

THE

Living

SECTION

DOWNTOWN PERKS UP

New Faces
Around
the Mall

By Robin Schirmer

Ever since the early days when Pacific Avenue was a mere footpath bordering farmlands and Front Street was only one block long, men and women have molded and reshaped downtown Santa Cruz with a penchant for doing business despite the obstacles of change. In the old days the biggest challenges to the city's commercial founders were wrought by acts of nature—great fires, earthquakes, and flooding from a more lively San Lorenzo River.

These days the challenge of maintaining a healthy downtown core is complicated by the movement of businesses to the outskirts of the city limits. To rise above its new competition, downtown Santa Cruz is making a comeback by way of commercial revitalization. If rediscovering the vaulted ceilings of the old Palomar Hotel or witnessing the metamorphosis of Front Street from an auto row into a gamut of contemporary shops are any indication, the city's best efforts are coming to successful fruition.

The momentum started up in the late 1960s with the vision of planners Manny Shaffer and Chuck Abbott and landscape architect Roy Rydell who created the serpentine one-way streets and proliferate greenery we now call the Pacific Garden Mall. Their world-class urban example was enriched by such landmark renovations as the ID building and the Cooperhouse, the latter fated for demolition until Max Walden bought it and turned the building into a retail commercial cornerstone.

Reinvestments in downtown relics of the past hit a peak with the recent completion of the Palomar Hotel, considered by city zoning administrator Carol Nelson as a role model for revitalization—*revitalization*, she stressed, because "the uses are now the same as the original plan, only enhanced." The project, which includes lobby, arcade, retail shops, El Palomar Restaurant, Jose's Cantina and the upstairs living quarters, was accomplished as a team effort by the new property owners, business owners, city planning and a supportive public—the combination a likely

key to present success after the last six efforts by previous owners failed.

"The idea was to use the original character of the building and bring contemporary touches to create a new atmosphere," said project architect Janene Cayton of Vantress Design of Aptos. Hence, a refinished ceiling to bring out the original stencilled artwork drawn between the dining room's ribbed arches, touches of rose and teal to replace dark red and green, and handpainted murals depicting pastoral Mexican scenes.

To light up a drab and somewhat foreboding passage while fostering the desire to broaden night-time appeal, the Palomar Arcade which leads from Pacific to Front Street was given new lighting, tile, banners, fresh paint and a promise of artistic wrought iron gates. With funding from the city's downtown rehabilitation program, the upper living quarters of the Palomar were restored, and through a federal subsidy they were given a 15-year fixed low-rent guarantee.

