



Bill Lovejoy Sentinel photos

The Loma Prieta earthquake took its toll on the Jepsen Building, which sat vacant for nine years. The building now offers commercial and residential space.

# NEW FACE ON MAIN STREET



The windows of this corner room reveal views of Main Street and East Lake Avenue.

*Earthquake - Watsonville - Rebuilding*

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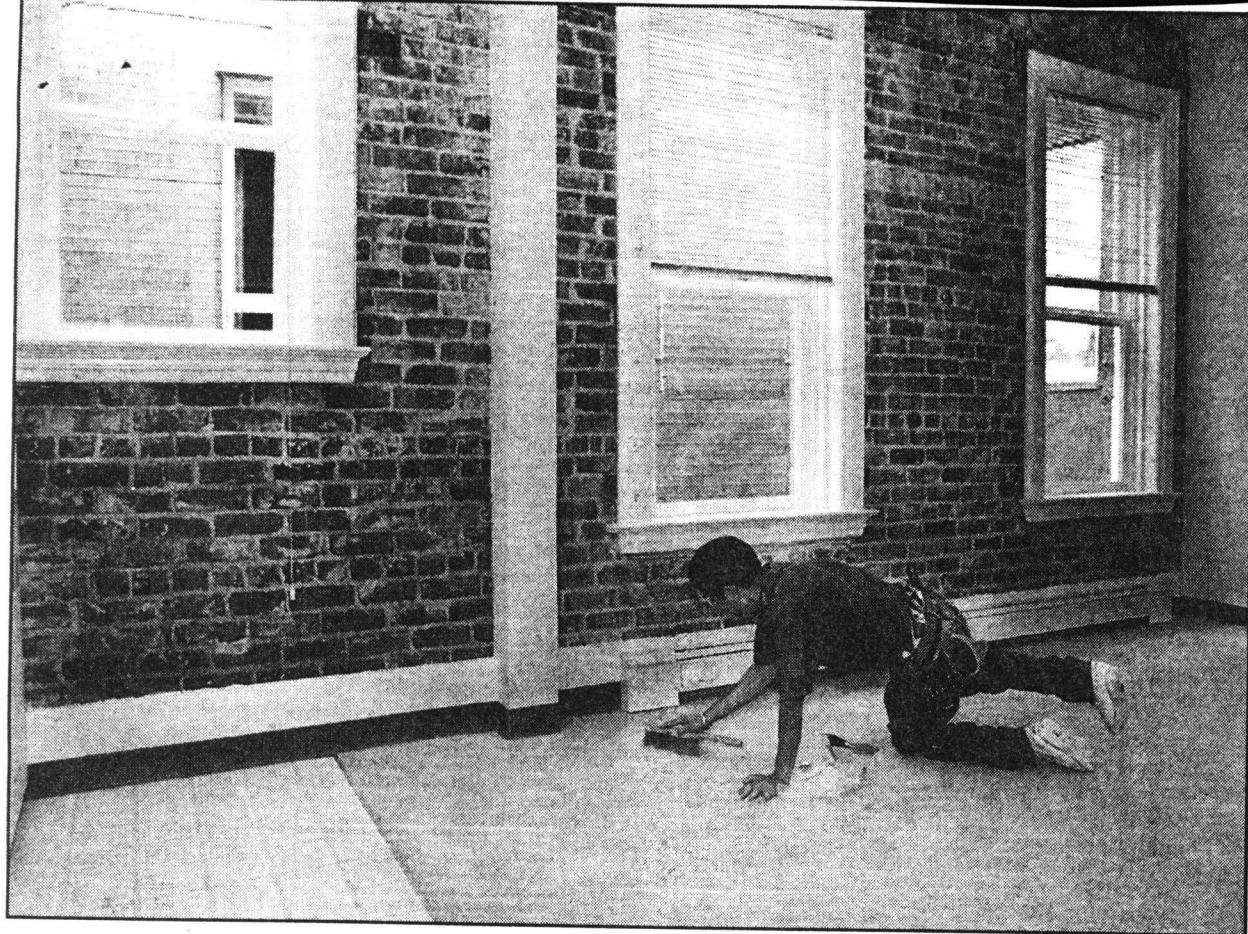
By **DONNA KIMURA**  
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — The days of being Main Street's biggest eyesore are over. After years of boarded-up existence, a renovated Jepsen Building is about to unbolt its doors. Merchants have started looking at opening businesses on the ground floor, and people are moving into the studios and one-bedroom apartments above. "We're bringing the old building back to life, something built 100 years ago" said Mike Martinsen, project superintendent for Barry Swenson Builder, Santa Cruz Division. The building, which dates back to 1904, was a victim of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. "It took a pretty good hit," Martinsen said. Seriously damaged, the Jepsen, which takes up much of the 500 block of Main Street, sat vacant for nine years. "It took away a lot from downtown to have such a building boarded up," said Marcela Tavantzis, deputy city manager of Watsonville. In 1990, the building was bought for \$1.2 million by the nonprofit Housing for Independent People, a San Jose-based nonprofit housing developer.

