

The unveiling Five years later: A public peek at renovation

By LAUREN COMSTOCK
LIVING SECTION EDITOR

IT WAS ALMOST bulldozed in favor of a parking lot in 1979. In 1984 it was designated under the City of Watsonville's historic and architectural preservation ordinance. On Friday, in all its refurbished splendor, it will be unveiled to the public.

The Porter Building on the corner of Maple and Main streets in Watsonville is not only another of noted architect William Week's designs, it is also a building filled with memories for many longtime Watsonville residents.

The post office was housed on the main floor for many years. Some people still feel twinges in their jaws when they remember Dr. Smith, the dentist whose chairs sat in the northwest corner upstairs.

Others remember The Toggery, a clothing store, that occupied the entire main floor in the '70s. The shop closed in 1979 when the city bought the property with the intent of bulldozing the building and paving the land for a parking lot.

A year later, Nancy Hendee and her associates John Norberg and John Jorgl were hired by the city to determine

the economic feasibility of the re-use of second floor space in downtown Watsonville. They decided it would indeed be economically feasible, particularly in the Porter Building.

"Over lunch one day, one of us, and no one will take the credit, said 'Well, why don't we do it?'" said Hendee, who also owns The Development Concern which is working with the Santa Cruz Beach Area Support Group to improve the beach area in Santa Cruz.

The Main Street Renaissance Group was born out of that lunch hour idea and the redevelopment of the Porter Building began. A year ago, Hendee, Norberg and Jorgl joined with Barry Swenson's Green Valley Corporation to form "The Porter Building Associates."

Hendee likens the vision of the associates to that of Warren Porter, the man who built the office complex 83 years ago.

Historical writer Betty Lewis in her book, "Watsonville remembered," quotes a 1903 edition of the Pajaronian:

"Such buildings (like the Porter Building) are a credit to any community, they bespeak the prosperity which this city and valley are

enjoying, and the contemplated improvement shows that Mr. Porter and his associates have an abiding faith in Watsonville and are willing to back their belief in the future outcome with cold cash."

Like Porter, Hendee said Porter Building Associates "think things are going to work out just fine" in downtown Watsonville. And they, and their lenders, have backed that belief with five years work and, of course, cold cash.

The result is an almost completed renovation that blends the old with the new. Terra cotta-colored carpeting is bordered by the original mosaic floor. The gleaming, new gold light fixtures in the bathroom shine on original marble wainscoating. All of the original wooden molding that could be was saved, and the pattern was duplicated exactly for the necessary new molding.

The marriage of old and new was gracefully accomplished by Aptos designer Marian Van Tress who, Hendee said, specializes in redecorating older buildings.

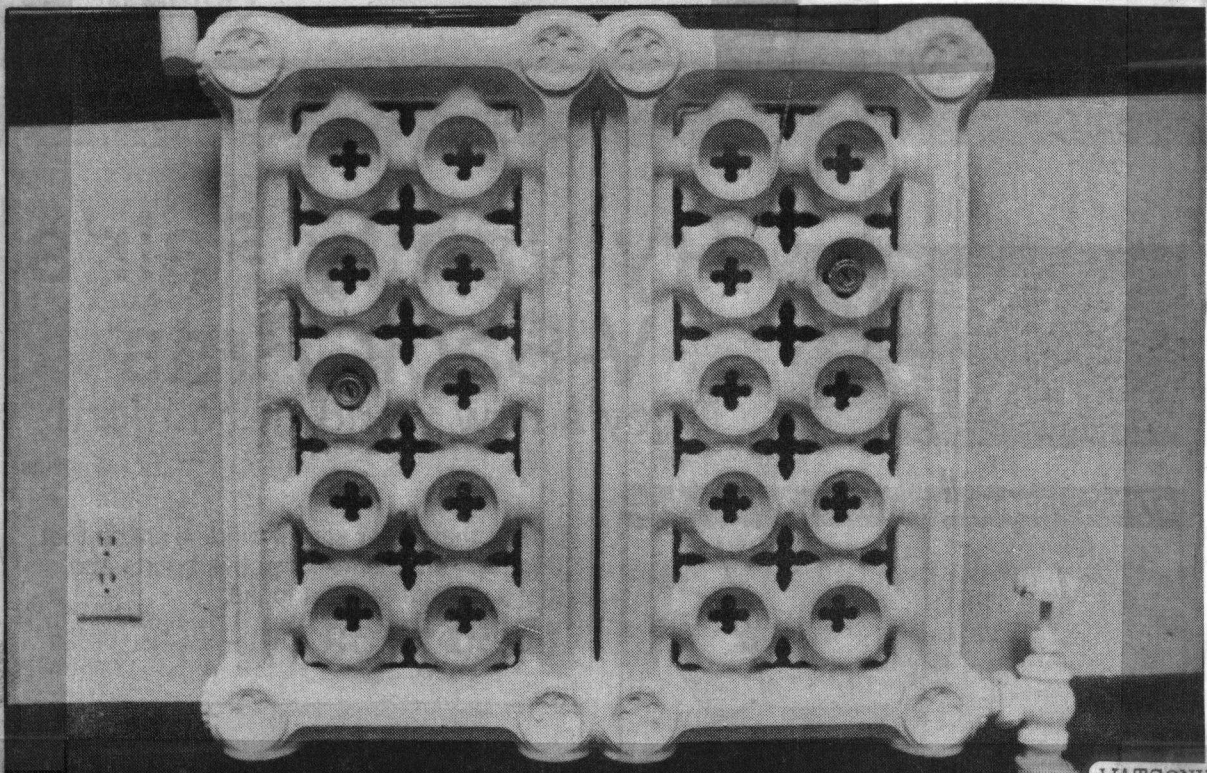
Although the interior was in desperate need of repair, the structure itself is quite sound. "It's just a real rock-solid old building," Hendee said.

