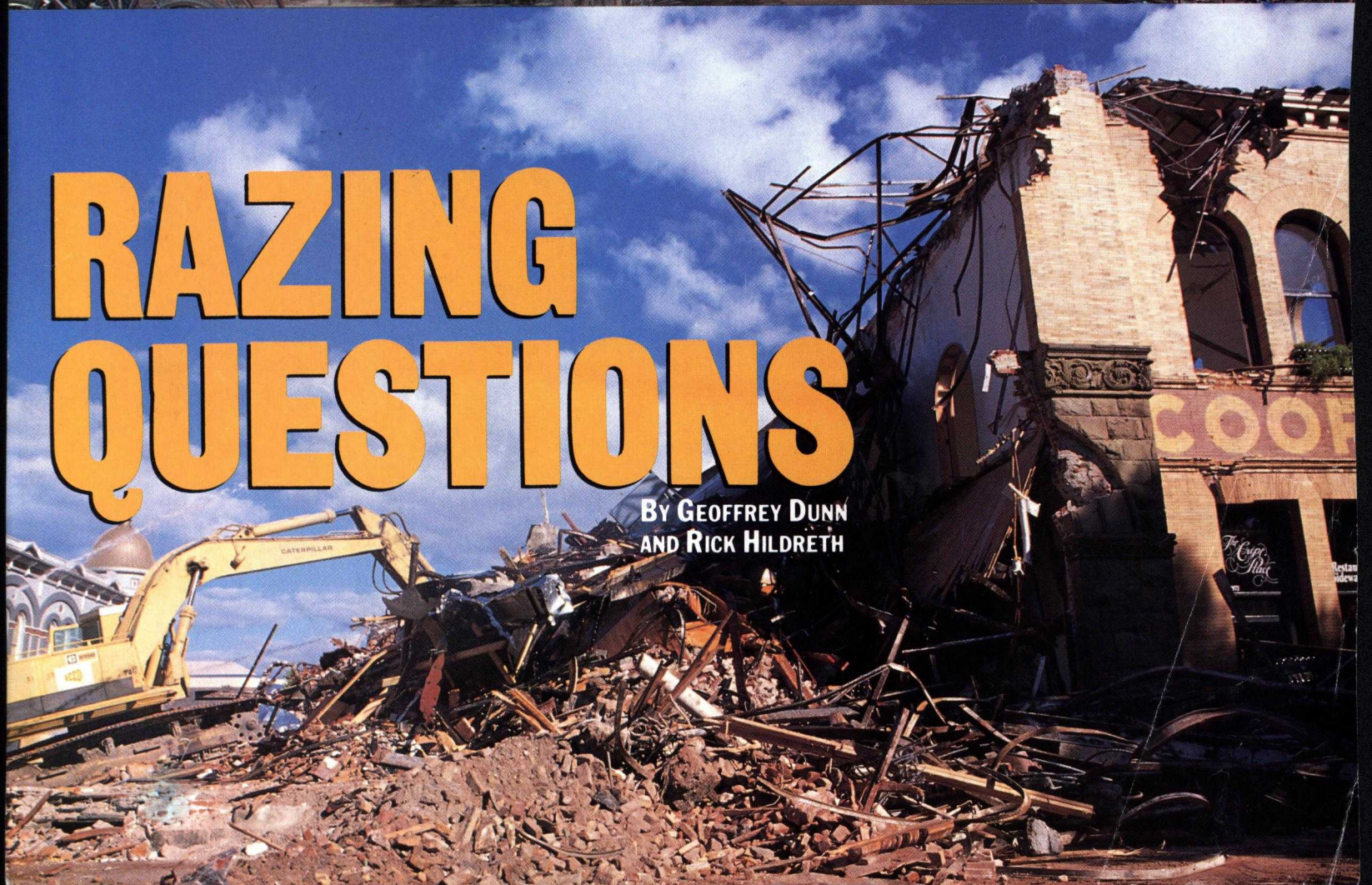




RAZING QUESTIONS

BY GEOFFREY DUNN
AND RICK HILDRÉTH



Two hundred witnesses gathered at the juncture of Front and Cooper streets in Santa Cruz on the afternoon of October 26 last year. The huge wrecking crane that had become a Pacific Garden Mall regular was now stationed at the north side of the city's beloved Cooper House, and the crowd was somber, if not funereal. A young saxophonist standing on the sidewalk played "Taps."

