

The Arcade Building

By L.A. Hayden

Using your imagination, rather than a bulldozer, think about the potential inherent in an old, architecturally rich building. The Arcade Building is a case in point. Recently renovated and restored to its original condition, one of San Pedro's gems is shining again. Curved, beveled glass front windows lead you down a corridor of imported black and white Italian tiles toward a carved stone fountain in which water hyacinths and brightly colored koi share a home. Looking up thirty feet you see a steel and glass skylight which extends the length of the building. Solid oak staircases with wrought iron railings draw you up to the second level gallery that overlooks the courtyard below. The entire building is topped by a seven room penthouse which boasts a view of the harbor and the Vincent Thomas Bridge.

The penthouse itself dates back to 1919, but wasn't always the top floor of the Arcade. Originally, it was part of a duplex known as Alessandro Flats, built by Aleck Careysi. However, he had a vision conceived from childhood; memories inspired by a building in his hometown in Italy. With the help of these memories and an architect, plans for the Arcade Building were born. In an heroic effort to preserve this family's home, the penthouse was raised and supported while the Arcade was built underneath. Construction began in 1924 and the building opened for occupancy January 2, 1925. Cost to construct the Arcade was \$80,000—to build the entire Los Angeles Coliseum a few years later was only ten times that much and at the time, for the cost of the Arcade, a six story building could have been constructed.

However, Aleck Careysi felt that quality was most important, in spite

of some negative public opinion. He explained to a local newspaper upon the opening of the Arcade, "from all that I sought counsel, they discouraged me in the building of such a type of business building, but it is my belief that beauty and uniqueness is going to play a very important role in construction of buildings in the years to come. Just four square walls, some plate glass and paint will not be sufficient for business buildings of the future."

Others followed his lead in San Pedro, one of the most notable being the Warner Bros. Studios, who erected its premier theater, the Warner Grand, directly across the street from the Arcade Building. This formidable art deco masterpiece has been recently renovated as a variety arts theater.

The Arcade enjoyed great success as a business building for many years, but eventually it declined, becoming nearly vacant and losing some of its charm through poorly conceived face-lifts designed to "modernize" the building. In November of 1984, the Caressis' sold the building to the Larson family. Gary Larson, who coordinated the renovation of the building, experienced some reluctance and pessimism from certain quarters. However he also found support in the San Pedro Revitalization Corporation—which assists renovation and restoration of the downtown area—as well as in others who remembered the Arcade as it once was.

The major hurdle in the Arcade's renaissance was the earthquake work, which Mr Larson described with the analogy of "trying to extract the skeletal structure from a human being, and then having to replace it intact." His goal was to retain and preserve the artistry and integrity of the building,

while creating a functionally new structure. During the earthquake work, the building looked as though interior demolition was taking place. While it was necessary to knock down walls, great care was taken to remove molding, trim and other architectural details so that they wouldn't be destroyed and could be replaced later. Missing moldings and details such as the solid brass finials on the newel posts were carefully reproduced to match the originals and structural earthquake components were disguised using copies of original details from the building.

Many proposals and ideas for final touches, such as carpeting, lighting and paint colors, were considered but then rejected as being too trendy; one suggestion included a turquoise and pink color scheme! Instead, Mr Larson let the building lead him, choosing a classic, elegant look that harkened back to the original formula, rather than something that would be dated in a few years.

The Arcade Building and similar restorations in San Pedro's downtown are timely, as private and public funds enter the area and more improvements are planned—a Sheraton Hotel downtown, the new Marina and adjacent Compri Hotel, Fisherman's Wharf, and the World Cruise Center.

These tenants were attracted by the aesthetics of a building filled with architectural richness and elegance. Renovation of an old building can be more profitable than tearing it down, and Gary Larson's Arcade is certainly an example of how successful such an endeavor can be.