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## POST-EARTHQUAKE PLACEMAKING IN DOWNTOWN SANTA CRUZ

*James E. Pepper*

Shortly after last October's earthquake, the Pacific Garden Mall (left) re-emerged as the Phoenix Pavilions project (right).

Santa Cruz—Dramatic images of the October 17 Loma Prieta earthquake, which brought widespread devastation to the California's central coast, are etched in our minds: stunned victims, collapsed structures, heroic rescues. In Santa Cruz the town's primary commercial street, the Pacific Garden Mall, lay in ruin, more than a third of its 75 buildings damaged beyond repair. Historic landmarks, two department stores and three major bookstores were lost. There were gaping holes in the urban fabric as a majority of the buildings along several block frontages were reduced to rubble.

A tree-lined street of turn-of-the-century buildings, the Mall was a central symbol of the city. Motor vehicle traffic had been reduced to a single one-way lane; extensive plantings of trees and shrubs, coupled with large flower beds and numerous seating areas, created a garden-like atmosphere. Following its completion 20 years ago, the Mall had spurred eco-

nomie and social regeneration downtown, turning a declining commercial street into a lively and attractive public place. The businesses and social life reflected the diversity of Santa Cruz: cafes, bookstores, a Greenpeace office and the state headquarters of the Certified Organic Growers were located within a traditional commercial matrix of hardware, jewelry, sundry and home furnishing stores. More than 200 elderly lived in two SRO hotels.

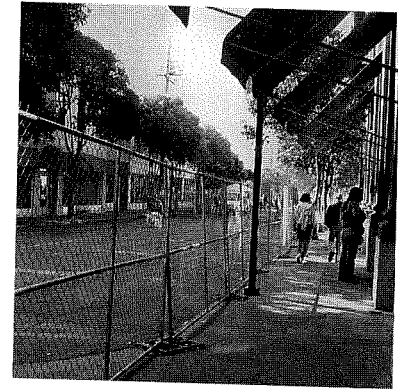
Despite the shock and tremendous losses, a plan for rebuilding emerged within days. The City began a search for temporary structures to house displaced businesses. Mobile trailers used in downtown Whittier (in Southern California) after an earthquake there lacked the size and distinctiveness deemed necessary for creating a socially viable public and commercial place. The search settled on tents, whose form, volume and character could create a carnival or festival atmosphere.

Four weeks after the earthquake, a seven-tent, 34,000-square-foot complex was in place. Dubbed the "Phoenix Pavilions" after the mythological Egyptian bird that rose from the ashes of destruction, the tents were set up on parking lots one block west of the Mall. The site of a building demolished after the earthquake is now used for replacement parking, and a free downtown shuttle was put in service to reduce traffic and parking problems. A local business group provided exterior improvements: outdoor seating, landscaping, signs and holiday decorations. Lights were strung along the exterior of the Pavilions, giving the entire setting a Tivoli Garden quality.

An eager community thronged to the tents downtown. Many businesses reported the best day-after-Thanksgiving sales in their history. But the pavilions are more than utilitarian: They are a center of public life.



The Phoenix Pavilions (left and center) have assumed the civic and commercial role formerly held by the devastated Pacific Garden Mall (right).



Within the re-organized Mall, places for outdoor eating, merchandising and socializing have been maintained—sometimes by contrivance, sometimes by accident. Even street musicians, in the past a familiar fixture on the Mall, have reappeared. Residents are being loyal not only to their downtown but also to the kind of place with which they had formed a strong association over the past two decades.

Inside the pavilions, a sense of community pervades. In contrast to pre-earthquake operations, merchants agreed to maintain common hours and have clung to them tenaciously despite chilly weather and a lack of heating. As a result, shoppers do not experience the decreased social vitality that results from a mix of open and closed stores.

Moreover, customers find shopping is a more interesting social experience because of the variety of retail shops in each pavilion and the diversity of people drawn to them. Among the tenants of one pavilion are a hat shop, a nutrition center, an antique shop and two clothing stores. Another pavilion includes a luggage store, an artisans cooperative and a Western shop. The variety of cuisine in the 3,000-square-foot food section of one pavilion includes a sushi bar, espresso cafe, gelato shop, pizza shop, Chinese noodle shop and two delis.

The pavilions modify the pattern found in typical commercial malls and

that of the predecessor street mall: Although merchants share a common interior space, separate businesses are not physically partitioned into “secure” individual space. Rather, each pavilion more closely resembles a department store in which separate tenants each constitute a “department.” Internal circulation carries shoppers through rather than past individual shops, thus creating a setting not unlike that of European outdoor markets.

The “market” atmosphere is heightened by the severe space constraints of the pavilions. The generous aisles and display areas characteristic of pre-quake merchandising have been replaced with compact, space-efficient arrangements. Common indoor and outdoor seating arrangements for food service tenants create a “street cafe” atmosphere of considerable diversity and vitality.

In spite of its incongruous appearance, the extensive system of chain link fencing has had unforeseen uses and consequences. The fences afford an opportunity for improvising and have become personalized with ribbons, yarn and flowers. They also serve as community billboards. At the same time, the clusters of “street people” increasingly present on the Mall prior to the earthquake are not evident in the Pavilion area, possibly because public and private space have become more differentiated by the fences.

Merchants claim that their customers feel more secure than they did on the Mall.

Tents, chain link fences, sawhorses, dumpsters, portable toilets, temporary plywood electrical panels and hand-printed directional signs are hardly the stuff of an established downtown. Despite the elegant appearance of the pavilions and the professionally prepared business signs, the environment is clearly improvised. Tenants have customized and personalized their individual spaces, creating a wonderful indoor market setting. The Phoenix project bristles with people, reflecting the human energy of place-making.

Resilience and adaptability are the hallmarks of successful places. The Phoenix Pavilions have clearly underscored the community’s determination to maintain a strong sense of place in downtown Santa Cruz. They have become a symbol of both continuity and recovery of place. Their character reflects that of the community, and in a time of great need they have afforded the opportunity to re-establish a public environment in a devastated area. They are an important expression of where we belong and have entered our lives in a fundamental way; they serve to remind us that we must survive as a community, and that we all have a stake in shaping the quality of its future places.