As the first swings of the demolition ball bounced off the building's stubborn



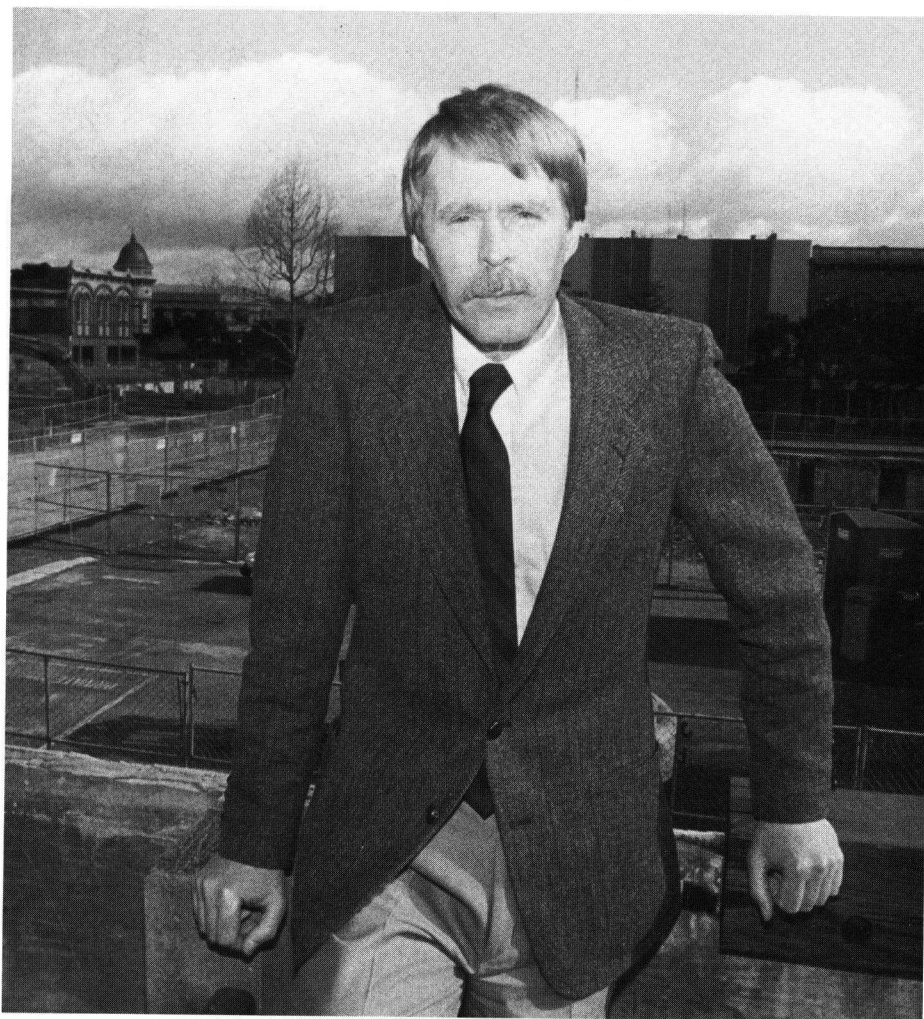
walls, the crowd let out a loud, approving cheer. Spirits were raised temporarily. "I'm rooting for the Cooper House," someone yelled. For a brief moment people smiled.

Then the roof caved in. The wrecking ball crashed through the tiled parapet above the building's Cooper Street entrance, hushing the crowd. Many of those watching the proceedings began to cry. Even Cooper House owner Jay Paul, who earlier had signed the papers that doomed the building, appeared shaken by the event. "It looked like he had just been kicked in the stomach," one attending city official said. "That building had become his dream."

The crane continued its dirty work, but to her credit the venerable leading lady of the Pacific Garden Mall did not leave the stage without a memorable final performance: it took nearly three full days before the curtain fell for the majestic building.

Certainly the most controversial decision rendered by Santa Cruz city officials in the aftermath of the October 17

WHEN PUSH CAME TO SHOVE BETWEEN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION AND POLITICAL HISTORIONICS OVER THE DEMOLITION OF SANTA CRUZ'S COOPER HOUSE, DID THE CITY'S POWER STRUCTURE PROVE WEAKER THAN THE LANDMARK'S STURDY WALLS?



