

Yuji Matsumoto

Instructor Weise

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A Brief History of the Sutro Baths

Driving north along point Lobos, just past the Cliff house restaurant in a cove protected from the waves of the Pacific Ocean stands the concrete ruins of the Sutro Bathhouse. In the day and age of today where urban density and real estate market sees to the gradual overwriting of San Francisco's architectural past, the ruins stand as a testament to the grandeur envisioned by the wealthy engineer and one time mayor of San Francisco, Adolph Sutro. Sutro had begun planning the construction of the baths in 1888. C.J. Colley and Emil S. Lemme were awarded \$500 by Sutro for their designs for the Sutro baths. Featuring seven swimming pools, six of which were heated in progressing increments of 10 degrees, seating for well over one thousand people beneath over 100,000 panes of green tinted glass, the Sutro Baths were a prestigious venue for fairs, beauty pageants, and swimming competitions.

Adolph Sutro had invested \$1 million in the construction of the Sutro Bathhouse including the amphitheatre able to accommodate some 5,000 people, and in addition to the bathers, enough facilities to support and entertain an additional 3,000 guests. The casino featured an array of dining rooms, the amphitheatre, a museum, as well as an observatory built atop the entire structure. Colley and Lemma's design echoes the bathhouses of Mediterranean antiquity in their uses of ornamentation, but incorporates modern construction materials and techniques reminiscent of the Crystal Palace of Victorian England. Effectively the Sutro Baths transformed a desolate stretch of San Francisco's coastline into a marvel of architecture and entertainment which was visited by thousands of people during the span of the seventy years it was open.

The amenities such as the dining rooms, trapezes, amphitheatre and museum were contained within the steel framework and glass exterior were interconnected by a series of stairways, promenades and elevators. The museum featured many exhibits such as totem poles, cigar store Indians, stuffed animals including birds, snakes, apes, jaguars, and insects. In addition there were international exhibits featuring Egyptian mummies, coin collections, photograph collections, fine art collections, Japanese swords and Aztec art. News articles boasted the question of what one could not find at the Sutro Baths.

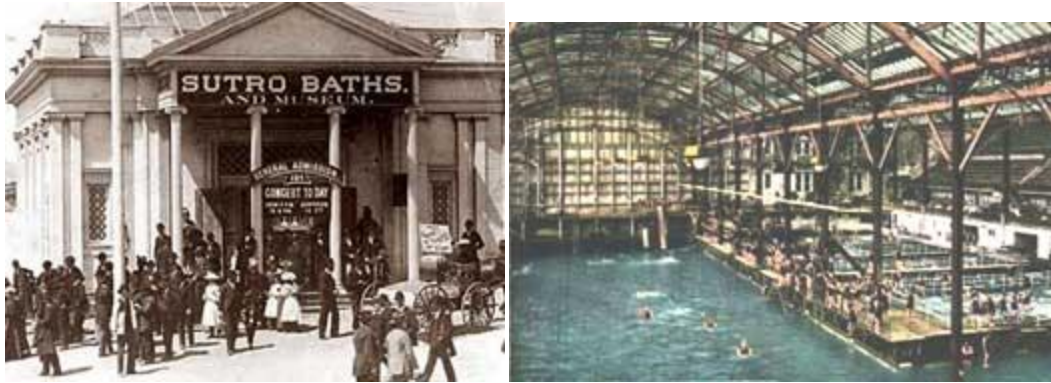
According to Adolph Sutro, the baths could support ten thousand bathers which ranged from children, to adults and seniors. The bathers could enter the pool via trampoline, slides, swings, flying rings, and toboggan slides. In addition to being a water park, Sutro had seen to the installation of rides appropriated from the Midwinter Fair held in Golden Gate Park including a Ferris wheel. Swimmers in the main pool had 300 feet of swimming distance lengthwise and 150 feet of space in terms of width in addition to the smaller pools which were heated in graduated degrees. During the initial seventeen years of its operation, the Sutro Baths did not rely on the San Franciscan power grid, the former having been accomplished through a system of generators and engines.

The use of generators and engines was problematic in that the tasks involving water heating would have to be completed before the building could be fully lit due to the limits on power capacity. Despite the problem of power capacity, the heated water would also be used for steam heating and the laundering of the bathing suits one had to rent upon arrival. The later addition of a central power station 17 years after opening allowed for the use of electrical devices such as hair dryers, warming pads, sewing machines and other electrical appariti. The regulation of filling the primary basin that fed the Baths could be facilitated by natural or electrical means. The wall of the main basin which still stands today, withstood the pounding waves of the Pacific Ocean which would be filtered to a settling tank before being distributed to the smaller heated bathing pools. More importantly the use of

wastewater for laundry, steam power, and heating reflects an attitude towards sustainability and environmental responsibility. The most ingenious aspect of using wave power to fill the settling tank versus the motorized pump is demonstrated by the single hour required to fill the tank by waves versus the six hours to fill the tank by powered turbines.

After the death of Adolph Sutro, the enterprise of operating the Sutro baths eclipsed the admissions garnered by guests. In response to the mounting expenses of upkeep Sutro's daughter Dr. Emma Merritt attempted to sell the structure to the city of San Francisco through a \$687,000 bond in 1912 and \$410,000 in 1919 had both failed. Sutro's grandson Adolph G. Sutro attempted to increase patronage through a variety of means such as a tropical themed renovation and the additions of an ice rink, basketball court, table tennis, and dancing area. By 1952 the frustration of financial loss due to upkeep resulted in the sale of the property to George Whitney. Owner of the now demolished playland-at-the-Beach, Whitney had purchased the property for \$250,000, one fourth of the construction cost. The costs of upkeep in regards to the pools and plumbing resulted in the removal of the swimming activities. In 1966 the baths were eventually closed, and the building was destroyed in a fire of suspicious origin.

Thus San Francisco had suffered the loss of the largest heated saltwater pool in the works, holding some 1,804,962 gallons of seawater. In 1980 the National Park Service had purchased the land for over \$5 million and added the area to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Now the area is surrounded by plant life – wild Lilies and Cypress Trees, spot the cliffside. The ruins are albeit in a state of decay, abutted by a verdant slope through which the hiking trail leads. Stairways whose destinations have been lost to the Pacific oceans and derelict railway equipment jut out from between the rocks. The rocks themselves tell the story of San Francisco's geology, as they imperceptibly subduct beneath the continental crust revealing the inverted bedding of San Francisco.



Left Above: Main Entrance, Right Above: Interior

Left Below: Aerial Photograph, Right Below: Wiki map projection of Sutro Baths Layout



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