

THE SUN

NEWS LIVING ARTS & OPINION FOR SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

VOLUME 3 • NUMBER 51

AUGUST 24, 1989 • FREE

Sitting on the edge of a brick planter box at the north end of the Pacific Garden Mall, my brother, a landscape designer, sums up the avenue by comparing it to a garden. "Whenever you design an area for use by a diverse group of people," he says, "they tend, like plants, to govern each other. The more variety in the ecosystem, the more self-governing."

As downtown Santa Cruz approaches the 20th anniversary of its resurgence from a dead-zone business district to a diversified garden mall, merchants, amid some talk that the presence of street people creates an unsafe shopping environment, report that business is good and the number of visitors using the downtown has been a constant part of healthy growth.

It's Saturday. A friend comes up to me. "Hey," he says, spreading his arms, one hand gripping shopping bags. "It's a beautiful Santa Cruz mall day." The clock on the old County Bank building registers 12 noon and Warmth has drawn a crowd on the Cooper House patio. People lean against the pretzel stand ordering hot dogs while an older gentle-

THE
MAKING OF
THE PACIFIC
GARDEN MALL

BY ROBIN SCHIRMER



man wearing a pith hat puts a coin into the guitar case of a young man singing a Beatles tune. On the next block a country-western couple and a string quartet are buffered from each other by ornamental fig trees and a menagerie of sounds coming from the one-way traffic and a constant flow of locals and tourists, some here to shop, some here for the entertainment. The sidewalks are still clean and the buildings' historic features mix with the people to create a dynamic main street environment spilling with diversity.

One hundred years ago every main street was like a mall. In August 1884, the *Santa Cruz Surf* depicts the local downtown people "talking horse

(Turn to page 10)



Front and Pacific today, from the Town Clock

THE MAKING OF THE MALL

(from front page)

"races and politics in a variety of tongues." Merchants offered a selection of goods from furniture, bridles and firecrackers to whiskey and canned goods. Street musicians were credited for enlivening the town while medicine men hawked their tonics and the candy man and peanut man took advantage of the crowd. Pedestrians strolled off the wood-plank sidewalks and socialized in the street, slowing horse traffic. The road was dirt back then, littered with horse droppings shoveled up and saved for someone's garden until the trolley was installed.

Electrification of Pacific Avenue had taken place by the turn of the century; the street had been widened, extended to the beach and, patch by patch, tarmack paved the way for cars.

Today's architectural landmarks remain our legacy from previous decades: the Roman-style brick courthouse with its East Coast turrets originally built in 1864; the Town Clock, on the same block, silenced in the 1920s and eventually finding its solitary place at the head of the mall; the Italianate Saint George Hotel, which still houses its guests for under \$30 a day.

"It was a quiet kind of thing back then, recalls Frances Drake of Spodick's General Furniture Company. Drake emigrated from New York City to Santa Cruz and has worked downtown in Spodick's since her family bought the store as a junk shop 40 years ago. "It's been quite a metamorphosis," she says. "You didn't have swarms of people. You went downtown to a specific shop, not to stroll. There were no benches and you would just as soon talk to a customer as sell them something. I don't ever remember going down to Pacific Avenue when I didn't greet everybody."

The presence of pronounced lifestyles—seasoned panhandlers and clusters of teenage skinheads and punks dressed in leathers and shredded Levis sporting 12-inch spiked hairdos with orange tips—do keep some of her older friends from shopping downtown. But, Drake, though somewhat astonished by contemporary

folkways, is not intimidated. She points instead to the food coupons and a poster on the counter stating "Give a Hand Not a Handout—Real Change Is Better than Spare Change." This is one of a series of posters, designed by downtown merchants in conjunction with the Food For All program, that is trying to limit panhandling while educating the public by encouraging shoppers to direct their spare change to hunger-relief programs. The biggest contributors on the mall over the last three months have been the customers of Bookshop Santa Cruz and Palace Art and Office Supply.

