



Rise from a Devastating Earthquake: Santa Cruz, CA

A Downtown's Demonstration of Resilience

The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake demolished over half of Santa Cruz, California's downtown, including almost 470,000 square feet of building space. Polarized stakeholders from the public, private and government sectors were forced to unite to collaborate on developing a new vision for downtown, with a particular emphasis on street vitality, pedestrian flow and nighttime entertainment. Nearly two decades later, downtown Santa Cruz currently supports a vibrant mix of daytime and evening retail, dining and entertainment with 18/7 street life enjoyed by visitors and residents of all ages.

Problem Statement

Prior to the 1989 earthquake, downtown Santa Cruz, California, like many other American cities, had begun to decline due to the loss of customers to indoor malls in neighboring towns. Many buildings were seismically unsafe and store fronts had fallen into disrepair, vacancies were common, and the lack of people on the streets at night made residents concerned for their safety after dark. The physical environment further contributed to the negative perception of safety – tall, overhanging trees blocked the sunlight and streetlamps, and low-lying shrubbery were conducive to the concealment of drugs and people such as transients and parolees.

Despite the imminent decline into blight, proposals to revitalize downtown were thwarted by city officials, many of whom harbored anti-development sentiments and a 'no-change', 'no-growth' position towards downtown. It took a natural disaster to force the situation out of stasis and into action.

Santa Cruz was the city hardest hit in the San Francisco Bay Area by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake due to its proximity to the earthquake's epicenter in the Santa Cruz mountains. Measuring 7.1 on the Richter scale, the earthquake demolished over half of the downtown, including almost 470,000 square feet of building space. The county as a whole faced approximately \$433 million in damages.

Overview

The earthquake displaced more than two hundred fifty (250) downtown businesses, resulting in an urgent need to restore the local economy and rebuild downtown. Emergency

efforts mobilized quickly and immediately condemned and demolished affected buildings. In addition, the streets, sidewalks, and below-ground infrastructure of downtown were damaged beyond repair. SC Metro declared “the economic and cultural heart of the city” utterly devastated.

Yet as talks to revive downtown began, Santa Cruz was faced with an even greater challenge than mere reconstruction: how to design a new downtown that was both safe and vibrant, with a unique sense of authenticity that could compete with the appeal of indoor malls and bring back customers. Downtown Santa Cruz became a clean slate upon which to craft a new vision of an 18/7 center for social, cultural and economic activity.

Stakeholders

City of Santa Cruz; County of Santa Cruz; Vision Santa Cruz; Santa Cruz Redevelopment Agency; Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce; Banks; Property Owners; Businesses; Private Investors; Voters; Customers; Social Service Agencies.

Process

Redevelopment Planning and Initiatives

In January 1990, three months after the earthquake, Santa Cruz City Council appointed an advisory board which became known as “Vision Santa Cruz” to develop a Downtown Recovery Plan. This 36-member public/private partnership was comprised of a diverse mix of merchants, property owners, developers, lenders, city officials and community activists. Despite their different backgrounds, interests, and agendas, they were forced to work together for a common cause: rebuilding downtown Santa Cruz into a safe and vibrant center for commerce, social activity, and entertainment during the daytime and evening.

The next month, in February 1990, the City Council established the Redevelopment Department’s Agency for Rebuilding Downtown Santa Cruz as a separate City administrative entity to directly take on planning and legislative initiatives for post-earthquake recovery. This new department was responsible for providing staff support to Vision Santa Cruz and overseeing implementation of the Downtown Recovery Plan.

Based on facilitated consensus among the members of Vision Santa Cruz, the following six planning principles were agreed upon.

Downtown Recovery Plan’s policy and design recommendations:

1. Strengthen Downtown as a Vital Retailing District with a physical environment that supports shopping.
2. Enhance the Open Space and Pedestrian Network to facilitate informal social gatherings and ease of pedestrian access.
3. Preserve and Enhance the Distinctive Scale and Character of Downtown to encourage diversity and density in new building development, yet also provide a balance of pedestrian-scale amenities.

