



— Policeman Jim Howes walks carefully through what used to be the dining room at the New Riverside.

Ruins of a once-great dynasty

By JAMIE MARKS
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SANTA CRUZ — Broken windows, shards of glass, crumbling walls, piles of trash.

That's what the once-proud New Riverside restaurant at the corner of Barson Street and Riverside Avenue looks like these days.

In its heyday in the '70s, the New Riverside attracted the great and near-great of Santa Cruz. They came to soak up the rich, spicy Szechwan sauces. Back then, it was the only "haute cuisine" Chinese restaurant in town.

The ever-gracious maitre d' Francis Tong — now owner of several restaurants bearing his name — would enthusiastically greet his guests at the door.

Inside, there were many splendors to absorb. Not only did the New Riverside serve up delicious food, but nightly entertainment — until the City Council revoked its license in 1977.

The New Riverside was more than a restaurant. It was a social center, opening its doors to high school proms, rock 'n roll bands, jazz greats — even a dinner club.

In short, it was a place to be and be seen.

Today it's a 22,000-square-foot dinosaur of decay and ruin, resembling the Bronx more than downtown Santa Cruz.

"It's a real blight," said Santa Cruz policeman Jim Howes on a recent journey through the abandoned restaurant's dark corridors.

Over the past two years, the New Riverside has been home to the backpack-toting transients that flock to Santa Cruz. It's also a prime target for neighborhood kids to vandalize, said Howes.

Police have posted "no trespassing" signs on the building. But just as quickly as they're put up they're torn down.

A year ago, the city condemned the building, but this, too, didn't stop the night owls from sneaking into it.

"Especially when it rains we find a lot of them in here," commented Howes.

Vestiges of McDonald's and Wendy's hamburgers line the floors. Rubble is everywhere. Portions of the ceiling have been pulled down. Even the China map has been ripped off the wall.

In one corner, Howes pointed a flashlight to a burned-out section of carpeting and said, "Looks like they had a barbecue here."

Over by the bathrooms, there are traces of rotting feces on the floor. Puddles of urine abound.

Abandoned trucks and cars sit stripped of their valuable parts in the parking lot. Weeds over-run the sidewalks.

Soon, all this will change if the Gavilan Development Corporation, Inc. gets its way.

Spokesman Malachi Sanchez said the Soquel-based firm hopes to close escrow on the property this week. If they get a go-ahead from the city planning commission Nov. 10, demolition of the New Riverside will begin.

Sanchez said Gavilan is planning to build an 85-room "Queen Anne" style motel on the property. Construction of the \$6-million project might begin as early as the first part of 1984, with the opening in late summer.

The Victorian-style motel will be called the Riverside Garden Inn, said Sanchez.

The Gavilan Corporation bought the property from the Letky Corporation of Los Angeles and Hong Kong. That firm had leased it as a restaurant until its closure two years ago.

Ironically, the latest proposal for the property brings it full circle. Originally the land housed the Riverside Hotel. Built back in 1872, the hotel burned to the ground in the mid-40s. It was then rebuilt as a restaurant.

Sanchez said his company plans to demolish the building which is presently on the 60,000-square-foot lot and begin anew.



ABOVE RIGHT — Howes stands in front of the New Riverside's map of China, now torn halfway off the wall.

RIGHT — Out in the parking lot are a variety of wrecks.

Photos by
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