

Cooper House's struggles pre-dated Loma Prieta earthquake

Cooper House

How did the roaring success of the Cooper House manage to fall on hard times before becoming a victim of the 1989 earthquake? In the 1980s new owners said this historic shopping complex was outdated and needed to be modernized. But the resulting disarray during its prolonged remodeling drove out many merchants. Sales boomed in the half-empty building the few times the sidewalk cafe reopened to enliven the landmark with a taste of its heyday. This is the history of its downfall.

The Cooper House was born in 1971, when the 1895 courthouse slated to be a parking lot was transformed by Max Walden into downtown's only tourist attraction. Other downtown businesses were popular with tourists, but were dependent on the drawing power of this unique National Register Landmark. The boardwalk had become the sole identity of Santa Cruz, until the Cooper House opened. Suddenly "... a trip to Santa Cruz wasn't complete without a trip to the Cooper House" as Sentinel reporter Joan Raymond wrote in 1986.

While Romanesque on the outside, its formal Victorian interiors had high pressed-tin ceilings, golden oak

paneling, sculptural details, iron grillwork, marble stairs and tile-mosaic floors. Well lit by giant windows, it glittered with beveled glass, and a tour de force of Art Nouveau stained glass by artist Michael Bates. The main jewel was Bates' nationally acclaimed stained-glass counter for Morrow's "Nut House," in a central hall flower shop, that included a buffalo-headed oak counter selling health juices. The "Curiosity Shop" boutiques included a toy store featuring unique crafted items, a surprising art novelties shop, an exotic bird and fish pet shop, an antique-filled apothecary, vintage clothes, art and art supplies, etc.

On the Pacific Avenue facade, the corner tower was a restaurant (last known as the Crepe Place), while the Oak Room pub sat to the south. Both faced out on a gas-lit sidewalk cafe outlined with floral planters and vine covered iron trellises. Here colorful locals danced to the band "Warmth" at the entrance to Crystal Alley, an outdoor art gallery under an antique stained-glass skylight. The establishment was a wonderful mix of 1890s and 1960s Bohemianism, and repeatedly cited as a defining feature of the Santa Cruz community.



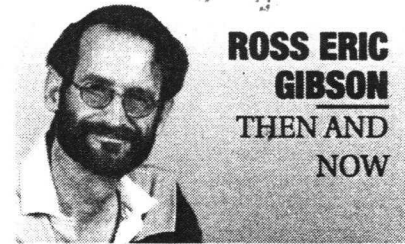
The Cooper House's flower stand was a popular stop for browsers at the old building, which was torn down after the Loma Prieta Earthquake.

Bill Lovejoy/file

But by 1980, Walden sold the Cooper House to a pair of San Francisco investors, Stan Mattison and Russ DeLong. After initial improvements, benign neglect set in due to absentee landlords. So in 1986 they traded it for three La Selva Beach condominiums, to locals Steve Sanchez and Jerome Jenson, who promised to "tone-down" the band Warmth from daily to weekly shows, do general improvements and modernize interiors (shocking some by painting the golden oak paneling).

Unfortunately, the remodeling project got in the way of business, dragging on for a year until only four businesses remained. Sanchez confessed he never wanted to be in the restaurant trade, nor manage lots of employees. So after one year's ownership, the Cooper House was sold to 24-year-old Brian Roeder of Aptos, with the restaurant a separate negotiation.

To reverse the deserted look, Roeder revived the sidewalk cafe with Warmth back on a daily schedule and



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reopened the Oak Room. Business finally boomed for three months, until Sanchez and Jenson stripped the cafe and bar of its furniture and changed the locks in a breach of contract lawsuit. Roeder counter-sued. At the height of summer, shop sales dropped from \$300 a day to \$50. Most remaining businesses left, citing erratic management, frequent lock-outs, raised rents and poor maintenance.

By April 1988, Los Gatos developer Jay Paul bought the landmark for \$2 million. Paul retained the firm that renovated Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, hoping to renovate the Cooper House together with the old county jail as a major retail center with a ground-floor museum. The Cooper House was closed for a month for remodeling and earthquake retro-

fit. Paul said he wanted to restore the building in an authentic Victorian style, "removing the 1970s kitsch Max Walden had installed."

Some complained that they loved Walden's golden era, as they watched Crystal Alley's stain-glass canopy demolished as unsafe — instead of faced with safety glass as was done in San Francisco.

In May, the restaurant and sidewalk cafe opened with the band back. Paul investigated purchasing the adjacent 1873 Odd Fellows Building to restore as a link to this project. City officials were shocked to learn the upstairs was being remodeled for offices, losing city sales taxes the upstairs shops would have brought.

Then the Oct. 17th earthquake struck. Paul's retrofit saved lives, but not the landmark, which was demolished eight days later. In 1991, a five-story office building was approved to replace both the Cooper House and Odd Fellows Building.

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