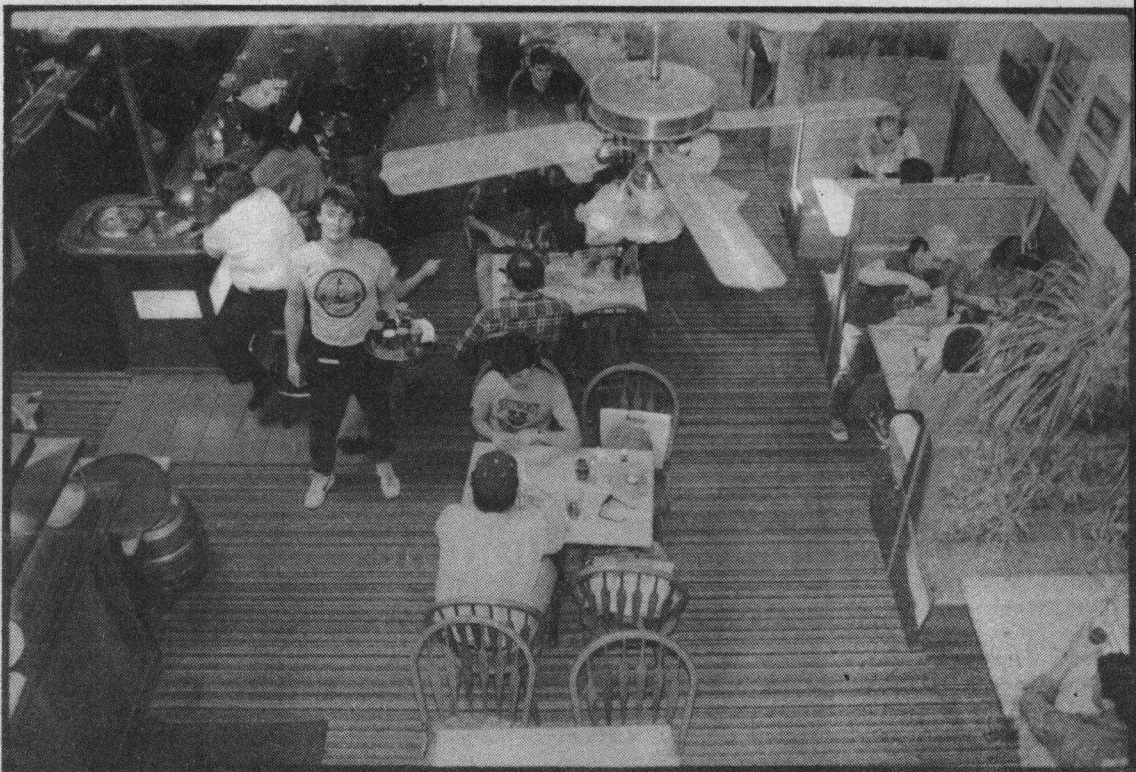
Jose Espinoza, owner of El Palomar Restaurant and the adjacent Jose's Cantina, is near ecstatic that things turned out the way they did. Espinoza, a still-young man with a knack for serving authentic Mexican food, has owned and operated the restaurant for the last four years. His namesake, Jose's Cantina, opened less than one month ago as a reincarnation of the Palomar's original bar, this time around featuring a retractable glass roof, mahogany woodwork and a reputation for the best margarita in town.

"It makes sense to do this," said Espinoza, who had just finished replacing an old hood fan with a newer



DAVID CONWAY

Rebecca's Mighty Muffins



DAVID CONWAY

Santa Cruz Brewing Co./Front Street Pub



Jose's Cantina

DAVID CONWAY

According to Turgeon, who was born in San Jose and raised in Saratoga, Santa Cruz was more open to his idea than any community he had previously visited. His patrons include a strong cross section of businessmen, students and senior citizens, who along with appreciating his home brew and interesting food are attracted to his place for its crisp, clean renovation.

Just what is this stuff of successful revitalization? According to Turgeon, success comes by way of devotion to quality. "Santa Cruz is a great place for this sort of concept," he said. "The people here support local products, especially if it's high quality, unique and uncompromising."

Next door neighbor Rebecca Campbell agrees. Originally from Canada, Campbell moved here four years ago, began wholesaling muffins and scones out of her kitchen and opened her retail shop, Rebecca's Mighty Muffins, six months ago. In her words, "business is mindblowing." In a clean, congenial environment she sells an old-time product with contemporary appeal—muffins, in 18 varieties from cornmeal-jalapeno-cheddar to apricot poppyseed, all hot out of the oven and made of 100-percent natural ingredients. "Santa Cruz is so open for possibilities," said Campbell. "I've been at this location nine months and it's already changed incredibly. This is going to be a great block."

version. "The owners, Jeff Smith and John McKenzie, are happy to see us work so hard for these changes. It works both ways. The work you put in is going to pay off, and I'm happy to do the changes because I know they'll be around for a long time." Espinoza made a careful point not to change the atmosphere of the place to the degree that it would lose its congenial appeal.

"What made this work is keeping the price down, serving good food and not changing it so much that people feel they're going to a very elegant, expensive restaurant. We didn't want that," explained Espinoza. "We wanted to keep it simple."



New Triangle

As new form and fresh appeal rise out of the sturdier creations of yore, a new breed of young business-minded folks are literally relighting certain dulled parts of town. A case in point is Brett Hancock, owner of the Warehouse Connection who will be moving his contemporary collection of home furnishings geared for a mobile, young clientele into the old Haber's used furniture store. "I was looking at that building for quite some time," said Hancock, who had serious doubts until he discovered under a dull wash of paint the fixings for a new glow—glass brick, black tile and a hot 1930s-style architecture. "The way I look at it now, this will be part of a new triangle of shopping opportunities which will expand and really upgrade Front Street."

This new triangle includes the Santa Cruz Brewing Company. When most people think of a brewery, they think of something large. Owner Gerry Turgeon explains that his is a new concept, the difference being his brew is made on the premises, by hand and done in small batches ranging from light lager to dark Pacific Porter.

Street location his new 20-year lease from co-owners Richard and David Stengl allowed him the security to invest enough of his own time and money to create the desired image with a promise of financial return.

The Stengls, who still own the Front Street property, moved their Marina Pontiac dealership from its old location to the Auto Plaza on 41st Avenue in Capitola amid concerns that moving the auto dealership out of town would cause a large dent in city revenues. "In the end it turned out best for everyone concerned," said David Stengl. "That particular facility on Front Street couldn't be used for a better purpose. These are three real fine businesses in which the people are trying to accommodate the character of Santa Cruz and coordinate themselves so that one business compliments the next."



Beyond the Mall

The changes from this creative commercial corner are emanating uptown as well, affecting established businesses in a very positive way, according to Marilyn Frame, past chairperson of the Downtown Commission. "They are changing the physical boundaries of the mall and expanding people's perception of what the Downtown Mall can be. That kind of activity tends to build on itself."

Indeed. Already there are rumors of more revitalization in the works. At this point it remains an unknown as to just how much the recent furor over the potential cost of earthquake retrofitting will dampen future intentions to put life back into fading spaces. It appears the crux of the problem is a state mandate which will require

buildings constructed prior to 1935 to be studied and identified for human safety hazards by 1990. "At least the panic can be eliminated because nothing will be mandated immediately," said Marybeth Richardson, executive director of the Downtown Association.

One project which is lifting its wings, undaunted and eager for change, is the vacated county jail building now under study by both the city and county for its potential as a combined art and commercial site. "It's a great idea," said Joe Hall, coordinator of economic development and senior planner for the city. "We can't fit a large shopping center downtown, but we can improve on our cultural facilities. With 41st Avenue continuing to develop as it is, we need to do whatever we can to make downtown attractive for people to come to." •



Art Deco Reborn

Anyone who's driven down Front Street can't help but notice that part of the change lies in the transformation of the old Marina Pontiac complex into a very streamlined commercial corner, new home of Pontiac Grille, The Pizza Company and Cymbaline Records. Owners of the Grille and Pizza Company, George Ow and Larry Chew, decided to keep the historical strand of their location alive by utilizing the original art deco building style they inherited from the auto dealership.

The owners give credit for a lot of the concept and all of the design to designer Larry Berk, who also designed Seafood Mama's and Gayle's Bakery in Capitola. The finished Pontiac Grille will be a 1950s-style diner with *real* home cooking on the inside, neon artwork and a full-sized oasis landscape on the outside, along with some very awesome objects of art by local artist.

"I've been wanting to make this building a diner for years," said Berk, who feels diners are rediscovering their rightful place. "The original three-sided art deco Cadillac building built in 1946 was ideal. We're taking the building and making it a new center of town."

Take an appealing product, an innovative approach, a soulful building, add vision, hard work, a green light from the city; top it off with an agreeable landlord and a good lease—*then* you have the makings of this new surge of revitalization. When Ron Prilliman, owner of Cymbaline Records, moved from his store's original location on Cedar Street to the Front