## Renovated Jepsen Building a key to revitalizing downtown Watsonville

HIP soon began a \$1.8 million renovation that was to be funded through state and federal emergency funds and private money. Plans called for businesses on the first floor — it had housed a drug store and other merchants before the quake — and 45 units of housing on the second. But there were problems with the funding, and the project was halted. The deteriorating building sat on the prominent corner of Main Street and East Lake Avenue serving as nothing more than a painful reminder of the devastating earthquake. The years following the disaster were also unkind. The

building was overrun by cats and the target of vandals. Barry Swenson, whose redevelopment projects were instrumental in the post-quake redevelopment of downtown Santa Cruz, acquired the property and took over the project, which is estimated to cost \$2.7 million. In Santa Cruz, his company rebuilt the St. George Hotel and the County Bank building, among others. "We always try to save old buildings," said Jesse Nickell, senior project manager. "We're not much for taking them down." It was about a year ago when Swenson's company began restoring the Jepsen. The long-standing barricades came down and work began on the building's ornate facade. Some of the decorative tiles that accent the building were gone, so replacement tiles were made. "We wanted to keep the architectural aspect and still make it functional for downtown," Martinsen said, explaining that workers changed the building's frame as little as possible. Nine commercial spaces have been created on the ground floor. There are plans for one of them to house a candy



Adolpho Ramirez lays carpet in one of the Jefsen's refurbished rooms.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

## Jefsen Building

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store.

There are 34 apartments upstairs — 24 studios and 10 one-bedroom apartments that rent between \$320 and \$750 a month. Eight units were rented as of last week. Many of the less-expensive apartments have been taken.

The city provided a \$500,000 loan to help develop the apartments. The majority of them are affordable units priced below market rents, Tavantzis said.

The city is very interested in having a mix downtown," she said.

This summer, the City Council agreed to spend \$8,000 to see if other types of housing, such as market-rate townhouses or condominiums, are feasible for the downtown neighborhood.

It's no secret that Main Street, Watsonville, has struggled in recent years. The rents are about half of what they are on Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz.

Developers hope the renovation of the Jefsen will bring more peo-

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**'We wanted to keep the architectural aspect and still make it functional for downtown.'**

**— Mike Martinsen,  
project superintendent**

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ple and businesses to the city's core.

"It's a piece of the puzzle to revitalizing downtown," Nickell said.

The project was like a puzzle itself at times.

"Everything was bit of a challenge," Martinsen said.

The frame made it difficult to install indoor fire sprinklers. Workers also had to install plumbing and bathrooms in every room.

In the old days, the building had communal bathrooms that residents shared.

The building was built by the Jefsen family, which operated a

blacksmith and carriage business in Watsonville around the turn of the century, according to the Pajaro Valley Historical Association.

During the renovation, many longtime Watsonville residents stopped by to see what was happening with the landmark. Martinsen said passers-by relayed the building's history, including a story that it was once a residence for women.

He also saw signs of the building's past for himself.

An old wooden waterpipe was found in the ground when crews were working on the sewer system.

Original brick serves as attractive walls in several rooms. An old staircase with its dark wooden banister still connects the bottom and second floors.

Developers hope the blending of old and new will be a recipe for success.

"The building stands on its own," Nickell said. "Watsonville has a lot of beautiful buildings. I'm glad to see one that's brought back."