4. Strengthen Downtown as a Place to Live to ensure seamless 24 hr/day social activity by residents and visitors.
5. Strengthen Downtown as a Place of Local and Regional Employment to create a built-in market for downtown shopping and restaurant amenities.
6. Create a Strong Relationship between Downtown and the Beach to enhance recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

Through the combined, laborious efforts of Vision Santa Cruz and the assistance of a retail analysis consultant, a comprehensive Downtown Recovery Plan was developed. City Council adopted the plan on September 10, 1991 and incorporated it into the City's General Plan providing the policy for taking legislative action between 1990 and 2000 in development activities in the downtown. In order to fully dedicate city resources and investment into rebuilding downtown's main street, Pacific Avenue, and adjoining side streets, the City Council decided not to approve any office projects outside of downtown for a period of time during the initial recovery years.

The following are among the key recommendations and initiatives of the Downtown Recovery Plan (not in any particular order):

(a) Community Design

- Maintain visual and pedestrian continuity along the entire length of the street, with unobstructed access to all citizens. Sidewalks should maintain a minimum width of 12-feet.
- Introduce an asymmetrical cross section that provides for a wider (20-25 ft) sidewalk on the sunnier, west-facing side of the street to support a public gathering place and a comfortable promenading sidewalk (12-15 ft) on the east-facing side.
- Introduce consistent treatment of boulevard trees along the length of the street that are high-branching and light in appearance.
- Provide pedestrian-scaled lighting that can support banners and holiday decorations.
- Introduce public seating in conjunction with retail kiosks and key activity nodes.
- Allow for the extension of café seating and retail uses within the public-right of way.
- Develop interior courtyards and gardens to provide attractive places to sit and relax, and also direct public linkages to other public streets.
- A Downtown Alley Improvement Plan was designed to deter the homeless populations from using alley dumpsters as living space and to promote alleys as attractive pedestrian paths. Murals were painted on the back walls of buildings and trash enclosures replaced open dumpsters.

(b) Land-Use

- Require continuity of active ground-level uses (retail, restaurant, and cultural) along Pacific Avenue.
- Permit and encourage housing as a principal upper-level use throughout downtown.

- Allow for additional height and intensity at the downtown core to attract office development as an additional upper-level use.
- Discourage office development in other parts of the city.

(c) Circulation

- Allow traffic entry from both the northern and southern ends of Pacific Avenue.
- Limit service and loading traffic to non-peak business hours.
- Maximize curbside parallel parking along Pacific Avenue to reinforce the perception of convenient and accessible parking downtown.
- Maintain on-street parking on other streets within downtown as much as possible.
- Provide efficient transit operation to downtown through bus access.
- Provide ample and secure bike parking to encourage alternative transportation.

(d) Community Facilities and Services

Social Services Task Force: Comprised of city, county and resident perspectives, a Social Services task force brought attention to concerns related to alcohol use by the homeless and transient population downtown. Several initiatives were implemented because of their findings:

- The City adopted an Alcohol Ordinance, which required alcohol to be sold only at premises with food service.
- The Redevelopment Agency hired a mental health outreach specialist who worked directly with the homeless and runaways by providing social services, referrals to appropriate agencies, and assistance in returning to the cities or states from which they originated.

Downtown in Transition

Small businesses needed a temporary solution to get back on their feet immediately following the earthquake, especially with the holiday season only a few months away. Within just six weeks of the quake, forty seven (47) of downtown's two hundred fifty (250) displaced retail merchants were moved into large tents located in parking lots, forming the "Phoenix Pavilion." Food vendors were housed in the nearby Civic Auditorium, where they prepared the meals that were sold in the Pavilion.

Businesses received tremendous support from the local community and university student population. Hundreds of volunteers helped business owners rescue their merchandise before their buildings were demolished and relocated them into the Pavilion. Santa Cruz county voters were also a critical force in funding redevelopment of the city. Overwhelming support of Measure E, a half-cent sales tax increase, contributed about \$20 million in tax revenues between 1991 and 1997.

The continued presence of businesses downtown kept the market mentality alive in the community during the three years downtown's main street was closed to the public. Furthermore, public relations campaigns to 'Shop Local' and 'Buy Santa Cruz County' fueled consistent patronage of Pavilion businesses by loyal local supporters and regional visitors.

In 1995, a multi-screen Cineplex and parking garage opened, which became an anchor for downtown's pedestrian traffic and marked the return of families to downtown. New business recruitment had been occurring continuously since revitalization efforts began, but this particular development served as a catalyst for more restaurateurs and merchants to capitalize on the growing vitality downtown.

