

THE COOPER HOUSE: FROM JAIL TO JAZZ

SANTA CRUZ—The Cooper House in Santa Cruz is an experience — not a place. Its unpredictable air tingles with the excitement of musicians jamming, epicures rapping and street people performing.

Locals and visitors come in droves every day to shop its unique boutiques or partake of its sunshine, wine, and jazz — played in a European-style street-side cafe, which serves food and music seven days a week. Only clouds shut them down.

But all isn't bliss . . . some digging at the Cooper House's foundation reveals an ongoing history riddled by disaster and strife as well as progress.

Reaching backwards to 1895 the marble hallways of this massive structure vibrated not with the beat of congas or the chatter of tourists. Rather, they echoed with the poundings of the judge's gavel as somber city clerks, jurors and taxpayers filed through the building's solid oak doors.

This was Santa Cruz County's fifth courthouse — and a fine addition to the justice system — after several precarious beginnings.

In previous years court held session in such makeshift quarters as a hotel and even a former saddle-making shop, when, finally, in 1867 land at Cooper Street and Pacific Avenue was donated by two pioneer storekeepers, John and William Cooper (descendants of renowned author James Fenimore Cooper), with the stipulation that the site be used for a courthouse.

Soon after, a handsome two-story red brick Victorian was erected, only to be razed 27 years later by the big fire that roared through central Santa Cruz.

A second structure was then built on the same site, of Richardson Romanesque Revival style. But the courthouse hadn't seen the last of its trials. This building — designed by architect N. A. Comstock, who blundered its execution and was later fired — nearly collapsed in the the 1906 earthquake. It was quickly restored, appearing basically as it does today, minus one precipitous tower. Then, keeping par with its unusual record of disaster, in 1955 a flood swept away many of the county records kept in its underground vaults.

Granted another reprieve, the courthouse served its purpose nicely but

eventually its governmental quarters became cramped, and when the county abandoned it for a new site in 1967, it became a target for demolition. The wrecker's ball loomed ever closer as city and county debated its costly rescue or swift demise. A park and even a parking lot were in the wind.

Fortunately, there would be a growing climate of restoration on Santa Cruz's horizon. It was 1967 and congruent with the fates of countless other downtowns, the businesses on Pacific Street were being neglected by patrons seeking suburban centers.

Acutely aware of this potential loss to the city, a man named Chuck Abbott (a photographer and learned mall-planner who collected pictures of the best aspects

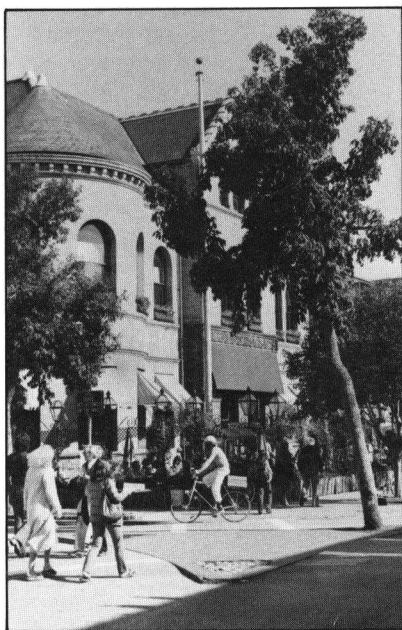


Photo by Susan Carol Besobrazoff

of malls all over the country and presented them as a slide show to Santa Cruz city planners), along with many other creative and concerned citizens, developed a plan which was to rekindle the sense of purpose and continuity in old downtown Santa Cruz. It was to be an attractive, lushly planted semi-mall . . . and the Cooper House would become an integral part of it when, with Abbott's prompting to buy the old courthouse and key it to this development, Max Walden (developer of Los Gatos' "Old Town" and a man truly dedicated to the preservation of Santa Cruz's rich cultural heritage) triumphantly bid \$75,000 and in 1971 took on the forsaken monster.

Walden soon showed he was a man of great vision and didn't waste any time transforming the austere halls and

empty rooms into a maze of impressive boutiques: prison cells became wine cellars and bathrooms; official quarters became flower or novelty shops. And, in keeping with his appreciation of the arts, a gallery was opened upstairs for local artists to display their work — at no charge.

The exterior was altered dramatically too, and today, with chill removed, Cooper House's sand mold "gold" bricks (with brownstone facing) are splashed with the words "Cooper House" and nicely complemented by sunshine-yellow awnings.

Owner of Cooper House's two restaurants, Charles Mercurio is adamant about its importance to the business community. "We're a major attraction — like Disneyland to Anaheim. This building draws 150,000 people a month — all year. People on their way to the beach or big trees will stop here at least once. And when they have, the majority will visit the rest of the mall."

However, in recent months the Cooper House has been receiving attention of another sort — and not at all pleasant.

It appears that the mall concept — which has so rejuvenated the old business sector — has its pitfalls. It invites loitering and, in turn, a certain amount of petty crime and disturbance. And while the Cooper House's sidewalk music, supplied by a group called Warmth, is admittedly responsible for some of it, supporters contend that it is getting more than its share of the blame.

In an effort to compromise, a large sheet of canvas has been wrapped around the area where Warmth plays (to discourage malingering and sidewalk dancing) and their volume has been tuned down by half.

Time will reveal what role the old courthouse will play in the future. We are at least assured by the county that it cannot be torn down until 1991 (the county stipulated in 1971 that Walden not be allowed to demolish it for 20 years).

As for its importance at the present: ask anyone shopping its vast halls, gathered with friends thumping to the beat of Warmth, or standing in a long line at the entrance to its sidewalk cafe, and you'll likely get this response, "Everyone comes here. The place is fabulous. Everything's happening — art, music, food, friends — everything. It's the essence of Santa Cruz."

—SUSAN CAROL BESOBRAZOFF