



The old Cooper House on Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz encounters the wrecking ball shortly after the Loma Prieta earthquake.

MERCURY NEWS
FILE PHOTOGRAPH

Cooper House arises

Cooper House SJMN 10598

The historic building, ruined in '89 quake, will be replaced

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Nearly nine years after downtown Santa Cruz's signature landmark, the Cooper House, fell to the wrecking ball, construction is at last under way on its replacement.

Developer Jay Paul joined city officials Friday in a groundbreaking ceremony for what is considered the most symbolic project in the city's recovery from the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

"This is in a way a moment of euphoria for the city of Santa Cruz," Mayor Celia Scott said. "We're seeing the major site for the city being rebuilt. We mourn the loss of the Cooper House, but we're joyful that this project is going forward."

The groundbreaking came after numerous false starts and just days before the city's approval of the \$15 million project was to expire.

Located at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Cooper Street, the original Cooper House was the most beloved building in downtown Santa Cruz. Built in 1894, the Romanesque brick structure served as the county courthouse until 1967. It was transformed in the early 1970s into restaurants, art studios and boutiques, becoming a favorite local hangout and meeting spot.

The Cooper House was among 29 downtown Santa Cruz buildings destroyed by the deadly Oct. 17, 1989, earthquake. Ruined beyond repair, it was razed nine days later while onlookers wept in the streets and a saxophonist played taps.

The new Cooper House, a five-story, 100,000-square-foot, Mediterranean-style structure, will be twice as big as the original and the largest building downtown. It will offer 75,000 square feet of top-grade

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New Cooper House starts to arise from the ruins

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office space and ground-floor retail space. It is expected to be completed in August 1999, two months before the 10-year anniversary of the earthquake.

"I think everyone is going to be pleased with how well this fits into the city," Paul said. "This is such a major focal point for downtown, I think it's really going to bring closure."

First approved in 1991, the project was repeatedly delayed as Paul searched in vain for prospective office and retail tenants willing to lease space in advance — a requirement of most lenders. Although several companies have expressed interest in the site, none has yet signed a lease. Paul was able to get a lending agreement this year that would allow him to build without

pre-leasing.

The project is being built with a generous city subsidy — \$950,000 worth of parking fees and permits for tenant employees. It is the largest subsidy offered by the city's redevelopment agency to any downtown project.

Until this year, city officials had offered an even greater subsidy, worth about \$1.3 million. But that offer reflected a time when the city expected the Cooper House to jump-start its downtown recovery.

With the downtown largely rebuilt, the Cooper House groundbreaking was anti-climatic. But the symbolism was not lost on the crowd of local officials who gathered for the ceremony.

"I think for all of us who had anything to do with the devastation of the earthquake, this is an emotional moment," said City Manager Richard Wilson.