

2011 GOVERNOR'S HISTORIC PRESERVATION AWARDS

Richmond Municipal Natatorium



The restored Richmond Municipal Natatorium building.

The Richmond Municipal Natatorium (“the Plunge”) is a historic public indoor swimming pool, listed individually on the National Register and as a contributing structure in the Point Richmond Historic District. It was designed by architect James T. Narbett in 1925 and constructed on land donated to the City of Richmond. Its civic importance stemmed from the fact that during World War II, huge shipbuilding yards in Richmond employed thousands of workers from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, leading to a larger and more ethnically diverse population, and an increase in racial tensions. But it was at the Plunge that Richmond citizens enjoyed a respite from those tensions and it became a place of civic unity and harmony.

In 1997, after 70 years of deferred maintenance, all of the Plunge’s systems were in near collapse, most notably the hollow clay tile exterior walls, damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. So beloved was the pool, however, that it was kept open for community use until August 2001, when it had to be closed or face collapse. In 2002 the City hired an architectural firm, but their designs exceeded funding, so renovation was shelved. Then, in 2006, Architect Todd Jersey saw a PBS documentary on the Plunge. Inspired by the story, he developed a strategy to reopen the Plunge for an attainable budget. Jersey’s firm spent four years supporting every aspect of the project restoration until the August 2010 public reopening.

The scope of the project entailed rebuilding what was lost and improving what did not work to recreate the historic grandeur and operational elegance at a reasonable cost. The biggest challenge was raising sufficient funds. A grant from the California Cultural and Historical Endowment funded Phase One. Phase Two was funded through grants and the use of park facility bond money. Finally, the architect

helped raise more than \$500,000 in in-kind donations of materials and labor. Energy conservation reduced electrical and gas load over a conventional municipal pool by about 50 percent. Solar energy production generates about half the pool's energy needs, and other green strategies provided more savings and efficiencies.

Learn more about the Richmond Plunge and the preservation project:

<http://www.ci.richmond.ca.us/2140/Richmond-Plunge>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUKQYW-jLC8>