

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Adolph Sutro's Interior Ocean: A Social Snapshot of 19th-Century Bathing in the United States

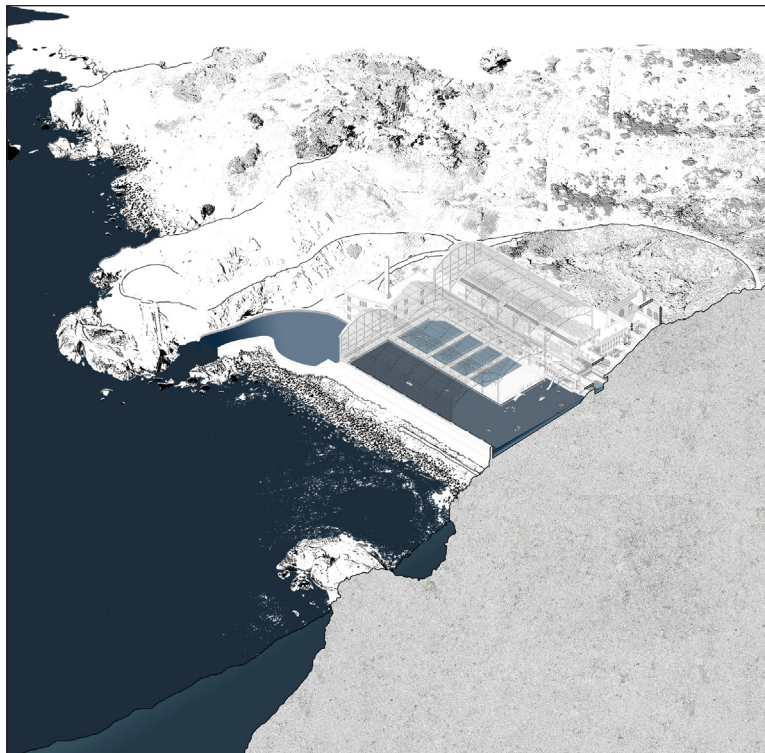
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The story of the Sutro Baths (1894–96) in San Francisco is an early example of encapsulating territory and interiorizing the natural environment. This paper situates Sutro's crystal palace for swimmers within the architectural and social contexts of bathing in the 19th century. The novel typology of these baths transcended previous notions of bathing centers and recreational swimming pools. Their history is linked to evolving forms of leisure and social segregation related to collective swimming pools during this period.

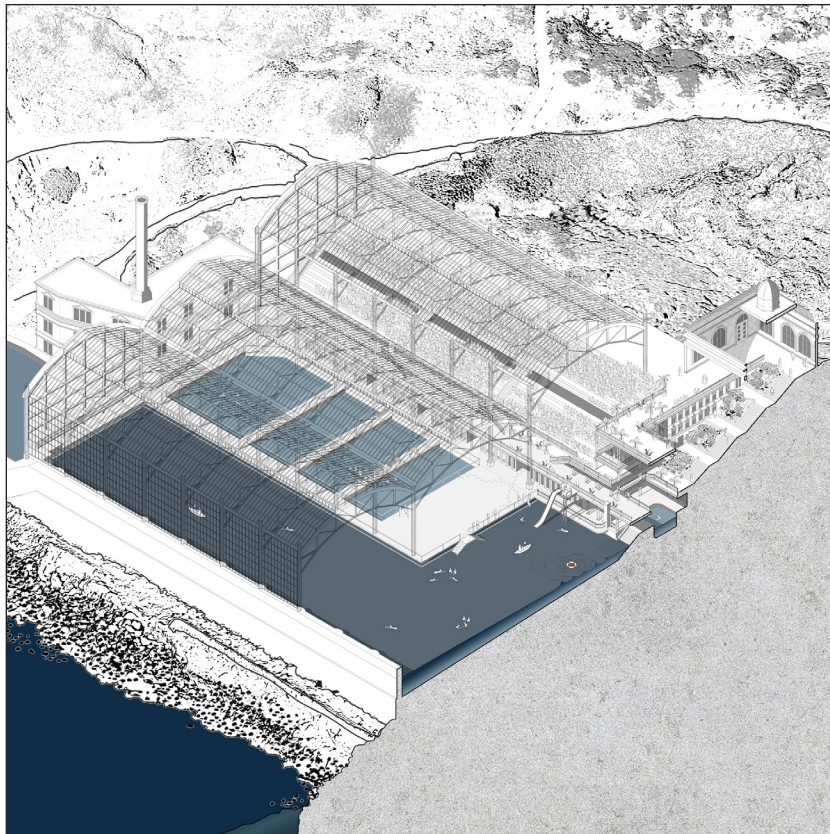
## An Interior Microcosm

The Sutro Baths (1894–96) at Point Lobos in San Francisco were a microcosm of America's 19th-century leisure, culture, and societal aspirations, the ambitious dream of a self-made millionaire, engineer, and later mayor of San Francisco, Adolph Sutro. Sutro, a German immigrant and entrepreneur, enclosed a portion of the Pacific Ocean within a spectacular glass palace. The seaside was sheltered, altered, tamed, and commodified within three

