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# Building Stories:

## The SERC Women's Locker Room Addition, the Long-Awaited "Big Wet Kiss" to Female Members

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On the far end of Fisherman's Wharf, past Pier 39, Ripley's Believe it or Not, and the stalls selling fresh crabmeat to tourists, a modest yet historic structure shares a small patch of private beach adjoining Aquatic Park. The South End Rowing Club (SERC, or "the South End" to locals) is a San Francisco tradition as treasured as the Irish coffee served up the street at the Buena Vista Café. Seaworthy club members intent on exploring the icy and tumultuous waters of San Francisco Bay have gathered here to share shelter and showers, boats, and friendship since the club's inception in the 19th century. If you are training for the English Channel, Catalina, the Irish Sea, and beyond, it is often from the springboard of the South End.

Each morning, I tuck my hair under a black thermal cap, arrange my mirrored goggles to keep the water from stinging my eyes, and straighten the corners of my bathing suit before making my descent down the long flight of wooden steps leading to the bay. There is something deliciously addictive about the first cold slap of water on your skin. The water and scenery never repeat. Brilliant streaks of a bold red Turner sky? The tousled hair of a seagull, sleepy and forlorn as together we brave the foggy rain? A patch of icy water cooled by faraway mountain streams carry-

ing newly melted snow to the sea? Each day is a surprise, creating a connectedness to everything, one too easy to forget when filing nails while stuck in traffic, or when standing in line for a double cappuccino.

Originally located at South End Point (by AT&T Park), the South End was initiated in 1875 by a handful of Irishmen looking for a place to dock their boats and change their clothes. It was a men's club, yes, but not in the Victorian tradition of self-congratulation and social status, complete with leather chairs, cigars, and whiskey. The goal here was swimming, and at that time, serious open-water swimmers were men.

The ramshackle structure was moved first to Aquatic Park (then called Black Point) at the far end, by Van Ness Avenue, in an effort to consolidate recreational use around the sheltered area known as "the cove." The club maintained ownership of the building but leased the land until it was moved again as part of the eminent domain appropriation for the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge. This changed the lease to include both building and land, now on federal property, a move that was to have far-reaching consequences for gender equality in the years ahead.



Above: East elevation; north elevation; gym [Renderings courtesy of OPA]  
Opposite: Upper boathouse [Photo courtesy of OPA]

This lease eventually opened the doors of the club to women, but it took a while. Hazel Langenour was the first to swim the Golden Gate in 1911 and was proud to sport a SERC insignia with a smile for her post-swim photo. But even this achievement did not merit a key to the club or even an invitation into the warmth of a sauna inside the hallowed halls. It would be another 66 years before a lawsuit against a neighbor and sibling club, the Dolphin Club, forced open the doors of both. In a manner similar to the later 1987 lawsuit filed against the Olympic Club near Union Square (their prestigious golf course was on federal land, so the OC was given a choice to either let go of the course or allow women to join), so did a band of courageous women argue their case.

And so a makeshift locker room was installed in the boat storage room on the ground floor, and women were permitted to join. Thin, uninsulated walls allowed sound and cold to flow in and out without obstruction and rendered the space unwelcoming and less private. At first perhaps this was an unintentional by-product of bewilderment over exactly how to include the club's newest members. Would they really want to stay? Or maybe it was a matter of not taking them seriously, assuming perhaps that female members could only be wives and daughters, rather than serious athletes. But, with time, it became the default—and then a financial hurdle. Upstairs, the community room lined with historic photos adjoined the men's locker area. Its warm cups of coffee and stunning view of the bay were technically available to all, but for women, it required a special trip. So as the years marched forward and Title IX forged opportunities for following generations, the large kitchen on the lower floor became the one truly communal gathering spot instead. No one's to blame precisely, but the women's spaces communicated marginalization and separateness just the same.