SHMUEL THALER

Hot Seat: Santa Cruz City Manager Richard Wilson has taken heat from detractors' outrage over his quick decision to pull down the Cooper House.

earthquake was the one to raze the historic and symbolic anchor of Santa Cruz' downtown business district. The Cooper House demolition has become a *cause celebre* in this quake-shaken city and the subject of varied rumors and myths. Ever since Santa Cruz City Manager Richard Wilson signed the building's demolition papers less than a week following the earthquake, critics have protested that the city acted too hastily and didn't do all it could to save what many considered to be the most historically significant building in Santa

Cruz County. There is now mounting evidence indicating that those critics were right.

For over five months, two significant aspects of the Cooper House destruction have been kept under lid from the Santa Cruz community: First, a concentrated effort to save the Cooper House launched by the National Trust for Preservation went ignored by Santa Cruz officials in the days following the earthquake; and second, city officials substantially misrepresented a series of engineering reports conducted on the Cooper House prior to

the demolition.

Center of Attention

Built in 1894 in what architectural historians call a Richardsonian Romanesque Revival style, the Cooper House had served as the Santa Cruz County Courthouse up until the 1960s, when it was sold to developer Max Walden. The building soon developed into the centerpiece of Santa Cruz' burgeoning downtown mall and served as the meeting place for the city's legendary counter-culture throughout the 1970s. It was at the Cooper House's famed outdoor cafe that locals and tourists alike listened daily to the up-beat jazz of Don McCaslin's popular band, Warmth, while a handful of adults and children danced on the sidewalk in the summer sun. The Cooper House was the place to be.

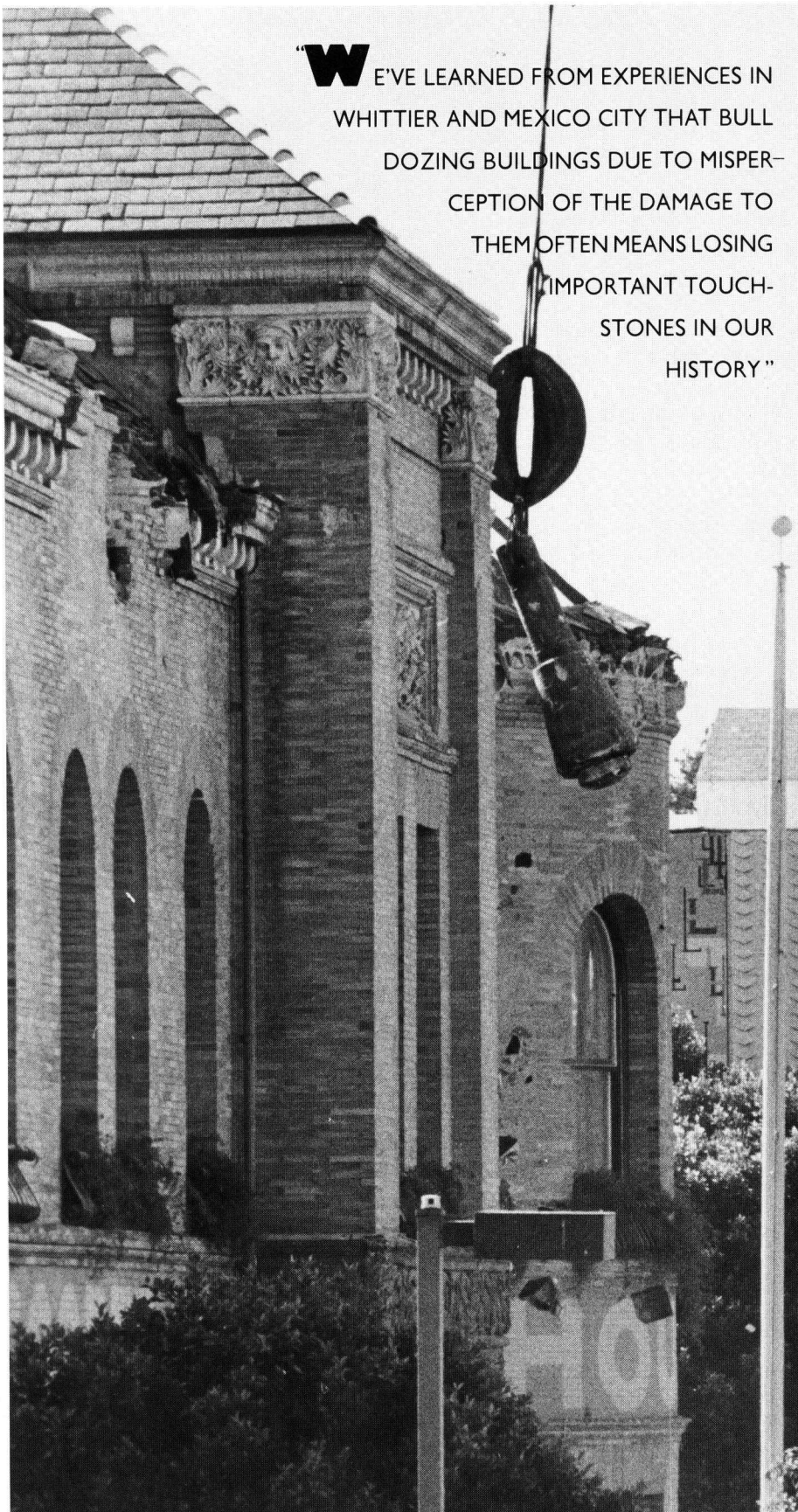
By the mid-1980s, however, many of its shops lay vacant, but under the new ownership of Los Gatos developer Jay Paul, its future looked promising. Paul was in the process of relocating his offices to the Cooper House and had spent nearly a million dollars retrofitting the building, an effort that certainly saved lives in the October 17 quake, but didn't necessarily prevent significant structural damage to the building. There was no question that the Cooper House had been hit hard during the quake: The question was how hard?

