

TODD JERSEY ARCHITECTURE

(Published in the Berkeley Daily Planet, March 28, 2006)

The Plunge—Volunteers Save Point Richmond Landmark

By Richard Brenneman

Richmond's getting ready to take the Plunge

The venerable structure in the heart of Point Richmond has been closed for five years, victim of an earthquake, a fire and years of neglect. But thanks to strong support from the community and a combination of state grants, the Richmond Municipal Natatorium may once again become the Bay Area's premier swimming hole—hopefully "within a couple of years," said Ellie Strauss, who has been working hard to make it happen. The venerable structure was built in an era when America was obsessed with swimming and housed pools in majestic buildings, said Strauss, a long-time member and officer of Richmond Friends of Recreation and a leader of the restoration effort.

Another obsession located the plunge at its prominent location in Point Richmond. Convinced by a confidence man that oil lay beneath the city, promoter John Nicholl literally sunk his fortune into the ground, drilling through the bedrock until he found not oil but water—an artesian well that poured out a thousand gallons a minute. A disillusioned Nicholl finally gave the site to the city in 1924, which built the plunge at the site, opening it a year later as the **Municipal Natatorium**, when a throng of swim fans eagerly waited to try the waters. Swimmers from around the Bay Area swarmed to the pool, said Strauss. "For years and years it was the centerpiece of West [Contra Costa] County," she said. "It was used during the summer by people from Marin and San Francisco."

Today, the Plunge is one of the few remaining grand pools left in the country. "There's one in San Diego, which was renovated with funds from a developer," she said. "Unfortunately, we don't have a developer up here willing to do that." The building has been a challenge. After years of neglect and little maintenance, the building was in sad shape even before the Loma Prieta Earthquake of Oct. 17, 1989. Cracks from the quake are visible in the stucco-covered brick walls and, as an unreinforced masonry building, it is considered unsafe. Richmond voters rejected a bond measure to fund restoration in 1997, though the city allowed the Plunge to remain open on a "swim-at-your-own-risk" basis through August, 2001. By that time, the building's antiquated plumbing, electrical, mechanical and other systems were failing, and the city couldn't afford the repairs. A small fire last October and periodic incursions by the homeless in search of shelter have inflicted further indignities on the venerable landmark. So Strauss and a cadre of recreation activists and North Richmond residents decided to do something about it. As president of Richmond Friends of Recreation, Strauss had ready allies at hand, who took on the task of raising the funds themselves, forming the **Save the Plunge Trust** so they could receive tax-deductible contributions for the project. "There's a hard-core group of about 40 or 50 people, which includes members of the Friends of Recreation and several people who swam at the Plunge in the old days, and the events we've been holding have been well-attended," Strauss said.

The project received a major boost when filmmakers Nick and Sari Arrington produced a documentary about the site, **The Plunge—Time Laps**, which aired on KQED. One viewer inspired by the film was Berkeley architect **Todd Jersey**, and after a call to the city and another exchange of phone calls and meetings, he has become the architect for the restoration. "The city had looked at several plans, but because the costs were between \$8 million and \$11 million, no one could see a way to do it. Then Todd Jersey came along and found a way to do it for a lot less, about \$4 million," Strauss said. The trust has been busily holding benefits, concerts and dinners to raise the money, as well as filing applications for other funds. With about half the money in hand or committed—including grants under three different state programs—the project is almost ready to begin. "We're going to do it in stages," she said. "The first thing is to get the building safe." A so-called Belvedere

monitor—a second roof above the main roof with celestory windows to improve air circulation in the building—which was removed in the 1970s will be restored, and the interior walls will be opened up and the pool itself will be retiled.

Because the building is a landmarked structure in the Point Richmond Historic District—which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places—all renovations must be approved by the state Office of Historic Preservation, a process now almost complete, Strauss said. The city's Design Review Board has already approved the plans, she said. "If all goes well, we could be open again in a couple of years," she said. "It will be restored to its old, beautiful self." Strauss's commitment to the Plunge has outlasted her residence in Point Richmond. Though she's been living in Cloverdale the last two years, she remains very committed to the plunge and to RFOR. More dinners and other fund-raisers will be in the offing, until the last dollar is raised. For more information about the Plunge and the restoration campaign, the Trust's web site at www.richmondplunge.org.