Up into the '60s, Santa Cruz was a small town and street people were not a part of the downtown consciousness, recalls Frank Trowbridge, president of Palace Art, a business that has been in the family since 1947. "Back then it looked like downtown Watsonville," he says, "and the fact we had a \$40 day says there weren't a lot of people." In those days all of the banks were downtown and there were four men's clothing stores selling traditional apparel. Lily Wong's was Morris Abrams, Taco Bell was the Creamery—a local teenage fast-food hangout—the transit center was Penny's Automotive, Pretty Mama Boutique was Grand Auto, the McHugh-

Bianchi grocery store had not been torn down for World Savings, Lenz Arts was a meatpacking warehouse, and Santa Cruz, while excited about the prospect of the university, had earned a reputation as the state's second-most-conservative county.

"Since then we've done a one-eighty," says Trowbridge. Frank's brother, Ray Trowbridge, manager of Palace Art, worked Saturdays in the store from the time he was 11 years old, when "it was common knowledge that you couldn't make it as a business on the sunny side of the street—it was too hot and there weren't any trees." Business was so slow Ray recounts walking across the street to buy ice cream and staying there in the shade, eating and watching his family's storefront to see if anyone went in.

At night, locals say, you could shoot a cannon down the middle of the street and no one would notice. Teenagers spent their Fridays cruising the loop down Pacific Avenue to the Boardwalk. Bill Brown, second-generation owner of Santa Cruz Glass Company, says, "Often there was nothing to do." Now, he walks down the avenue avoiding panhandlers and looking back at his younger years in Santa Cruz with a wry nostalgia that typifies many second- and third-generation natives. "Back then, we didn't know how good we had it."

It was 1963, mid-July. Downtown Santa Cruz had become a place of seedy storefronts with 22 va-

cancies and business signs that overwhelmed the esthetic of its historic buildings. That year, Chuck and Esther Abbott came to town. Both were accomplished professional photographers recognized for their environmental achievements, and brought to Santa Cruz a world view and specific ideas on architectural preservation.

Chuck Abbott, subsequently dubbed "the Father of the Mall," predicted that unless the downtown core recreated a climate conducive to business it would fail to meet the challenge of suburban shopping centers and face instead the threat of becoming a slum. Esther, now 78, recalls that they had just come from a city renowned for its Victorian buildings and felt that no one appreciated the historic attributes of Santa Cruz. "Chuck was always strong for making beauty pay," she says of her late husband. "Beauty is good business, but it was a revolutionary idea back then."

The couple presented slide-shows to the business community that effectively emphasized the contrast between what Santa Cruz had become and how it could be improved through a signage ordinance, building reconstruction and landscaping. "We had nothing to gain," she explains, "except what everyone has to benefit from a better town. They never saw themselves until they saw those pictures."

After completing a study of selected malls across the country, Abbott presented his concept of a relaxed, pleasant semi-mall that would allow some

"We all hoped the mall would succeed... but we had our skepticism. It has beautified the city at times. Now it has too many trees to sleep under."

—Emmet Rittenhouse

vehicular traffic and attract people who, once out of their cars, would stay, browse and make more impulse purchases than they would if they had come downtown for a specific item.

"Chuck had the vision," says Stan Williams, second-generation owner of Dell Williams Jewelers, recalling his weekly informal breakfast meetings with Abbott to discuss the potential of the mall. "In the mid-'60s the idea of a mall was good business. Chuck definitely wanted to get it started before a mid-county mall locked in a customer base and made it difficult to recapture trade. After it got rolling it turned out beautifully. It's still good as far as business goes."

The project's first hurdle was to create an assessment district of merchants and property owners in lieu of city financing. The mall concept went down hard for some, particularly those who owned their buildings outright, despite the fact that rents were low and vacancies were a constant factor.