Within days of the Loma Prieta temblor, Kathryn Burns, director of the National Trust's San Francisco office, heard reports that the city intended to demolish the Cooper House and other historic buildings in the downtown. Burns immediately attempted to freeze demolition efforts until all preservation options had been thoroughly pursued.

National Historic Trust Ignored

In a package of documents she mailed to the city on Saturday, October 21, Burns included a ten-point list of procedures designed "to prevent the rush to demolish earthquake damaged historic structures" such as the Cooper House. Included was a letter by the Trust's national president, Jackson Walter, warning against "rash" demolition pro-

ANNIE OHEVETZ



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ceedings. "We've learned from experiences in Whittier and Mexico City that bulldozing buildings due to misperception of the damage to them often means losing important touchstones in our history," Walter declared. "Let's not compound the loss [from the earthquake] by hasty demolition of older buildings that might not actually be as unsafe as they appear." The package also contained information about a variety of funding sources for historic rehabilitation, including potential monies available from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

On Tuesday, October 24, Burns learned that plans were afoot to raze the Cooper House in just a matter of days. Burns said that she and Walter made several attempts to contact city officials, including Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt and city manager Wilson. According to Burns, none of her calls was returned.

The next morning, Burns tried calling Wilson once again. This time, according to Burns, she spoke directly to the city manager. He requested that she send him a letter via fax machine expressing her concerns. She did so. According to her records, the letter was transmitted to city hall, and received at 12:45 pm Wednesday, October 25.

In the emergency letter, Burns indicated she had obtained information from structural engineer Michael Krakower of Pasadena that the Cooper House could be "retained." A senior member of the internationally recognized engineering firm of Kariotis and Associates, Krakower has had extensive experience with earthquake-damaged structures and is specifically familiar with the rehabilitation of historic buildings in the aftermath of seismic damage. He, along with a group of five other engineers, had toured the Cooper House on Friday, October 20.

Burns' letter noted that Krakower offered to assemble a rehabilitation assessment team, including himself and two other widely respected earthquake reconstruction experts, Milford Wayne Donaldson and Timothy Gohr. "They indicated that they could react immediately, i.e., tomorrow," Burns communicated, "The National Trust has offered

to pay the team's travel costs, and they have generously offered their services on a volunteer basis." In other words, this detailed evaluation by a trio of experts wouldn't have cost the city a dime.