With increasing downtown patronage in the mid-1990s, efforts then turned to dispelling negative perceptions that still lingered about nighttime safety. Police presence was increased, with regular foot patrols walking the beat along Pacific Avenue. A hospitality guide/'ambassador' program was created to reinforce the presence of safety by providing extra 'eyes on the street' until 8:00 p.m. Meanwhile, retail merchants other than restaurants and bars were encouraged to stay open later to ease the daytime to evening transition by providing pre- and post-dinnertime activity. Nighttime entertainment from coffee shops and music venues further contributed to nighttime vibrancy.

Outcome

It took more than a decade to restore and revitalize downtown Santa Cruz. Since the destruction of 468,846 sq ft of building space, 942,886 sq ft has since been rebuilt. Development of the second to last vacant lot is slated for completion by the end of 2008.

The earthquake has been referred to as a "mixed blessing" for good reason. Today, downtown Santa Cruz is stronger than it ever was in the past. The new downtown Santa Cruz is a vibrant center for both daytime commerce and nighttime entertainment that plays host to a diverse mix of retail, residential, and office space. Encouraging small, independently owned business development has kept the unique spirit of Santa Cruz alive. Downtown is renowned for appealing to a niche market of specialty retail and bohemian interests that particularly attracts the college student demographic from the University of California Santa Cruz. Without a doubt, downtown Santa Cruz achieved the aim of serving as the city's primary social gathering place.

The Downtown Recovery Plan's streetscape and street design guidelines have resulted in a proliferation of active street life due to outdoor seating, sidewalk cafes, kiosks, street entertainers and staggered pedestrian flow.

Meanwhile, the collaborative spirit of Vision Santa Cruz lives on today in the Downtown Task Force. This task force convenes stakeholders such as the mayor, city council members, police, the locally owned business alliance, the Downtown Association, as well as department heads of Public Works, Parks and Recreation and the Redevelopment Agency on a monthly basis to assess evolving challenges that Santa Cruz will face in the future.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The greatest challenge facing downtown Santa Cruz during its recovery period was establishing a collaborative process with diverse stakeholders to create the Downtown Recovery Plan. Prior to the earthquake, these stakeholders were unaccustomed to working together, and their diverse agendas led to disputes and lengthy debates. Working through

these differences of opinion to reach consensus can be attributed in part to what made the plan so comprehensive and effective.

The start of the holiday shopping season presented an initial challenge to businesses trying to recuperate from not only displacement from their buildings but also the destruction of much of their inventory. Thus, a coalition of local organizations, including the local Chamber of Commerce, managed the pavilions charging a minimal amount of rent so they could sustain themselves until the replacement buildings were completed so they could move back in.

One of the most contentious debates was whether or not to turn Pacific Avenue into a pedestrian mall closed to vehicular traffic. After much debate, it was decided that two-way traffic would be allowed in select locations on Pacific, while one-way traffic would lead cars directly to parking garages or side street parking. Streets were designed to be narrow, so that Pacific Avenue could not be used as a thoroughfare. Further, the alleys behind buildings would not have been conducive to convenient service deliveries, which was another key factor in allowing limited vehicle traffic on Pacific Avenue.

A challenge that reverberates today is developing a streetscape design that is oriented to pedestrians while reducing attractiveness to panhandlers and homeless demographics. The City has addressed these issues by instituting an ordinance against aggressive panhandling, but the presence of persistent yet not 'aggressive' panhandlers persists downtown. The City also opted to play classical music outside the main transport hub, a primary gathering place for transients, and also switched to a planter design that is not easily used as seating.

Jurisdiction

Downtown Santa Cruz

Funding

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provided relief funds to the City of Santa Cruz to assist in replacing the physical below-ground infrastructure of downtown (sewage, water and telecommunication lines). A planning consultant was hired through funding from the state and the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration. Local banks committed funds to loan to property owners for the redevelopment of downtown. Overwhelming support by Santa Cruz county voters of Measure E, a half-cent sales tax increase, contributed about \$20 million in tax revenues between 1991 and 1997. The city successfully requested federal funds to match the amount generated by this local initiative, raising a total of more than \$40 million.

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