

# Richmond Plunge poised to make another splash

Berkeley architect's retrofit plan cuts costs; bids out

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When the first renovation estimates came in, the Richmond Plunge seemed doomed.

More than \$1 million was needed to pay for concrete block walls, the pool's antiquated water pump system had to be replaced, and the state-of-the-art gym included in the plan did not come cheap. All told, it would cost more than \$10 million to renovate and update the crumbling public pool that had been closed after the building had been deemed unsafe in 2001.

Until Berkeley-based architect Todd Jersey stepped in, organizers had little hope that they could raise enough funds to reopen the Municipal Natatorium, more commonly known as "the Plunge."

Jersey is the principal at Todd Jersey Architecture in Berkeley, a seven-person design team specializing in sustainable design.

He proposed an alternate design for the historic building that he said would cost half as much and reopen the pool within a matter of years. Despite initial skepticism, Jersey's design plan is now on its way to being implemented.

Construction bidding has begun and Jersey hopes to break ground on the project by late this winter or early spring.

"I focused on what was needed to get the building open again," Jersey said. "The hardest part probably was convincing people that I had a plan that could work."

## Remnants of a bygone era

Just a few years ago, however, Jersey didn't even know the Natatorium existed.

He was watching television one day when he stumbled upon a KQED documentary about the Plunge. It charted how one man's unsuccessful quest for oil under the bedrock of Richmond uncovered a gushing artesian well that the city eventually tuned into the Natatorium, now one of the last remnants of a bygone era when swimming was a national pastime and grandiose public works projects were not uncommon.

The film, entitled "The Plunge - Time Laps Through History," profiled 12 swimmers ranging in age from 2 to 92 and brought the social history of the place to life for Jersey.

It also highlighted how after years of neglect, the landmark building was in danger of being lost.

Richmond voters already had rejected a 1997 bond measure to fund the restoration effort, and the city lacked the cash to fund the project itself. Though a core group of volunteers had formed a nonprofit to raise money for the building's preservation, the \$10 million renovation and retrofit price-tag seemed out of reach, said Ellie Strauss, president of the Save the Plunge Trust.

As an architect, Jersey decided he wanted to do something to save the building.

"I thought, you know, there are a lot of buildings that don't mean anything to the public," he said. "And this is a building that has made a huge difference in peoples' lives."



Photos courtesy of Richmond Museum

**Richmond's Municipal Natatorium opened in 1926. The two-story building had an indoor warm-water swimming pool, a fountain, observation balconies and an open truss ceiling reminiscent of the Sutro Baths in San Francisco.**

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Todd Jersey Principal, Todd Jersey Architecture

Once Jersey got hold of the renovation plans, the cuts began.

First the new exercise facility, then the decorative extras. Then came the walls. Instead of using cinder blocks, which added both weight and expense to the bottom line, Jersey suggested using a wooden frame with a stucco exterior for

the outside and a cheaper fiberglass-type material to line the interior walls. It would function in the same way while saving money and preserving the original look and feel of the building.

By the time his revisions were done, Jersey had reduced the renovation costs to about \$5 million, half of what the original architect had estimated.

"Todd came in and he started noodling around. He came up with some plans and he came up with some figures and he just energized everybody," Strauss said.

## Save the Plunge

The more reachable fundraising goal was exactly what Save The Plunge needed to jumpstart its fund drives. Dozens of volunteers donated countless hours to put on benefits and secure grants from city, state and nonprofit agencies.

Today, Strauss said, the trust has raised

more than \$4.5 million and it is still working on getting more cash.

"The real excitement was with the Friends of the Plunge, to know that this thing could really be done the way they saw it for half the price," said Rich Davidson, Richmond's city engineer who has been working on the project.

The Plunge also has received \$75,000 for seismic retrofitting from an American Express historic-site preservation grant.

Jersey divided the renovation into two phases. The first would fix the structural problems and make the pool swimmable with temporary locker rooms. Phase two would include locker rooms.

At this rate, Strauss said, the trust may be able to cover the total cost.

"You're going to walk into this building and see this beautiful tile work and see this massive skylight," Jersey said. "We're really restoring this building to its original grandeur."