



Innovative as always, Santa Cruz is rescuing its stately Victorian buildings from demolition. Good show

# SAVING THE QUEENS OF VICTORIANA

By Larry Wood



Commission, comments that "the ideas for our program came from communities across the country. Where Santa Cruz is unique is in the comprehensiveness of its commitment."

The preservation program didn't get started without a big flap, however. In 1974, the McHugh & Bianchi Building—one of the town's two registered national landmarks—fell under the wrecker's ball.

Appalled, the city council moved quickly to form an Historic Preservation Commission and legislate a strong historic-preservation ordinance. Although their action kindled instant controversy, civic leaders figured they had adequate community support to back up their new zoning laws. They based this belief on the results of a 1970 survey which had asked residents, "Would you like to see the city pursue policies to encourage the preservation of traditional Victorian homes in Santa Cruz, or should these homes be torn down and the land used for new residential or commercial uses?"

Eighty-two percent of the respondents favored policies that encouraged restoration. "Interest in historical preservation," notes architect Page, "has also been stimulated by the commercial success of historical-preservation efforts."

Page cites the rehabilitation of the old county courthouse, the railroad depot and the Sinkinson Sash Mill as some of the restoration efforts that have "provided the city with a unique commercial atmosphere."

All a visitor needs to do to experience the distinctive flavor of Santa Cruz is to stroll through the city's Pacific Garden Mall shopping area.

Here, old buildings blend with new; shady trees, profuse plants and comfortable benches invite visitors to linger. Careful attention to street lighting, signs and logos gives the place an unusual flair and individuality. It's hard to believe that the final plans for the mall were published only last year. Experts expect that it will take five-10 years to complete the mall, but most local architects and citizens agree that it is already a success.

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**W**hen Santa Cruz was incorporated as a city in 1891, Victorian elegance was at its zenith, and the seaside resort was considered the last word in modernity.

Today, nearly a century later, architectural preferences have come full circle, and Santa Cruz is achieving a new kind of fame for its effective campaign to preserve and restore its fine old Victorian buildings.

Prompted by a combination of nostalgia, economic necessity and civic pride, Santa Cruz residents have been working for more than five years on a preservation plan that could well become a model for other medium-sized California cities.

"Santa Cruz," says San Francisco architect Charles Hall Page, "has as comprehensive a set of preservation tools and as staunch a commitment to historic preservation as exist in any urban area in the United States."

And Williard Morris, a member of the Santa Cruz Historic Preservation

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# Victoriana

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What helps to make the restoration of Victorian homes and buildings so successful in Santa Cruz is that it's a sincere grass-roots effort—not a project superimposed on local taxpayers by city bureaucrats, or a program lavishly funded by bonds, government loans or corporate grants.

The people seem to really love their town, and are genuinely anxious to preserve its heritage. Not long ago, a group of landlords and homeowners got together to plan an all-day conference called "Old House Workshop." Its purpose, in the words of one of its organizers: "To encourage spontaneous preservation activity by exchanging information, like trading the names of good carpenters and reliable roofers, and finding inspiration in a neighbor's progress." More than 250 people attended.

Although the passing of Proposition 13 affected the ability of California cities to provide 50 percent in matching funds for preservation, Dr. Knox Mellon, the state's historic-preservation officer, foresees a shift that will increase the grant money available to preserve and restore private and commercial historic buildings.

Two recent government actions provide an unprecedented opportunity for private owners to receive federal grant money for preservation schemes. Explains Mellon: "The newly formed Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service within the Department of the Interior, and the State Office of Historic Preservation, are now giving requests for such grants the highest priority."

"However," points out city-planner Carole Nelson, "people here aren't quite sure that's the way they want to go; they like their changes in small increments, to make sure things are going right.

"We're trying to provide as much support as we can to the private sector," she adds. "We keep trying to find federal subsidies so that the individual businessmen can take advantage of them. Meanwhile, the city itself is sticking to public improvements as its contribution."

Lawyers, doctors, dentists, architects and other professionals are among those who have restored Victorians and converted them to offices. Roy Rydell, whose office is located in a charming Victorian on Maple Street, is one of those who stood up to city hall when the council said that it couldn't be done. In one instance, Rydell bought a Victorian building for \$1 to save it from demolition, and had the entire structure moved to a new site on Chestnut Street.

In response to all the attention recently given to its restoration programs, the city has outlined four walking tours that cover the Mission Hill, Ocean View, Beach Hill and Laurel areas.

A list of houses on the four tours may be obtained by requesting the *Walking Tours* brochure from the Planning Department at Santa Cruz City Hall, Santa Cruz, Ca., 95060.

A book that's also informative is John Chase's *The Sidewalk Companion to Santa Cruz Architecture*, published by Paper Vision Press, 111 Pacific Avenue, Santa Cruz. It's available at the Octagon House Museum, on the corner of Front and Cooper Streets, and also at local bookstores. □