Emmet Rittenhouse, an attorney in Santa Cruz who has worked in his family-owned building on Pacific Ave-

nue since 1936, says his opinion toward the mall was initially middle-of-the-road. "Not for and not against it," he says. "I knew Chuck Abbott and talked to him every morning as he walked up and down the street. He was the benefactor, the guy telling you the way to promotion and pay. But you had your skepticism on the subject. We all hoped the mall would succeed, and had a give-it-a-whirl attitude, but we had our skepticism. ... It has beautified the city at times. Now it has too many trees to sleep under. Once that's rectified and the undesirables are removed, it can become nice again."

Abbott made a campaign of gathering the signatures of property owners, such as Rittenhouse, many of them absentees, eventually securing the 60 percent needed to proceed with the project. Architects, landscape designers and engineers were hired to study the labyrinth of electric vaults, gas conduits and sewers under the street before going ahead with a design concept. The sidewalks were widened and the street narrowed to make the downtown more congenial while the enduring faces of old buildings were scrubbed up.

Landscaping, a key and currently controversial element, added an attractive outdoor atmosphere featuring a wide range of subtropical and cool-weather plants from crabapples and cedar to magnolias and jacarandas. Groups of ficus trees, the brunt of current criticism, were planted with the intention of pruning their trunks up into columns with ceilings of foliage.

Roy Rydell, the main landscape designer for the mall, contends that the recent furor over landscaping reflects the city's failure to maintain and prune the trees properly from the outset. "Now, some merchants complain that the density is unpleasant and there are too many trees," he says. "In fact, we should be planting more trees. A pleasant garden-like space encourages people to linger and participate. If there are people who are downtrodden and share that pleasure, those are social problems that should be handled by society and not be blamed on the environment."

It was six years from vision to completion of the Pacific Garden Mall followed by a Renaissance era in the '70s during which students were here and voting, the Cooper House, under the renovative guidance of Max Walden, was becoming a lively mall cornerstone and street musicians flourished like they hadn't since the turn of the century, testing the seam between residents who wanted to control the atmosphere of the mall and the more liberal-minded who wanted the place to create itself.

The popular sport of badmouthing the mall had begun. By the late '70s the Coalition for Street Performers of Santa Cruz and their advocates coexisted with amplified assertions that panhandling, purse-snatching and street drunks were causing shoppers to avoid the mall. Meanwhile, the city finance department reported that in 1979, the mall's 10th year, the downtown shopping district's sales had increased 12 percent.

"Running down the mall started way before there was any justification for it," says Hal Morris, owner of Plaza Books/Paper Vision. "The mall was installed in '69 and complaining start-



Pacific Avenue, circa 1929

ed not too long after." In 1972 the city council proposed a charter amendment that would have diminished student participation in municipal elections by changing election dates from April to mid-October. Hal Morris, along with Hugh Johnston and local attorney Tom Shanle, wrote the argument against the proposal, stating, among other things, that it did not lend itself to full voter participation.

"People who held political power in the community saw themselves losing it," explains Morris. "They tried to make an issue around the normal merchandise changes that were going on in the street. What was actually going on was that people with old stores who couldn't adjust were going out of business rather than changing with the character of buyer on the mall."

Morris, too, paid his dues on the mall. His business, formerly located on the north end of the mall, was floundering until he moved to the corner where Changes is now. Four months later, in November 1969, the mall was completed. "Being at that juncture and with the mall in place we began a period of 20 years of consecutive prosperity."

