

COOPER HOUSE

# Gone four years

## A bit of Santa Cruz's soul went with quake-ruined Cooper House

BY PAUL ROGERS  
Mercury News Staff Writer

Today, when thoughts across the Bay Area turn to football and yardwork, Marlene Keeley will quietly throw a bouquet of flowers over the chain-link fence to the vacant lot where Santa Cruz's heart was broken.

She doesn't want anyone to forget.

Four years have passed since the Loma Prieta earthquake of Oct. 17, 1989. Houses across Northern California have been rebuilt;

nerves for the most part recovered. But the Cooper House is still gone forever.

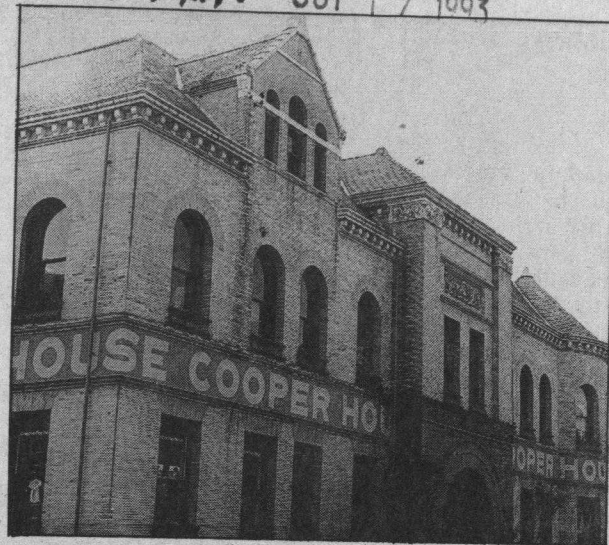
"I really miss it," said Keeley, owner of the Crepe Place restaurant, a former Cooper House tenant. "It's a part of Santa Cruz that can never be replaced."

Other landmarks across Northern California still bear witness to the devastation. The Embarcadero Freeway along San Francisco's waterfront is gone for good, an improvement in the eyes of many. And work has yet to

begin to replace the Cypress structure in Oakland, the double-deck section of Interstate 880 that collapsed, killing 42 motorists.

Of all the ruined buildings, the Cooper House may have been the most beloved: an 1894 Romanesque fortress with rounded brick edges and high ceilings, for decades the Santa Cruz County Courthouse until transformed in the early 1970s to a collection of restaurants, art studios and boutiques.

See **COOPER HOUSE**, Page 2B



Once the county courthouse, Santa Cruz's 1894 Cooper House was a tremendously popular commercial center until it became a casualty of the 1989 earthquake.

MERCURY NEWS  
FILE PHOTOGRAPH

# Santa Cruz knows it can never replace beloved Cooper House

## ■ COOPER HOUSE

from Page 1B

To many locals and weekend visitors from San Jose, it was more than a redevelopment success at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Cooper Street, it was a brick-and-mortar symbol of Santa Cruz's spirit: distinctive, casual and endearingly offbeat.

On sunny afternoons, Ginger the Rainbow Lady could be seen dancing and playing the tambourine outside while members of "Warmth" filled the air with jazz. There were jugglers and flower carts, revolutionaries with petitions and neighborhood regulars sipping coffee.

"That building had incredible charm," said Paul Lee, a former University of California, Santa Cruz philosophy teacher who operated the Wild Thyme restaurant in the Cooper House in 1974.

All that remains today is an ugly hole, with little prospect of change for several years.

The building was condemned and demolished nine days after the quake. Onlookers wept while a bugler played taps.

Owner Jay Paul, a Scotts Valley developer, has encountered little luck since. In 1990, Paul drew up plans for a \$20 million Mediterranean-style replacement.

**'We haven't thrown up our hands. We certainly are still trying to make something happen.'**

— Jay Paul, owner

The five-story building would be twice the size of the old Cooper House, with retail shops and restaurants on the ground floor.

But he has had no success finding a major tenant to occupy the top four floors of office space. Because of the slow economy, few companies have offered to expand, and none has been able to afford the rents of a massive brand-new building.

Without at least 70 percent of the space leased, no bank will loan money to begin construction. It's a scenario that has been repeated over and over again in Santa Cruz since the quake.

"We haven't thrown up our hands," said Paul, who has lost an estimated \$250,000 in delays. "We certainly are still trying to make something happen."

Paul and Santa Cruz redevelopment officials have been searching for a Silicon Valley software company or other large user.

They still hold out hopes that the United States Geological Service or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration could sign deals.

Paul said he is considering scaling down the project, a blueprint many city leaders say privately was too ambitious.

To this day, he faces criticism from some locals who feel he and City Manager Dick Wilson were too quick to sign the Cooper House's death warrant.

But he stands by the decision, noting that bricks had separated and the structure was deemed a hazard.

"I wish it hadn't happened," he said. "But there was just no way of rebuilding it that would have been safe."

Meanwhile, a new Pacific Avenue slowly grows around the lot. Most of the 29 buildings lost in downtown Santa Cruz have been replaced. A few of the largest projects remain unbuilt.

But without the Cooper House or a stunning replacement, the city will continue to grieve.

"The Cooper House was the only building downtown that was recognizable outside the region as exclusively part of Santa Cruz," said Ross Gibson, a Santa Cruz historian. "Without it, we really don't have a downtown identity."