"One of the guys from Barry Swenson's crew said working here is like learning construction from an old master," she added.

Hendee's favorite story about the renovation is the recovery of the wrought iron grill work that sits in the arch above the main entrance.

"When I very first met Mrs. (Bernice) Porter, she said to me, 'There is a piece of wrought iron that belongs in that archway. It's in the basement of city hall. I want you to go find it.'"

(Bernice Porter and her daughter, Diane Porter Cooley, have been active in



The Porter Building was one of the first to boast steam heat throughout.

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helping with the renovation of the building that bears their family name.)

Hendee sought out Manny

Araiza, the city's head custodian, and he took her to the spot where he has kept the wrought iron.

The story goes, 8 to 10 years ago, Araiza saw some teenagers stealing the wrought iron. He called the police in time and the would-be robbers were caught. Araiza has kept his eye on the piece ever since and was able to deliver without delay when Hendee inquired about it.

The marble and oak staircase that again shines its welcome to visitors, the charming touches like the mail slot Porter had installed to drop his mail directly into the post office below, the wrought iron story — all of these details have worked together to create a certain magic for Hendee and her associates.

Now, they're hoping the spell holds and that their vision for the Porter Building will be realized. Hendee said they would like to see accountants, attorneys, counselors, consultants and other professionals housed above a title company, real estate office or a retail concern.

They have a few tenants lined up, but plenty of offices



Bannister post detail.

and the main floor are still available for rent.

"Frankly, I think decisions on the 200 block are what's going to trigger it (the successful leasing of Porter Building office space)," Hendee said. "The marketplace is skeptical."

The Porter Building Associates have faith in their project.

"Barry Swenson has the vision to see beyond today," Hendee said. "And, frankly, his lenders have the vision."

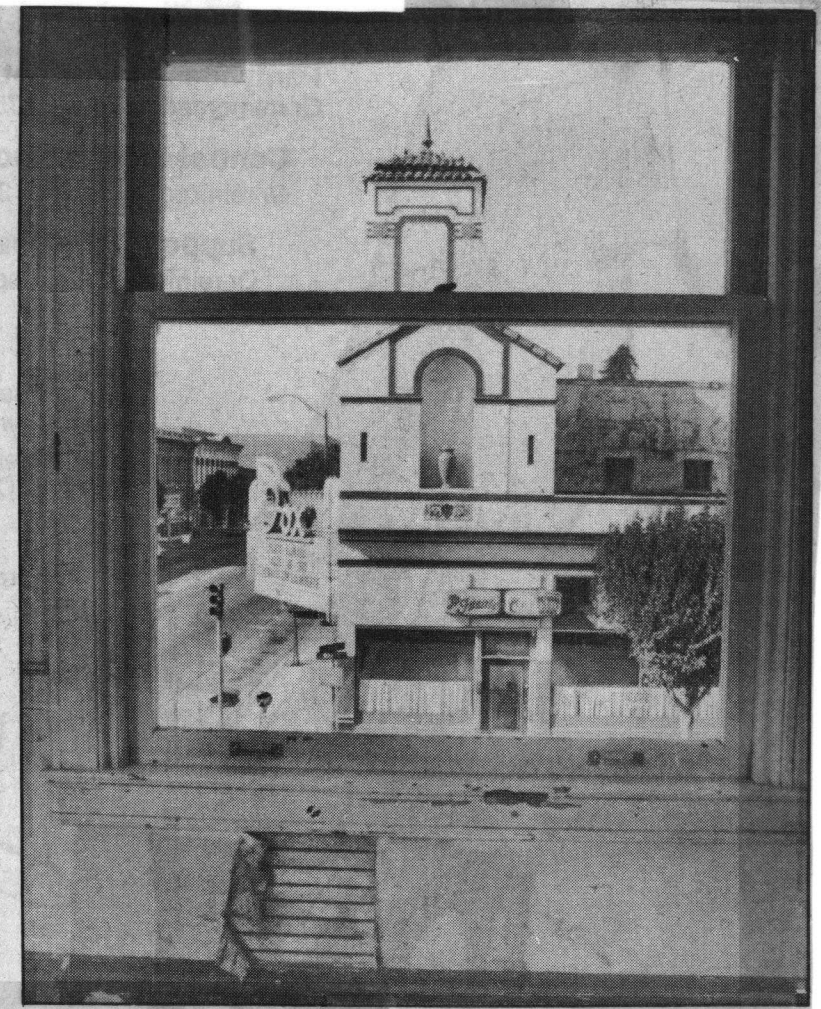


The Porter Building on Main and Maple streets sports a facelift five years in the making.

Photos by Diane Varni



A marble and oak staircase leads to the newly-carpeted office area on the second floor.



The Fox Theater is just across Maple street.