

Santa Cruz Sentinel (<http://www.santacruzsentinel.com>)

## **Stephen Kessler: Santa Cruz needs to think outside the parking structure box**

*By Stephen Kessler, Special to the Sentinel*

Friday, April 7, 2017

As Steve Jobs proved, you have to imagine something before you can create it. Envisioning what you want is often the first stage of innovation. The Santa Cruz City Council needs to put its collective imagination to work — with help from some visionary citizens — if it wants to avoid a colossal civic mistake: the proposed five-story parking structure atop a new public library on the site of the downtown farmers market. This is one of the worst ideas since the early 1970s when a hotel and convention center was proposed for Lighthouse Field.

I've never been unable to find a parking space downtown at any hour of any day, even Friday and Saturday nights. Is there a proven need for the architectural atrocity a massive 70-foot-tall concrete ziggurat would be? Even if the trees on the site could be saved, such a monstrosity in the heart of town would be environmentally destructive, esthetically disastrous and economically dubious at best. (If you're going to build something that big, how about affordable housing?)

The project would cost at least \$35 million and would likely be obsolete even before completion due to changing habits and technologies of transportation. If people are willing to walk a few blocks, there is already plenty of parking downtown and not enough open space. We need a plaza more than a parking tower.

As for the library, it would be a crime against books and everything else a library represents to bury such a center of learning and culture and information under an immense storage bunker for automobiles. A library — think MLK Library in San Jose — should be an architecturally distinctive building that stands alone as a civic attraction, not the ground floor of a parking garage.

The only rationale for building the parking library on the farmers market lot is that the city owns it. But given the cost of the studies and design and construction of such an offensive structure, it makes sense to seek alternatives before destroying what little "open space" (if a parking lot can be called that) we have left. The peace and quiet of Abbott Square will soon be replaced by a commercial extension of the ever-ambitious Museum of Art and History. You have to walk uphill two blocks from the Town Clock to find the underused Mission Plaza Park in front of Holy Cross Church. Where else downtown is there a public commons?

For a library, could there be an existing vacant commercial building — like the flatiron building across from the post office, or the remaining retail space in the Rittenhouse Building — that might be leased and converted into a library for less than what it would cost to build one from scratch? Could the existing library be renovated? Could the hole in the ground next to Lulu Carpenter's be bought and built on?

If the motive for spending a fortune to build a parking garage is to bring more people downtown to shop, wouldn't a space for outdoor public events be more attractive? With its

wealth of cultural workers and organizations, its artists and performers, its recreation freaks and accomplished artisans, surely Santa Cruz could generate enough interest in a common space to bring people to town for events where public transit and parking on the periphery would enable them to stroll the streets and spend their money. Another enormous structure would only diminish the appeal of downtown as a destination.

The City Council, with public input, needs to be as creative as the cultural community in order to make the downtown more congenial for human gatherings and unique events that would also attract consumers. If the steroidal expansion of the municipal wharf can be sent back to the drawing board for a more appropriately scaled design, the lot at Cedar and Cathcart can be spared as a space too valuable to wreck with a Tower of Automobabel.

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