

Planning  
1990-2000

# Watsonville blueprint

## Architect of city's rebirth a builder for recovery and a preservationist

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On Oct. 17, 1989, Watsonville was devastated. The Loma Prieta earthquake reduced buildings to rubble and left the city pockmarked with empty lots.

Twenty-one commercial structures were demolished that day, taking with them numerous businesses and draining the vitality from the city's economy.

In the weeks that followed, the city rallied to begin the slow process of reconstruction. Watsonville architect Bob Corbett was one of those summoned to apply his art and experience to re-creating Watsonville.

Corbett was a good choice for a simple reason — he genuinely likes the city. He is here by choice, not by birth, and knows the value of living in a smaller town.

Born and raised in San Diego, Corbett, 45, graduated in 1972 from Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo and got his architect's license in 1975. Two years later, he and his wife were settled in Santa Cruz.

But first he put in five eye-opening years in San Diego working for a large firm doing large jobs.

"I was just a small cog in the wheel," he said in a recent interview. "(That time) made me not want to live in a big city, doing big, glamorous projects ... the quality of life is more important ... living, working and serving a small community." He commuted over-the-hill every day for a year, then worked four years for another company before opening his own practice in 1982, specializing in commercial and industrial buildings.

With numerous local projects already under his belt, he readily agreed to become involved in resurrecting the city.

Besides the vision, design, planning and numerous other elements that go into a successful architectural project, Corbett said he has spent considerable time researching the city and its history.

The results of his efforts are becoming increasingly apparent, especially in the downtown area. And while Corbett is understandably pleased, he is not surprised.

"I thought this right after the earthquake and I still think it's true ... that the effect of the earthquake was a terrible shock and a terrible loss to the community, but that five years down the road, people will look back at the earthquake and say it was the best thing to happen to Watsonville."

As with many history-making events that serve as chronological yardsticks, the earthquake serves to differentiate old and new eras of the city for Corbett.

"Before the earthquake," he said, "downtown Watsonville was a deteriorating city center, adversely affected by the establishment of new shopping centers being built in the outlying areas. It was a downtown with problems. It had older buildings, it didn't have modern facilities at all, businesses were leaving."

"The earthquake has presented an opportunity that can allow (Watsonville) to be re-established in a real dramatic way."

Corbett sits on the board of directors of Main Street Watsonville, the city's participation in a national economic revitalization program. He said having the program accept Watsonville as a demonstration city has provided city planners, developers and businesses guidance and

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assistance in establishing a vision of what a downtown can be. "And," he said, "the earthquake provided the vacant land to make it happen."

A case in point is the 300 block.

Corbett said that before the earthquake, the block featured a series of old, relatively narrow buildings developed from 1870 over a period of about 100 years. "But that's sort of the appeal of a downtown ... to not try to minimize the architecture's different styles, colors, texture."

Six weeks after the quake, three families with adjoining

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properties in the 300 block contacted Corbett to help them rebuild.

"All of a sudden we had a whole city block to do," he said. "We had a meeting with all the various property owners and a discussion of what worked and didn't work with their previous buildings (demolished after the earthquake.) And one of the clear consensus items was that

the very narrow, extremely deep stores were not very efficient retail spaces."

Some ground floors of the older buildings were between 20 and 40 feet wide and 150 feet deep — "Bowling alleys, basically," he said.

It was decided to move the buildings back from the street, settling on a depth of 120 feet. The broader sidewalk space was given over to the city to develop improvements in the public right of way.

Improvements aside, Corbett is firm in defending the merit of Watsonville's older structural

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hodgepodge — otherwise known as character. It's that quality that makes a downtown different from — and more attractive — than a big shopping mall. And Watsonville's buildings, he said, are big on character and detail.

One of these, Corbett said, is the building in the 300 block of Rodríguez that houses Kilpatrick's Bakery Thrift Store. "If you look carefully, you see little medallions, the tile work ... In the Jefsen building you see detailing, craftsmanship, wood-working ... ." Elements of a quality and pride in work you don't always see in modern building techniques, he said.

To date, Corbett has applied his un-modern, un-glamorous view of quality and pride into building or renovating such downtown structures as Jalisco restaurant, the Herrera Building, the Fox Theater, and most recently, the Petroustas clock-tower building opposite the Plaza. He did the Penny Lane building that houses his firm, as

well as the Town and Country Center and the Callaghan Park Recreation Building.

Work under way includes the Spanish-inspired Romo building at Main and Second streets, and renovations to the old post office to house the new Cabrillo College satellite campus. Down the road is the new transit center on Rodríguez which, Corbett promised, "will be a lot more than a bus stop."

He said his intention has been to reorganize the new structures around the Plaza, which has a diagonal layout. The Romo building is angled off at 45 degrees "to begin carrying through the diagonal orientation of the Plaza," he said.

The earthquake not only changed the approach to rebuilding for Corbett, but the process. "Before the earthquake, I'd see several clients on various projects," he said. After the earthquake, several of these clients also owned buildings that were either destroyed or which needed renovation. And as it

turned out, many projects were side-by-side.

"Working with the (building) owners was really a unique process," he said, "intercommunication and a great willingness to give and take. They were all local family members, and they were interested in rebuilding, and rebuilding well."

Corbett is anxious to see the face lift finished and business booming. Essential to that is an effective downtown core, he said, with commercial retail and especially office space, a lot of which was lost in '89. He envisions the upper floors of downtown buildings filling that need. "(Office space) is lacking right now," he said. "It's critical that it be re-established for the downtown to come back."

He also said high-density housing should be encouraged closer to downtown to draw people and life into the area.

"... The earthquake didn't drive the nail in the coffin. (It) was really the beginning of the rebirth of downtown," he said.





Mike McCollum

Watsonville architect Bob Corbett said he is pleased, but not surprised, by city's earthquake recovery.

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— Architect Bob Corbett

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