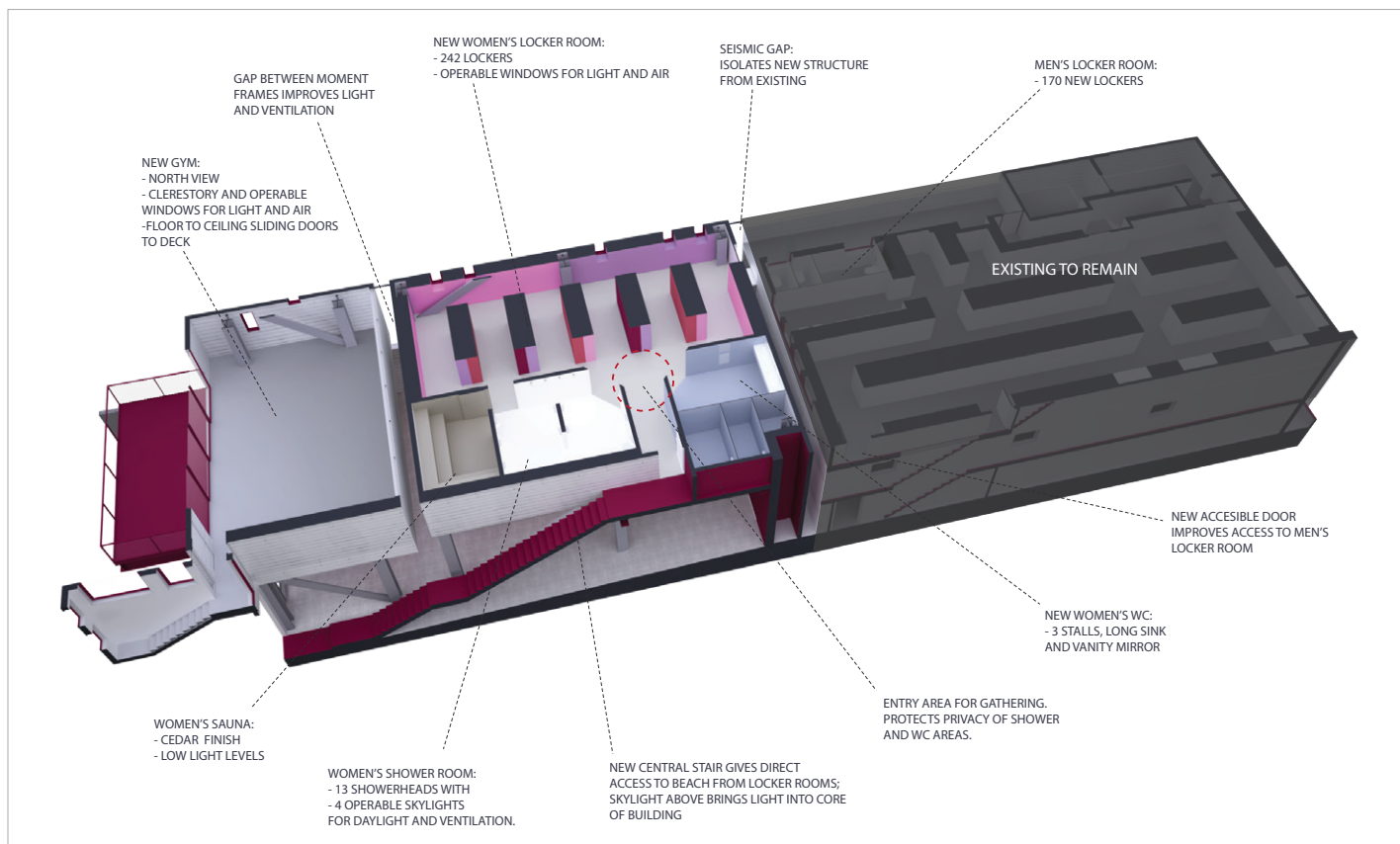
But the South End is a close-knit group, and eventually, that loyalty did extend and embrace both genders. In fact, the South End now prides itself on including an international set of women swimmers as its own. Kim Chambers, the only woman to swim the Oceans Seven (the watery equivalent of the seven summits), takes a daily dip from this small patch of beach (she is in fact a "two-fer," both a Dolphin and a SERC member). Swimming is inherently and beautifully unusual in that it is an equal-opportunity sport. In fact, many have argued that women are particularly well suited to open-water swimming—and given recent world records by Sarah Thomas and Melissa Berkay, and former records by Lynne Cox, it's easy to see their point.

So here we are, in April 2017, cutting the ribbon to usher in a new women's locker room at the club. As Jessica Brokaw, chair of SERC's Foundation Committee and initiator of the Founding Women's Luncheon, so eloquently put it during the opening ceremonies, the addition is at last, "a big wet kiss to the female members of the club."



Top: East elevation; bottom: North elevation [Renderings courtesy of OPA]  
Opposite: Program [Diagram courtesy of OPA]





Progressive architects Ogyrdziak Prillinger Architects (OPA) were the right choice, with a gender-equal principal distribution (one man, one woman). OPA followed an understated style of architecture that, while certainly contemporary, simultaneously maintains the proper decorum befitting this prominent and historic site.

From the street, the exterior form is a simple box, clad in wooden siding, and not very different from the original structure. But facing the water, a large stretch of storefront glass opens to the impressive view beyond. In the women's locker room, skylights fill the generous shower area with light, while windows squeezed between lockers provide glimpses of the view. The women's locker room is smaller than the men's, reflecting present membership numbers, but the size and type of the lockers are the same. The lockers have been painted varying shades of lipstick-appropriate red, mauve, and fuchsia, riffing off of the traditional SERC crimson that is ubiquitous throughout the club. This is clearly an Albers-inspired gesture, visually marking the lockers as equal but separate just the same. The good news is that there are plenty enough for the present and future members who no doubt will now line up to join the fun and challenge of the bay.

A monumental flight of stairs fills the space between the old and new structures, bridging the gap between then and now, much like the club itself, making a celebration of the connection.

Brava, South End, brava! ■

#### About the Author



Donna Schumacher is the founder and creative director of Donna Schumacher Architecture (DSA), a boutique architecture practice for small-scale commercial tenant improvements, retail, and residential work in the Bay Area. DSA projects range from one-of-a-kind signature elements for architectural interiors, utilizing Donna's background in the fine arts, to complex projects requiring multiple permits, tapping into her 30 years of experience with the San Francisco building department. DSA has recently introduced art consulting to its roster of services. Donna was the managing editor for the VIEW from 2012 through 2016 and is currently the editor emerita for its editorial board.





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