Burns never got a response to her offer. Mayor Wormhoudt says she never saw the letter, and, indeed, there is no record of it in her letters file at City Hall. Wilson acknowledges having a phone conversation with Burns, but has "no recollection" of the correspondence, even though Burns said he had specifically requested it be sent via fax machine.

Demolition Derby

City Manager Wilson, who was given extraordinary emergency powers by the city council in the aftermath of the earthquake, strongly defends the city's demolition decision. "There was simply no reasonable alternative," Wilson declared. "The Cooper House was one of the most heavily damaged buildings on the mall. There was unanimous consensus

that it couldn't be saved. We did not act hastily. I didn't know anyone who didn't think that (sic)."

Wilson's official order to demolish the building was actually signed on October 31, four full days after demolition had been completed. "I was signing so many papers that initially some of them were signed late. There was no intentionality there," said Wilson. "Later on we tried to rectify that."

According to Wilson, the "unanimous consensus" he cited was reported to him by Santa Cruz Public Works Director Larry Erwin. Following the October 17 quake, some 60 to 80 structural engineers were flown into the county, said Erwin. Of that number, five engineers working under the auspices of the federal Office of Emergency Services (OES) examined the Cooper House.

Reports filed by those engineers are on file in the city's public works department. Sketchy as they are, they clearly contradict the city manager's claim of unanimity on



Three Blind Mice: Santa Cruz Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt, Gov. George Deukmejian and Public Works Director Larry Erwin tour devastated Pacific Garden Mall where the Cooper House once stood.

the building. Two of those reports do indeed recommend that the building be destroyed, without consideration of restoration. Three other reports, however, suggest that restoration was possible, with two of them indicating an estimated cost of \$2 million.

Engineer Krakower, who was a member of the OES team, further points out that the initial OES assessments were not intended to seal the fate of the building. "The idea of an initial evaluation is not to conduct a detailed analysis," Krakower explained, "but to provide a rapid assessment — a 'quick screen' — so officials can have a sense of the damage and to ensure public safety. Our evaluation indicated that further in-depth study of the building was warranted. The so-called consensus arrived at by the engineering team was cursory at best. It certainly did not imply automatic demolition.

"Obviously the building had sustained damage," Krakower continued, "but I didn't see anything that indicated that it couldn't be saved. It was apparent that the building was in the middle of being retrofitted, which probably prevented it from collapsing. Let's put it this way, there are always ways to rehabilitate a building if there's enough community interest. More often than not, demolition is a business or economic decision."

Rubble Without a Cause

Public works director Erwin acknowledged that restoration was a possibility, but argued that the risk and expense were too high to warrant the project. "Kariotis [Krakower's firm] can restore anything, if you pay for it. We probably would have lost a few lives in the process," he added.

Following the OES evaluations, Erwin hired structural engineer Ron Nelson of the Pasadena firm Meyers, Nelson and Houghton, Inc., to perform a further evaluation of the Cooper House damage. Although no written report was filed, Nelson, according to Erwin, characterized the building as "standing rubble."

Photos taken by Nelson inside the building clearly indicate substantial structural damage not readily apparent

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to those who viewed the building from outside. Ceilings were bowed and had in some cases fallen through, and major cracks undermined the supporting shear walls. On the other hand, some portions of the building appeared to have sustained no damage whatsoever.

Erwin, himself an engineer, also evaluated the Cooper House. He then conveyed his findings, as well as those of the other engineers, to city manager Wilson, who, in turn, relayed them to Mayor Wormhoudt. At Wormhoudt's insistence, a final evaluation by state officials was requested.

Wilson asked city planner Joe Hall to oversee a "final look" at the building on Monday, October 23. Hall, a member of the State Historic Building Code Board, called upon a structural engineer whom he deemed "the best person in the state to make final, unbiased judgment."

According to Hall, the structural engineer, he and two others spent roughly half an hour inside the Cooper House on

Monday afternoon. "It was like a dungeon in there. The place was devastated. There were no two ways about it.

"While we were in there, there was an aftershock. Bricks were falling out of the wall. We got out of there as quickly as we could. We're lucky no one was killed."

Hall said his expert's final assessment was that "he was optimistic until he went inside. That says it all." Hall refused to identify the engineer ("I don't want to drag him into this."), nor would he provide further details of his evaluation. No report of this tour was ever filed.

