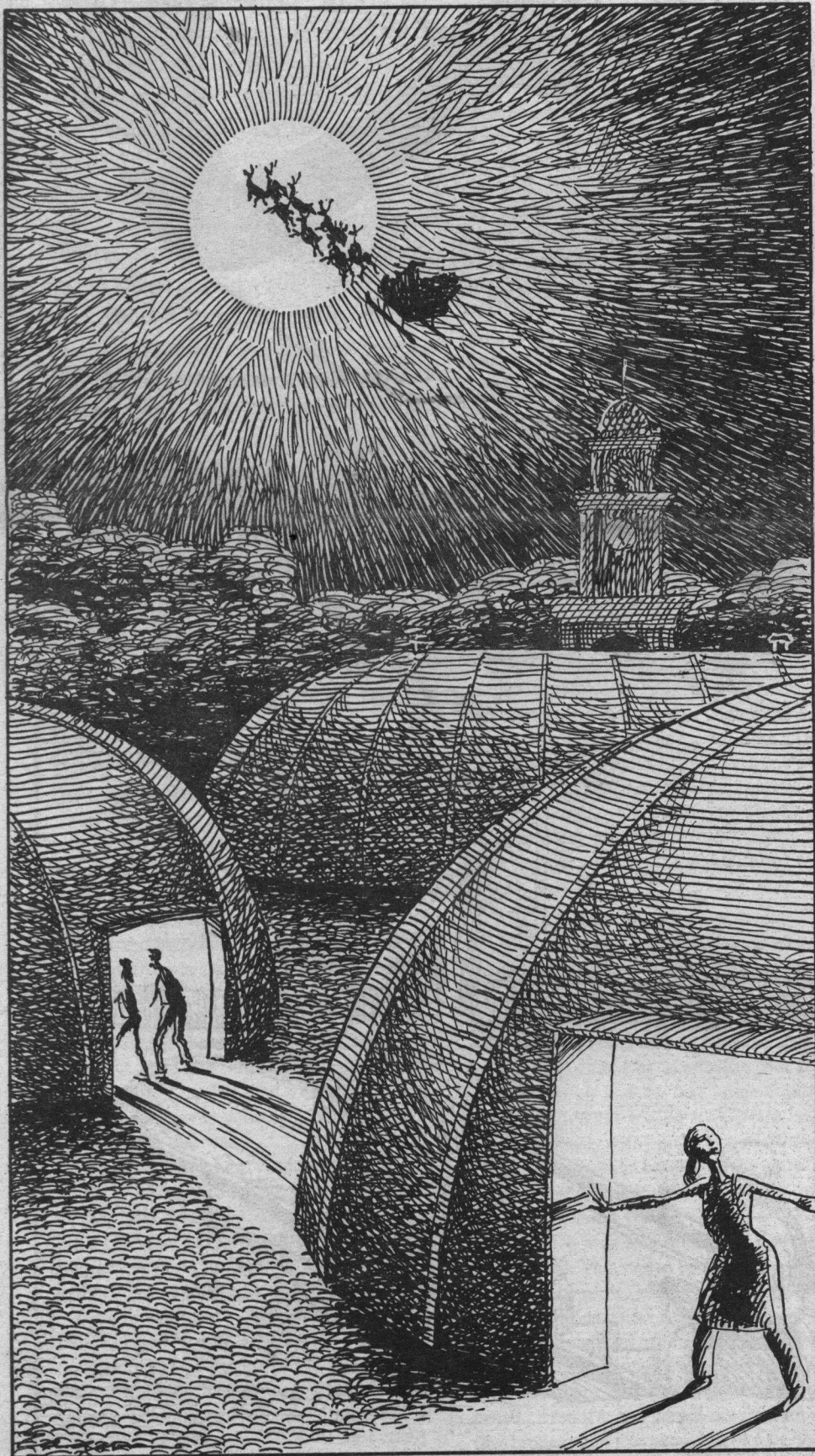


Illustration by Tim Eagan

On October 17, 15 seconds of earth movement left downtown Santa Cruz a shattered wreck. Five weeks later, businesses reopened in 'Phoenix Pavilions' as the heart of the community began

Rising From The Rubble

YES, VIRGINIA, there will be a Christmas in downtown Santa Cruz this year. And if there isn't, it certainly won't be from lack of trying.

Just 38 days and 17 hours after Mother Nature shut down the Pacific Garden Mall, over four dozen downtown businesses reopened in seven giant white tents, known as the Phoenix Pavilions, and in the old Bank of America building on Pacific Avenue. That the reopening coincided with the biggest shopping day of the year was no coincidence. That it went off as scheduled was nothing short of a miracle, especially considering the number of people involved.

by Terri Morgan

Logistically, the task was staggering. The Pacific Garden Mall went from a quaint and charming shopping district to a rubble-strewn disaster zone on October 17. As soon as the dust settled disagreements broke out between business owners and city officials, first over building access, then over nearly everything. Tempers did more than flare. "First we had an earthquake," quipped one merchant, "then we had a disaster."

