

## Santa Barbara Architects Say Pandemic Serves as Opportunity to Reinvent Downtown

*They contend that there's demand for building a '24/7 living environment,' where residents can live, eat, work and play*



Santa Barbara architects say outdoor dining that recently opened along State Street is reminiscent of European countries and cultures that have enjoyed outdoor activities for years.  
(Joshua Molina / Noozhawk photo)

By Joshua Molina, Noozhawk Staff Writer | [@JECMolina](#)

August 12, 2020

9:45 p.m.

Santa Barbara architect Henry Lenny grew up in Mexico, on a street where there was a tortilla shop, a pharmacy and an ice cream store. The neighborhood was rich with mom-and-pop

shops. State Street used to have that same small-town vibe, recalled Lenny, who has been practicing architecture for 47 years.

"Over the years, we began to lose our small shops, and that was, in my opinion, the beginning of the end," Lenny said. "They were pushed out."

Lenny was among the architects and commercial real estate investors who spoke Wednesday during former Mayor Hal Conklin's [Santa Barbara Leadership Team](#) meeting. Lenny was joined by Conklin; architects Ellen Bildstein, Cass Ensberg and Detty Peikert; and Jason Jaeger, principal of [Jaeger Partners](#), which specializes in adaptive reuse of downtown buildings. The architects are part of the [American Institute of Architects](#), among local stakeholders in a charrette to re-envision the future of downtown.

Even before the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) took a toll on the local economy, Santa Barbara was struggling with vacant storefronts and an exodus of big chains, such as [Macy's](#), [Saks Fifth Avenue](#) and [Staples](#) leaving downtown. The problem is measurably worse now, with [Nordstrom packing up](#), and other smaller, locally owned shops closing their doors.

Like the [1925 earthquake](#), however, the pandemic can serve as an opportunity to reinvent downtown.

"This is an opportunity to go back to what we had before," Lenny said. "When people live by or next to where they work, the whole city opens up. People just walk out into the streets. They don't need a car. They can go out to dinner literally blocks from where they live. We lost it, and we must bring it back."

City officials over Memorial Day weekend decided to open nine blocks of State Street to pedestrians and close it to vehicular traffic. At the same time, it allowed outdoor dining, so restaurants are now serving people at tables along State Street.

The architects said the outdoor dining was reminiscent of European countries and cultures that have enjoyed outdoor activities for years. In addition to allowing outdoor dining, Santa Barbara's recent move to rezone to allow developers to build housing downtown will help revitalize State Street.

"So many people come to Santa Barbara because it is not a strip mall, it is a real city," Ensberg said. "Getting the housing downtown where we need it and having these little stores are critical."

Conklin waxed poetically about the history of Santa Barbara, noting that [Paseo Nuevo](#) was built 30 years ago to the day next Monday. He said the building of the mall was a large effort that involved wide swaths of the community. It was not a top-down process. He said malls have a shelf life of about 30 years, so it is time to take a look at the role of the mall in the context of downtown.

"The next generation is demanding what people had in the past, which is to make it a 24/7 living environment, where people can walk, talk and eat on the street," Conklin said. "This is a great opportunity to build a community where people live, eat, work and play."

The architects said they appreciated Santa Barbara's recent changes to its high-density housing program, which encourages developers to build downtown by reducing parking requirements and the need for ground-level open yard space.

"In San Francisco, they will laugh at you if you proposed parking at your sites," Lenny said. "They have public transportation. There's no reason why we couldn't do the same here."

The AIA meetings began Monday and will continue during the next several weeks. Their findings eventually will be presented to the [Santa Barbara City Council](#).

Jaeger said Santa Barbara needs to relax the permit process so that developers will be interested in building in Santa Barbara. He said the city has a reputation for being unfriendly to business.

"We need to attract the developers and investors with a short permit process," Jaeger said. "Then you are going to see a new group coming that will help us revitalize."

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