

# Born Again

## The Rebirth of Downtown Santa Cruz

A major topping-off party will shake up downtown this Saturday, and everyone's invited.

That's everyone who grieved when the town toppled, everyone who struggled to put it back together again, and everyone who has endured years of noise, dust, detours and despair.

by Tom Stevens

But mostly, this party is for everyone who lost hope that downtown could ever make a comeback.

The thousands of citizens, workers and visitors who will throng Pacific Avenue this Saturday to "Celebrate Downtown" will enjoy a party of truly historic proportions (see related stories). They'll also discover that downtown is not only "back," but is in some ways better than its predecessor.

What was a jail is now a museum and arts center. Pacific Avenue is now one-way, affording more sidewalk space for cafe patrons, street musicians and the impromptu music and theater performances for which the old Garden Mall was justly

famed. And new businesses ranging from funky to swanky are opening all over town.

This doesn't mean downtown Santa Cruz is ready yet to replace its much-lamented forerunner in the hearts and minds of the citizenry. For one thing, it's not the same town, architecturally or atmospherically. Gone forever are distinctive Victorians like Cooper House and Eisenhower-era retro landmarks like Ford's Department Store. In their place stand vacant lots or yawning chasms.

Cruzans also will have to accustom themselves to a strange new skyline — a multi-level parking garage here, an oddly-peaked office building there; glass and steel rising where bricks and cupolas once stood.

"Everything changes, doesn't it?" offered restaurateur Chris Estrella last week as he supervised kitchen implacements for his new downtown cafe, Good Fellows. "That's life. But change doesn't have to be bad. We're in the beginning of a new change, a real renaissance for Santa Cruz. I think it's going to be nice." Estrella, a 25-year area resident, sit-

A jazz trio plays to a packed afternoon crowd at 99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall in downtown Santa Cruz.

ed his new business in the McPherson museum complex because they wanted to be in the center of downtown. "It's new," says Estrella. "Everything is new."

Also viewing the "new" downtown as a potential business boon is 16-year Santa Cruzan April Shen, whose classy Shen Gallery on Pacific replaces her former quake-ravaged Cooper Street outlet.

"When I first moved back here, everyone said I was a fool. We were one of the first merchants to move back downtown after the earthquake. I wanted to be near the museum, because once downtown is rebuilt, it's going to be better than it was. So far," Shen smiles, "it's been worth it."

### The Spirit of Downtown

If downtown is to thrive and prosper, it will need customers — particularly longtime Santa Cruz residents who foresook downtown after the quake.

GREG PIO

Two of those, Jackie Milligan and Beverly Ann, take in some spring sunshine along with their lattes outside the Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting Company. Nearby, a pair of chess players hunch over their board, alternately tapping a time clock.

"I quit coming down here after the earthquake," says Ann. "It reminded me of a war zone, it was so depressing. But when the Roasting Company opened again, it changed the whole ambience. I know I can always come down here and run into somebody I know."

Milligan nods. "It seems like it's coming back. The spirit of the town is slowly coming back."

"They have so many coffee shops down here now," says Ann. "You can just roll down the street from one to the other."

"You mean bounce down the street," Milligan laughs.

The coffee places perk right along with students bent over calculus texts at Espresso Royale, patrons finger-popping to a jazz trio at Cafe Milano, avid conversationalists enjoying the Bohemian ambience of Java House, and friends meeting friends on the worn porches of Caffè Pergolesi.

Taking a break at Cafe Milano, trumpeter Dustin Hengl of the Walkin Blue trio surveys the late afternoon crowd of students and young families clamoring for service. "Just a month ago, it was really dead downtown during the day, but now it's happening," he said. "This summer's really going to take off."

Up Pacific Avenue, past workers installing wooden benches and wrought-iron flower bed fixtures, motorcyclist "T-Berri" and her fellow riders enjoy post-run refreshments at an outdoor cafe. Their bikes lean nearby, including T-Berri's cow-colored motorcycle, "Daisy."

"We just got back from a run along Skyline Boulevard to Alice's, and we decided to come here and top off the day," T-Berri explains, adding: "It'll take a few years for the town to come back fully, but I think it's great now compared to how it was after the quake."

Over on Front Street, long the stepchild of downtown avenues, volunteer Kate Mullikin polishes windows at the New Women's Art Gallery so that passersby will notice the gallery's first invitational exhibit: the works of 53 area women artists.

Mullikin says she hopes Front Street becomes, in time, "a cultural avenue" of galleries and studios, but gallery manager Neidin Henard goes her one better.

"I can see Santa Cruz becoming like Santa Fe," says Henard. "All we need now are a few more galleries and a good comedy club." She believes the empty but spacious former Inside store adjacent to her gallery would make an ideal performance space.

*'It seems like it's coming back. The spirit of the town is slowly coming back.'*  
— Jackie Milligan

### Ironing Out the Kinks

Such lofty aspirations aside, it will take years of labor before downtown Santa Cruz can regain its former élan. Restoration work even needs to be done on the restoration work.

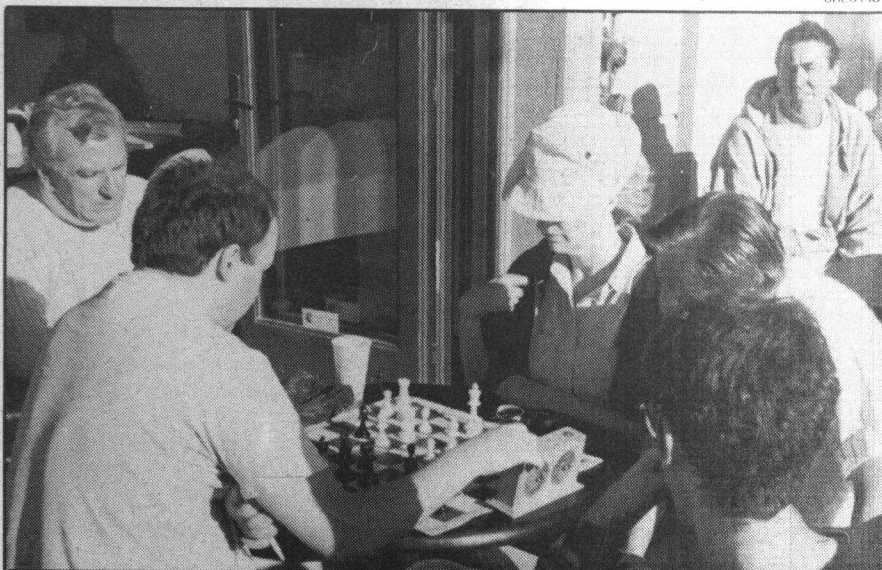
"This whole floor might have to come up," frowns tile setter Don Paige of San Jose as he tests a new adhesive compound on a section of Bookshop Santa Cruz flooring that has started to buckle.

Landscape laborer Jose Cardenas of Petaluma shovels broken concrete and mislaid pipe out of a tree hole near the post office. "The first company screwed up," he said. "They didn't center the trees right, so we have to redig these holes."

Logos clerk Heidi Kerner alludes to power outages that periodically

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Chess players find refuge from the hustle and bustle of downtown at the Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting Company.