One thing everyone did agree on, however, was that merchants needed to be back in business during the Christmas shopping season. The questions were how, where and who would take charge.

The answer, it was decided, was to move the businesses temporarily into weatherproof tents. To this end semi-permanent structures were set up in city-owned parking lots off Cedar Street under the management of a trio of community organizations.

"The Downtown Association, the Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce and the Cultural Council have leased the space from the City of Santa Cruz," said Mimi Paulson, executive director of the Downtown Association. "The actual leases are between the businesses and these community organizations. The businesses and the City have formed a partnership for the on-going maintenance, security and common areas program."

Leases are on a month-to-month basis. "Some businesses will be in tents for at least a year, maybe longer," said Paulson.

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Rising from the Rubble

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"We hope to be able to extend the leases as long as necessary," said Chamber of Commerce director John Lisher.

The idea of relocating in tents occurred to many people simultaneously.

"It was one of those ideas that was so logical that it sprung up in a dozen different places at the same time," said Santa Cruz mayor Mardi Wormhoudt. "I certainly can't claim credit for it. But we (the City Council) spent lots of staff time working out technical problems and helping with the construction."

The tents, which were erected in city parking lots by literally hundreds of volunteers, were shipped from Los Angeles and Canada by Sprung Instant Structures, a Canadian company with offices in San Francisco.

"It's been a wonderful thing to see," said Wormhoudt. "As difficult as the past five-and-a-half weeks have been, it's been elating at the same time. The human resourcefulness and the generosity of compassionate strangers has been very moving."

“Parking could be tight,” admitted John Lisher. “But if we didn’t put the tents up, there would be no need to park downtown anyway.”

Up front costs for the tents, and for the initial wiring, plumbing, heating and security charges were paid for by the Chamber, the Cultural Council and the Downtown Association.

To fund the project the City Council applied for a \$75,000 grant from the Office of Commerce. The San Jose Chamber of Commerce donated \$40,000 to the Downtown Association, and \$45,000 directly to the pavilion and Bank of America projects.

"Eventually we'll be paid back (for up front costs) by the tenants," said Lisher. "There's no profit involved for us."

Nor is there any money to be made by the Downtown Association or Cultural Council. We're a non-profit organization," said Lance Linares, Cultural Council executive director. "The Cultural Council didn't get involved to make money."

"We were invited because there were a lot of arts businesses on the mall and they thought

people would feel more comfortable if the Cultural Council was involved," Linares continued. "They thought we'd add some credibility to the project."

Tent tenants, according to Lisher, "stood in line and applied for space," which rents for \$1.08 per square foot. (Typical building rents on the mall had ranged from \$1 to \$1.50 per square foot.) Security — fencing, guards and electronic alarms — is included in that price.

"Placement within the pavilions was decided by the types of businesses," said Lisher. "We tried to put compatible businesses together. Each pavilion (except for Bookshop Santa Cruz which has its own tent) will choose a pavilion captain, a representative who'll deal with our property manager."

Only businesses that were dislocated from buildings were eligible for space in the pavilions. Not everyone was able to secure space. Ironically, Logos Books and Records owner John Livingston, who was involved in the original discussions about the downtown pavilion project, was left out, even though he lost most of his building to the quake.

"It came down to one weekend, when they said you have to sign a lease now and go for it," Livingston said. "I was negotiating that day for another space and didn't jump in. I thought there'd be a second run (chance to apply) but there wasn't. By the time my first deal fell through they said 'forget it.'"

Livingston ended up moving the bulk of his store's contents to a gigantic warehouse on the corner of Chestnut and Laurel. He was also able to reopen out of the back of his old store.

"In the long run I may be better off," Livingston said. "Although I did get left off the list of where everyone is."

Margaret Wilson, who operated Lily Wongs in a building that was not demolished, did relocate into one of the pavilions.

"There's no scandalous story here," she said. "The building is fine structurally, but the owners have taken this opportunity to completely remodel it. The floors were slanted, things like that (as a result of) the 1955 flood."

One of the drawbacks of the downtown pavilions, however, is that the tents have taken up one-quarter of the city's downtown parking lots. Paulson said that plans to operate a downtown shuttle are in the works, and that the Metro Transit District has agreed to add extra bus stops downtown, and issue free bus passes to downtown employees.

"Parking could be tight," admitted Lisher. "But if we didn't put the tents up, there would be no need to park downtown anyway."

The downtown pavilions opened with great fanfare and a blitz of media attention on November 24. Hordes of holiday shopper showed up to sightsee and spend money.

"The businesses did absolutely wonderfully over the (first) weekend," said Paulson. "The real test will come after Christmas, during the traditionally slow period between January and April."

Others fear the real test has already begun. "We did OK over the (Thanksgiving holiday) weekend, considering," said Livingston. "But the last couple of days have been slow. The pavilions are a nice novelty, but the novelty might wear out quickly." ♦

The Phoenix Pavilions are open from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily through December 24. Beginning December 26, the pavilions will be open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays.