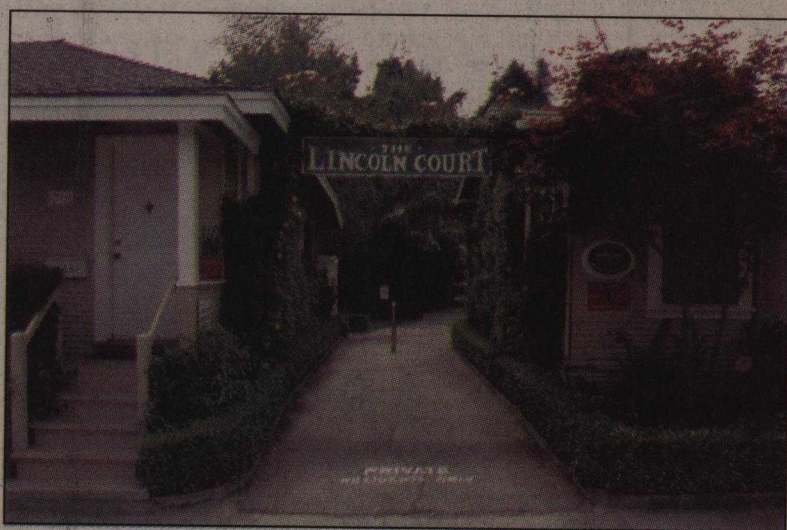


# HOME FRONT

Santa Cruz County Real Estate

## Gentle barriers

'Narrowscapes' define architect's vision



Architect Michael O'Hearn renovated Lincoln Court to its quiet, elegant state.

Greg Pio/Special to the Sentinel

By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**  
Sentinel staff writer

### SANTA CRUZ

**T**AKE A WALK down Center Street past the Boys' & Girls' Club of Santa Cruz, past the Progressive Missionary Baptist Church and around the corner past Lincoln Court.

You've just met Michael O'Hearn.

The hedge-on-hedge gardens punctuated with roses against the lace of birch trees that line the street are this architect's trademark.

You'll find restored Victorians, including O'Hearn's. He restored the Progressive Missionary Baptist Church and Lincoln Court. You'll see dozens of small courtyards lined with hedges and trellises for privacy on very public streets. Again, that's his thing.

After designing thousands of office buildings and business parks in what became Silicon Valley, O'Hearn has come home to Santa Cruz.

It's here, in the neighborhood around his home, that his renovation-roots have flourished and his green thumb has found pay dirt.

Check out New Street, starting with O'Hearn's home (115 New Street.) It's one home he didn't renovate himself. The two-story beige Victorian is the historical Cope House, built in 1876 by Ellen and Jesse Cope, who was sheriff of these parts for awhile.

People know it as the house with the carousel horse in the window. Originally located next to the Nickelodean Theatre, in the 1970s, it was sold for \$1 and moved to make way for Cedar Street and Jack's Hamburger's.

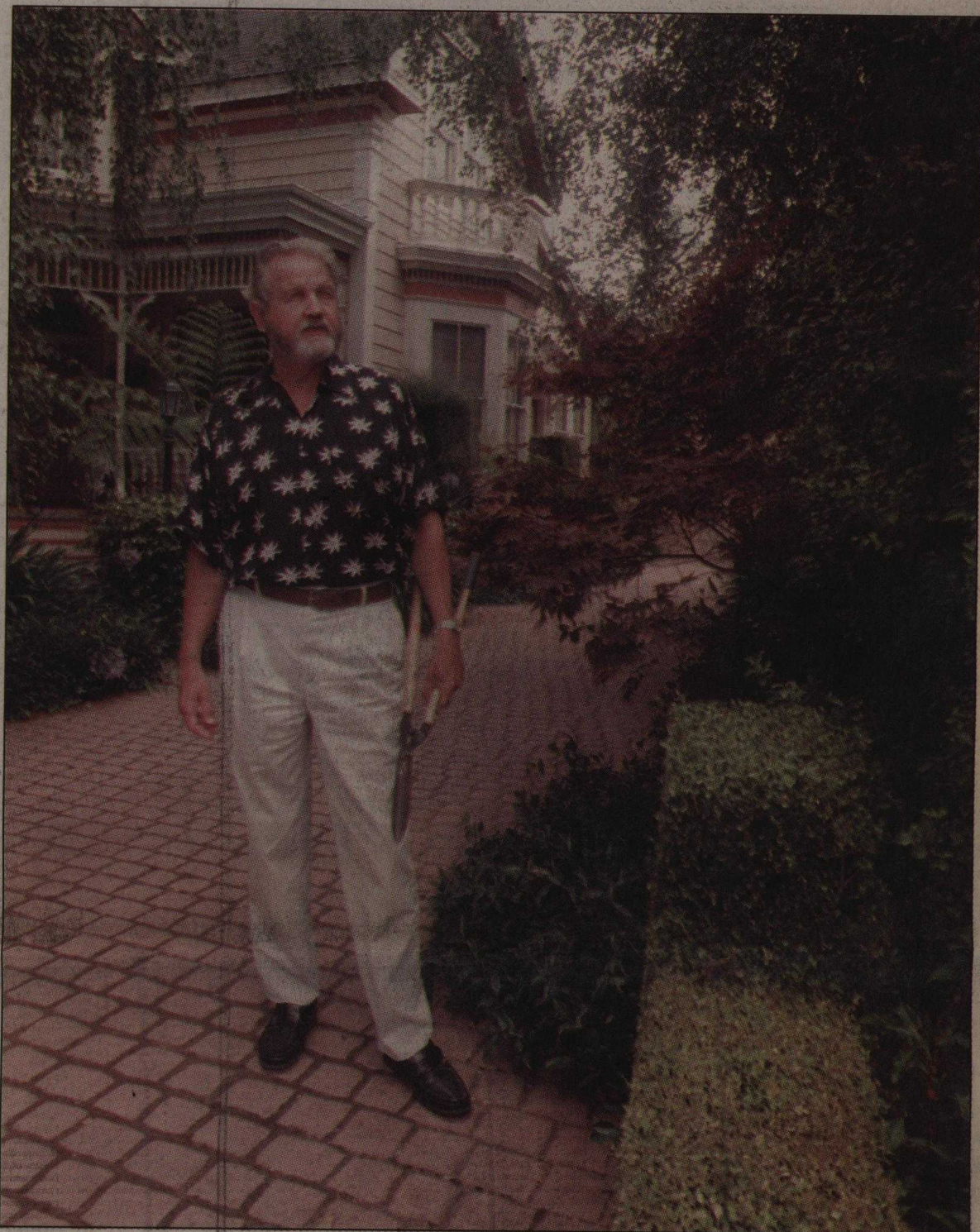
Charmed by the swimming pool in the sumptuous backyard, O'Hearn bought the house nine years ago and has filled it with antiques, unusual wooden chairs, and bright splashes of blue. He tried contemporary furniture, but gave up. "The house kept screaming, 'Get stuff my age,'" he says.

Then he started planting what he calls his "narrowscapes" along the house, driveway and sidewalks. Generally, the land width he has to work with is 18 inches to 4 1/2 feet.

O'Hearn, using hedge-on-hedge against a fan of birch trees, mixes a handful of plant textures and colors to build up, making the small space feel like more.

The foliage "fences" are gentle barriers between places with a practical purpose. They keep graffiti off walls, "keep the beer cans and people out" of the yards, and raise the sight line of the homes as people walk by. "It raises the whole palette," notes O'Hearn.

Instead of seeing an entire wall of a building, the layered-look of plants allows "the feeling" of the building, says O'Hearn, who views a building and landscape architecture as a



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Michael O'Hearn stands in the driveway of his Santa Cruz home, the former Cope House.



'Landscaping is the outside room and space. It has to be secure.'

— Michael O'Hearn

In the interior, Victorian-style lamp posts, hedges and vertical landscaping bring a refined coherence to Lincoln Court homes, 12 units tucked together near Center Street.



# O'Hearn brings vision to SC homes

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50-50 deal.

"Landscaping is the outside room and space," he says. "It has to be secure."

The trees and plants also protect the old houses, providing natural shade to keep them cool and blocking the destructive sun rays, he adds.

O'Hearn used the same landscape concepts at 620 Washington on an old Victorian he has restored as a four-plex, and at 702 Washington, another Victorian that is now a six-plex.

O'Hearn worked his ideas into Lincoln Court, a 12-unit complex of cottages of different styles ranging from California bungalow to pseudo Victorian, and different ages from 1890 to 1930, with a yard of dirt between them.

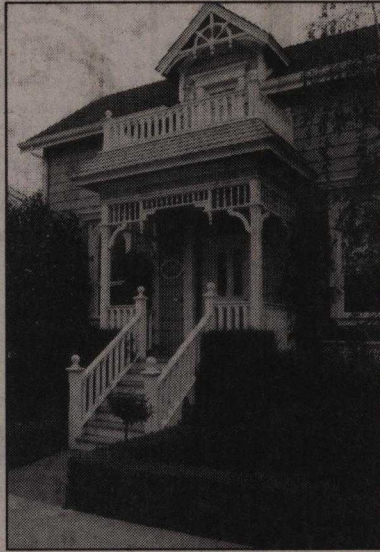
O'Hearn bought Lincoln Court in 1987 and let the renovation "evolve," — a word foreign to most architects. Each of the renovated cottages has its own private garden patio, separated again by trellises and hedges and an ample number of roses. The cottages are different colors, all muted, all with white trim.

Each has its own floor plan. The patios are all different sizes. O'Hearn blocked the drive-thru and narrowed it with landscaping. He bought streetlights that are similar to those he installed on New Street for the courtyard, had light posts made to reflect Victorian details on the cottages, and painted them the same as the cottages.

Motion detection lights are hidden in the foliage for security. A variety of other "gentle lights" — with wattages of 25, 45 and 60 — are used throughout.

Lincoln Court backs up to the Boys' and Girls' Club, a 25,000-square-foot institutional product of the 1960s. Architecturally, it is best described as a concrete block. Gradually, the walls are disappearing into a cloak of greenery, thanks again to O'Hearn's flickering of birch trees. "It drops the scale of the building down." There's another trick: O'Hearn has planted rose trees around the trees. "People don't climb trees with roses on them," he says, smiling.

O'Hearn has volunteered to continue the same landscape theme in front of the club to soften its relationship to his nearby homes. To help pay for the improvements to the club, he also instituted a highly successful fund-raiser auctioning off one-of-a-kind playhouses. The



Greg Pio/Special to the Sentinel

**O'Hearn has won many awards for his restorations of Victorians, such as this one at 620 Washington St.**

one he designed this year sold for \$7,750.

Another O'Hearn project is next door to the Boys' and Girl's Club on Center Street, Progressive Baptist Church, an elegantly simple, small, old, white church with a wooden cross on top.

Damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, O'Hearn shepherded the renovation and added a steeple. Despite the historically incorrect addition, the church was placed on the state's Historical Register, and was given a SCOPE award, a local award for excellence in improvement.

A native of San Francisco, O'Hearn is a big, tweedy man with biting opinions and scant tolerance for bureaucracy or mediocrity or "franchise architecture."

After getting his degree in architecture from U.C. Berkeley, he designed a few houses in Marin, spent a few years in Europe after winning a national competition, and then returned to California where he worked on more than a dozen schools.

When school bonds stopped passing he went to work for developers, and became known for his concrete "tilt-up" designs for offices, business parks and retail stores.

He and his then partner, Jim Starkovich, founded Habitec, an architectural firm with about 40 employees. Over the years, the firm designed a few thousand office buildings throughout California. Many of them housed start-up electronics

companies in the burgeoning Silicon Valley, he said.

O'Hearn sold his interest in the firm 17 years ago, moved to Santa Cruz, and became a "conceptual consultant" who would give developers a number of options for a property. The designs, often done before the property was purchased, helped developers decide whether to move forward. "It gave developers the freedom to maneuver between architects, between projects and contractors," said O'Hearn.

He was recruited by developer Kimball Small to work on San Jose's downtown redevelopment project, a nine square block area. O'Hearn was to rework the design and coordinate projects that included the Fairmont Hotel.

By the time his involvement ended, O'Hearn was bitterly disappointed with the "antiseptic" designs and "bureaucratic meltdown" of the original concepts.

He's had more success in Santa Cruz, working from his home office. His renovations are almost uniformly acclaimed — he has about 40 SCOPE awards and about 30 renovated Victorians to his credit.

He was the force in the transformation of Sunshine Villa from an earthquake damaged old hotel turned drug den into an elegantly appointed historic landmark and residence for seniors.

Here's a sampling of O'Hearn:

- On Santa Cruz: Sandbox to the Bay Area, but it still is a long way from meeting its potential as being a very sophisticated art and play center for the population that wants to come visit.

The potential is like no other city, but it falls short because of the local fear that it will look like San Jose.

- A vision: To have a conference center at the end of the wharf. It would have lots of windows to the Monterey Bay and Santa Cruz and would have museums, displays and places for whale and seal watching.

- Downtown Santa Cruz, post earthquake. Too many historical buildings were allowed to be torn down. The city should have protected them. The St. George Hotel was a good re-do.

- Down side of downtown: Light-colored sidewalks that are too bright and have to be eternally steam-cleaned. The downtown should have been connected to the San Lorenzo River; the runoff water could have been used for downtown landscaping. Downtown should have more planters and garden areas along retail areas.