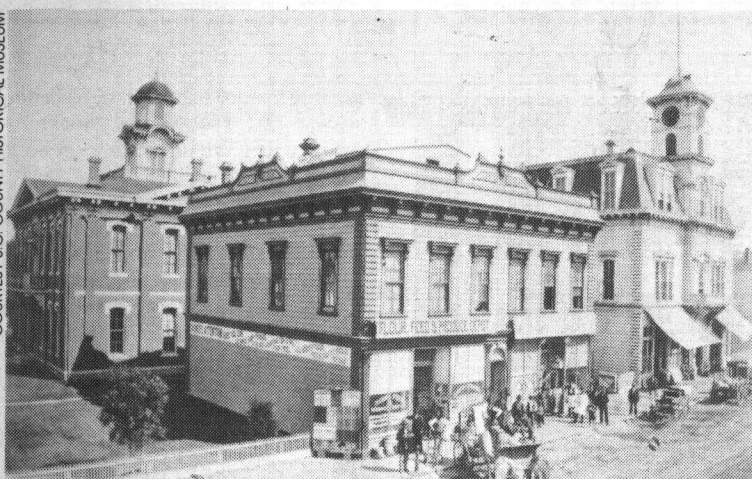
Bob Sheppherd, director of finance for the City of Santa Cruz, is optimistic about business on the mall, and for good reason. "I feel really positive about the downtown," he says. "The most recent accounting shows retail sales have gone up a whopping 14 percent, which is really a healthy growth. To say downtown isn't doing well isn't supported statistically."

Presently, the Cooper House, anchored by the new Crepe Place, has begun to regenerate activity in the center of town; the downtown now provides between 20 and 25 percent of employment in the city; more than 50 new stores have joined the downtown roster in the past year, and leading national franchises, such as The Gap and Limited Express, which depend on favorable marketing studies before locating, mix well with independently owned businesses.

"We saw the character changes and improvements happening to Pacific Avenue," says Steve Kaplan, senior vice president of real estate for The Gap. "Whereas in the past it was a service-oriented center, it has become a more generalized shopping area with nuance. We saw that people were beginning to be venturesome with restaurants, boutiques and art galleries, that the character of the street was improving, and that's what we look for all across the country."

With more new faces appearing among familiar ones, the mall none-

COURTESY S.C. COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM



County Courthouse, rear, and Oddfellows Building, circa 1894

theless retains a community atmosphere that lacks the pinch of conformity both on its atmosphere and merchandising. "It's a friendly place," says Julie Hendee, co-owner of Cat 'n' Canary. "We pride ourselves on being a store for everyone."

This particular apparel store came into its own on the mall, beginning as a vintage clothing shop on Soquel Avenue before it moved to its present location. Since its beginning, co-owners Hendee and Kathleen McBurney have paid close attention to the community they sell in. They keep a vigi-

continually increasing annual profits, attribute their success to the shop's upbeat taste in apparel, its open attitude and, largely, to its location. "It's not an artificial environment like the 41st Avenue mall," explains McBurney. "But because we're more vulnerable to times of inclement weather we have to find more creative ways to bring in our shoppers."

The tables outside Zoccoli's delicatessen are full—a European family sits eating lunch beside two scruffy young men sharing a can of root beer serenaded by a five-piece country-western band. Zoccoli's, Plaza Bakery, Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting Company and the Swan-Heavenly Goose restaurant are playing their part in enhancing the ambience of the mall with plans to extend Santa Cruz's dining and cafe culture onto their sidewalks. "In the short time we've had the tables outside it's created a new feeling downtown—a more relaxed feeling and it's a real good mix of people," says Bob Zoccoli, who has been working behind the counter since the delicatessen began in 1948. "We're looking forward to other businesses on the avenue following suit."

In April, the city council allocated \$100,000 for a demonstration "face-lift" on the north end of the mall, historically the crossroads of downtown. The project is currently in the preliminary conceptual stage and expected to be completed in November, coinciding with the mall's 20th anniversary celebration. It will be carried out by the Focus Downtown Committee (a mix of representatives from public and private sectors) who are examining the appropriateness of existing lighting, seating, outdoor use, street furniture and planting, and the potential of such things as leveling the grassy knoll in the front of Bookshop Santa Cruz and widening the mouth of the street.

"That area is a place people have associated with problems," explains Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt, who spearheaded the project. "We're looking at the situation to see what we can do to make it safe, seeing if doing a lot of little things will make a big difference. I think it will."

