

Residents ready to dive into Richmond Plunge

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The Richmond Plunge, a historic indoor swimming pool with an open truss ceiling reminiscent of San Francisco's Sutro Baths, is set to reopen this summer after a decade of renovations.

Workers last week started pouring water back into the huge 60-by-160-foot pool in Point Richmond. Built in 1926, the pool, also known as the Richmond Municipal Natatorium, was a relic of a bygone era when huge public pools were en vogue.

But even as the building withered for decades without repair, it remained a popular gathering spot.

It was big enough that people learned scuba diving and kayaking there. There were programs for the disabled and infants - going on at the same time. And as Richmond evolved, attracting white, black, Latino and Asian Americans, The Plunge was a place that brought everyone together.

"I thought it was real nice - where you go to a place and everybody's friendly and you don't look at color," said Jerrold Hatchett, 58, who is black and swam in the pool from 1971 to 2001. "That's magic in itself."

The pool is expected to officially reopen in July. But its future was never sure.

Ellie Strauss, 72, can still remember the day she walked into the Richmond Plunge in 1972.

The light was streaming in through the sweep of windows and onto the biggest swimming pool she'd ever seen.

"It was magic - a huge, huge expanse of water," she said. But it wasn't all pretty.

"Even then, it needed work," said Strauss. "It was already tired. It needed to be painted. It needed to be scraped. Even all those things didn't take away from the vastness. And once I walked in there, I never walked out."

Quake damage

When the Loma Prieta quake struck in 1989, the building took a blow. In a city where money was and remains tight, there wasn't money for a repair.

By 1997, inspectors warned the city, recalled Rosemary Corbin, the city's mayor from 1993 to 2001.

"Inspectors told us that it was not safe," said Corbin, 70. But when the city said they were going to close it, she said, "the public went crazy."

A ballot measure was put up to pay for repairs, but voters turned it down. Enthusiasts offered to sign waivers. Ultimately, the city kept it open, but told folks to swim at their own risk.

But by 2001, it was impossible to ignore the obvious.

Engineers found sagging walls, crumbled plaster and exposed reinforcing rods. Richmond closed The Plunge.

"We kept it as long as we could," said Corbin. "It was very sad, and the public was outraged."

But after a period of finger-pointing at the city, local residents got organized. Save the Richmond Plunge Trust was formed. They raised money and awareness. They paid for a documentary, held garden tours, sold memorabilia and had a classic car show in the process of raising \$500,000.

And despite the early blame on the city, trust members now credit the city - particularly city manager Bill Lindsay and staff member Rich Davidson - for making it happen.

Without them, said Strauss, "we wouldn't have gotten as far as we did."

The \$7.5 million pool was paid for through city redevelopment money, funds from a regional voter measure, individual grants and also the donations, - some as little as \$5 - said Strauss, president of the Save the Richmond Plunge Trust.

'Greenest pool'

But the renovation is hardly going to make this an old-time pool. While they've tried to preserve historical elements, they've designed for the future.

There are 3,500 square feet of solar hot water panels for the pool's 324,000 gallons of water, 30 kilowatts of solar panels for electricity, 300 operable windows, a hyper-efficient boiler and sophisticated pool pumps, said Todd Jersey, the Berkeley architect who designed the renovation.

And the pool itself won't have chlorine. It's a saline pool that will use an ultraviolet disinfectant system. Kids and others will be able to swim without goggles.

"We've branded this as the greenest pool in the country," said Jersey.

Now everybody's waiting for opening day.

"I want to be one of the first ones to jump in there," said Hatchett, another trust board member. "As soon as they say 'OK,' I'll be diving in there real quick. It's going to be wonderful. God is good."

-- For more information about the Richmond Plunge, visit links.sfgate.com/ZJRQ.

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