

Symbol of renewal: Cooper House to go up

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In an emotional and economic milestone, construction is set to begin next month on a replacement for the most prominent building destroyed in downtown Santa Cruz during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the Cooper House.

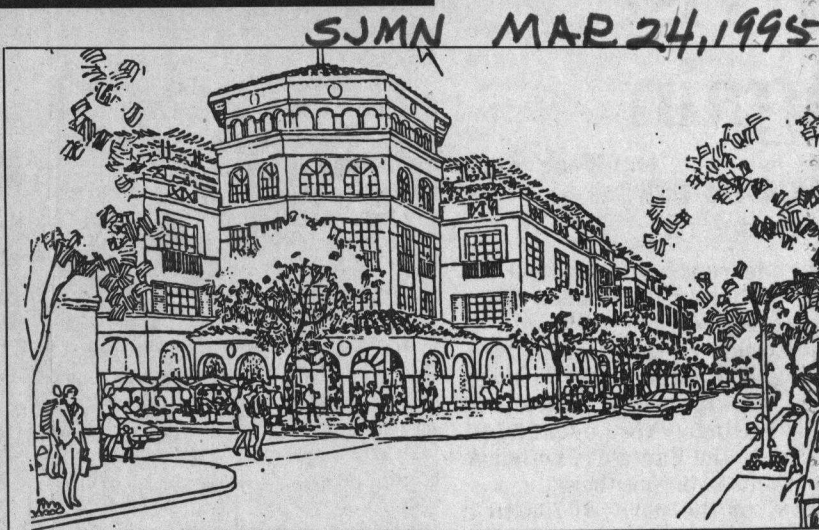
"We're going to break ground in April," said Santa Cruz developer Jay Paul. "It's pretty exciting."

Plans call for a five-story, \$20 million building, with Mediterranean-style architecture and an 83-foot tower on the corner. At 100,000 square feet, the new Cooper House will be the largest

building in the city's downtown, twice the size of its predecessor. It is scheduled to be completed by April 1996.

To many locals and weekend visitors from San Jose, the original Cooper House was a brick-and-mortar symbol of Santa Cruz's spirit: distinctive, casual

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SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

Artist's rendering shows what the new Cooper House will look like as viewed along Pacific Avenue in downtown Santa Cruz.

Cooper House to rise again

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and endearingly offbeat.

Of 29 buildings wrecked along Pacific Avenue in the quake, it was considered the most beloved. An 1894 Romanesque fortress with rounded brick edges and high ceilings, for decades it served as the Santa Cruz County Courthouse, before being transformed in the early 1970s to a collection of restaurants, art studios and boutiques.

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

The building was condemned and demolished nine days after the quake. Onlookers wept in the street while a saxophonist played taps. To this day, locals debate whether it could have been saved. All that remains at the site is a gaping hole surrounded by chain-link fence.

City leaders say the new building is a critical part of making Santa Cruz whole again.

"This will be a major turning point," said Santa Cruz City Manager Dick Wilson. "It is a stunning success."

The ground floor will house a corner cafe, clothing stores and shops selling kitchen equipment and home decorations, Paul said.

A major computer company will occupy three of the top four floors. Paul, who said he has obtained signed leases or letters of intent for 70 percent of the space, did not disclose the name of the computer company. He said it is based in Santa Cruz County, however, and does not currently rent offices downtown. Large companies that fit such a description include Seagate, the Santa Cruz Operation and Borland.

About half the demolished buildings along Pacific Avenue have been rebuilt. The area's complete reconstruction is not expected for about another five years. But in recent months, new projects have created a mood of optimism lost amid the bankruptcies, torn-up streets and vacant lots that marked the early post-quake years.

Palo Alto developer Jack Bariteau is constructing a nine-screen movie complex across the street from the Cooper House site. That project, combined with the improving economy and new trees, sidewalks and public art have helped show the outside world at Santa Cruz finally has healed the corner, Paul said.



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS

The old Cooper House was destroyed by a wrecking ball a short time after it was severely damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Comparing Pacific Avenue to prosperous downtowns such as Palo Alto's, he said: "Santa Cruz is heading in that direction."

Cornerstone from old house

The cornerstone on the new Cooper House will come from the old Cooper House, said Dick Stubendorff, Santa Cruz's chief building official. Its finish will be stucco, with trellises on the top floor and arches over the windows.

"We're closing up gaping wounds," said Stubendorff. "The process of healing is becoming clearer."

Stubendorff called the Cooper House site — centrally located at Cooper Street and Pacific Avenue — the most important parcel of real estate in downtown Santa Cruz.

"A lot of people didn't think the old Cooper House should have been torn down," he said. "I've thought about it for years. But the building was not savable. It was too dangerous."

Progress comes slowly

The design of the new building is not a secret. The Santa Cruz City Council approved it in 1991 by unanimous vote. But progress stalled because Paul, who owns the site, could not find tenants to

sign leases. Without leases, he could not obtain loans to fund the building.

Now, he has obtained financing from a union pension fund, he said.

Work will take a year. During much of that time, Cooper Street will be closed, but Pacific Avenue will remain open.

The general contractor on the project is Rudolph & Sletten, Inc., a Foster City firm that built the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

More steps ahead

The project still has a few steps to complete. Paul's architects plan to submit blueprints to city planners in a week to obtain a building permit. Crews then will survey the site and put in place construction trailers. When the rain clears, they will fill in the hole on the site and pour a foundation. That work probably will occur in May, Paul said.

Cynthia Mathews, a city councilwoman and former president of the Santa Cruz County Historical Trust, said many locals might look at the project at first with mixed feelings.

"It is kind of bittersweet because we can never get another Cooper House," she said. "But this is enormously important. It's a vote of confidence in downtown."