Despite the optimism and innovative efforts to accommodate concerns for safety and quality on the mall, the presence of street people and the homeless is still blamed for creating an unsafe shopping environment which, in turn, is blamed on the city council.

According to Lieutenant Rick Bartell of the Santa Cruz Police Department, the mall's reputation as a high-

risk shopping area is improving because of a joint effort between city officials and high-visibility and undercover law-enforcement efforts. On one hand, Bartell agrees that the issue of street people and the homeless is a phenomenon that cities across the country are coping with and is not specific to Santa Cruz or liberal politics. On the other hand, choosing his words carefully, Bartell adds that "on the outside it appears Santa Cruz is more permissive than other communities. Whether that's a matter of perception or reality I don't know at this juncture."

Louie Rittenhouse, current president of the Downtown Association, says the biggest problem with the mall now is that it was allowed to become political. The mall, as Rittenhouse describes it, has always been a business district until, somewhere in the 20-year span between Chuck Abbott's dream and the present, it became regarded as a park in the city's view, adding to the illusion that it was a place of public recreation rather than business. "The park issue was the beginning of the downfall of the mall."

Yet Rittenhouse, a third-generation businessman who, like his father, works out of his family-owned building constructed on Pacific Avenue in 1879, voices native attachment to downtown as the only shopping center in the county where you can go to your dentist, see your lawyer, pay your PG&E bill, get your pet food, go to the

"There's always been a public debate about the function of the mall," says Neal Coonerty, owner of Bookshop Santa Cruz. "I think the park is part of the strength and milieu that brings people downtown and helps Santa Cruz keep its own identity."

Coonerty bought Bookshop Santa Cruz in 1973, and the store's growth since then has paralleled the growth of downtown. "Anybody who talks about the decline of the mall doesn't know what they're talking about. It's a myth that's been talked about so much it's been taken for truth. If there was no garden, the social problems would still be there. Somewhere along the line you have to admit the mall is a success."

I was tired and found my way through Bookshop Santa Cruz to Cafezinho to contemplate the character of the mall. I bumped into a couple of friends and we grabbed the last table. Do they like the mall? They do. "I feel like it's ours," said one. "I don't have any problems with merchants or the street people. It belongs to them as well."

They had taken their children to listen to the street musicians between shopping. One, revisiting Santa Cruz after living in Boston for two years, had bought souvenir T-shirts at Greenpeace, children's books at Plaza and ordered trousers from Chi Pants. The other lives in the downtown neighborhood and enjoys a symbiotic rela-



DAVID ALEXANDER

Courtyard at Cafezinho

movies and home. "There's not one lawyer at 41st Avenue, not a doctor in the place and you have to cross a four-lane road to get to the grocery store."

Rittenhouse is pushing for less plant life and improved lighting to attract more nighttime shoppers, quoting a statistic from IDA (International Downtown Associations) that the average shopper prefers a one- to two-block line of vision to feel comfortable shopping. But in a downtown where a customer buys dime-store items at Lily Wong's, coffee at Cafezinho and books at Logos you have to question the value of "average," and compare the shopper who is drawn to a self-styled unique environment characterized by national chain-store franchises. The former want more in a downtown environment than what an average mercantile viewpoint offers. They want a shopping adventure. They want what someone else may call a "park."

relationship with the mall, where she does the majority of her shopping. "One person or three people sitting outside a store playing a guitar does not keep me from going inside and buying what I want," she says.

It's the 20th anniversary of the mall. So what's to celebrate? I look around Cafezinho, a gathering place for people who like strong coffee; some are talking, reading the newspaper, writing; some are alone, some buying flowers, others hoping to bump into someone. My friend's baby is foraging on the cobblestone. She picks him up and walks out to finish shopping, past young people, aging people, scruffy people, straight people, creative intellectual-looking people, some lingering and others passing through to shop or carry on their business. It's a colorful promenade of lively characters and a realization of the original vision of the mall: a living environment that invites the entire community.

COURTESY S.C. COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM



Looking toward Beach Hill, circa 1930