Pacific Monthly has learned that the structural engineer brought in by Hall was Loring Wyllie of Degenkolb Associates in San Francisco. As with other engineers who examined the building, Wyllie emphasized that it had been "extensively damaged." He also acknowledged, however, that it "could have been salvaged.... It would have taken a great deal of shoring work, but, yes it could have been saved."

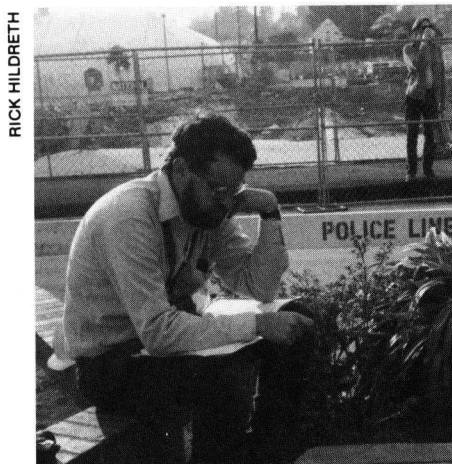
Wyllie, who characterized his evaluation as "in between an in-depth study and those emergency surveys conducted by OES," estimated the cost of rehabilitation at roughly \$2 million.

"I always hate to see old buildings come down," Wyllie added.

"But you have to realize that ultimately it was *not* an engineering decision. The decision was more economic and political. I would speculate that a city like Santa Cruz had great concerns after the earthquake about abating what they deemed to be a public nuisance. Three or six months down the road, they would have lost their emergency powers. It wouldn't have been as easy."

History Lesson

Like his superior Wilson, Hall was quick to defend the city's decision. "We went way out of our way on this," Hall declared. "The decision was not made lightly. The cost of rehabilitating the building would have been astronomical. In the end, it would have been more of a replication than a rebuilding. You had to ask how many resources do you want to commit. Do you want to risk more lives?"



Think Piece: Michael Krakower ponders the many possibilities that could have saved the Cooper House from demolition.

None of this, of course, explains why the demolition proceeded so quickly, nor why the National Trust's recommendations were not pursued. It is Wilson's contention that the building posed "an imminent risk to public health and safety" and therefore had to be demolished immediately.

That urgency, Kathryn Burns noted, is hard to reconcile with the fact that the building was free-standing and cordoned off from public access. It also does not acknowledge the million-dollar retrofitting work which stabilized the exterior walls — and made them so difficult to knock down.

When asked if the Cooper House demolition was prompted by concern for public safety, public works director Erwin conceded, "No, the building was pretty much isolated. It was one of the first buildings that I got all the engineering reports on. FEMA was saying that you have 30 days from the day of the event to get the funding [for demolition]." That

deadline was later extended to 90 days.

The rapidity of the demolition had a devastating economic — and emotional — impact on the business people who owned shops and restaurants in the building, four of whom have filed a lawsuit against the building's owner, Paul, "for willful and conscious disregard" of their rights and property. (Paul failed to return repeated phone calls to discuss the suit.) The city was not named in the legal action.

National Trust director Burns speculated about the reasons behind the once-treasured structure's hasty demise: "You have OES structural engineers coming into cities, not familiar with the locales nor the buildings and their historical significance. (Indeed, at least one of the OES engineers who examined the Cooper House filed his report claiming he was in "Santa Clara.") Their tendency is to be conservative. City officials, fearing liability, react to the outsiders' claim that buildings are unsafe, and want to eliminate

the perceived problem as quickly as possible."

At least one city official, who asked to remain anonymous, confirmed Burns' speculation. "The city manager's office kept referring to what happened in Coalinga and Whittier after their earthquakes, and how those cities still have fences around buildings years later. They didn't want that to happen here. Maybe they thought that by tearing down the Cooper House early they'd serve notice that there weren't going to be any sentimental decisions about demolitions. They used the Cooper House as a signal."

Such logic makes Burns' hair stand on end. "That's exactly the kind of reaction we try to prevent," she says. "Once you tear a building down before it's been thoroughly evaluated and all options pursued, you never know whether it could have been saved. And that's a shame, especially with historically significant structures. How could they use a building like that as a signal? ■