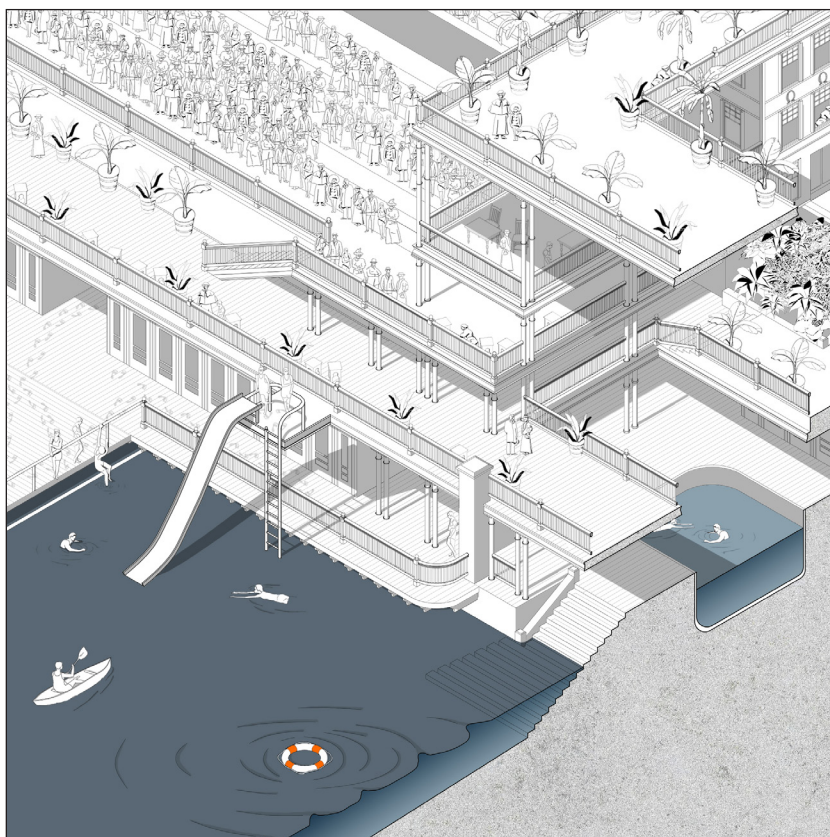
vaulted glass naves supported by a combination of iron columns and wooden trusses. Launched as the largest interior space for bathers in the world at the time ('Salt-water Bathing for People', 1894: 19), the Sutro Baths were an early precursor of the contemporary water park: a strange amalgam of swimming pools, elevated promenades, club-rooms, an amphitheater, a winter garden, a taxidermy collection, and a wax museum, along with antiques and seashells (Figures 1, 2, and 3). Sutro died in



**Figure 1:** Section across the Sutro Baths and the cove at Point Lobos. *Sutro's Interior Ocean Section, Wide*. Nerea Feliz Studio and Richard Gagle, 2020, based on blueprints of the Sutro Baths held by the San Francisco Public Library and digitized for the Cliff House Project.



**Figure 2:** Section across the staircase of Sutro Baths. *Sutro's Interior Ocean Section, Medium*. Nerea Feliz Studio and Richard Gagale, 2020, based on blueprints of the Sutro Baths held by the San Francisco Public Library and digitized for the Cliff House Project.



**Figure 3:** Detail of the section across the Sutro Baths. *Sutro's Interior Ocean Section, Close-Up*. Nerea Feliz Studio and Richard Gagale, 2020, based on blueprints of the Sutro Baths held by the San Francisco Public Library and digitized for the Cliff House Project.

1898, only two years after the permanent opening of the baths. Today, only the concrete foundations of the pools remain (**Figure 4**), following a devastating fire in 1966. Ten years later, the National Park Service acquired the land that today is part of the Sutro Historic Landscape District.

Sutro's enterprise to enclose a portion of the coast in 100,000 square feet of glass serves as a backdrop for examining the birth of the modern phenomenon of recreational swimming facilities and their unfortunate history of social segregation. The Sutro Baths are an early manifestation of a new leisure economy that transformed the ocean into a resource, the coast into a stage, swimming into a desirable sport, and exercise and the human body into a spectacle. The extraordinary scale of the facility, its scenic grandeur, and the bustling energy of the crowds together created a specific atmosphere for this pioneering and majestic mall of water.

Sutro inaugurated a new typology, an architectural formula to capitalize on the ludic pleasures of bathing, consumption, and leisure. Throughout the 20th century, with the growth of the working middle class, the demand for such spaces of leisure and consumption would grow. Among the rise of myriad new forms of private and public recreational spaces, the Sutro Baths were one in a series of attempts to construct autonomous atmospheric environments for immersion — encapsulated portions of the world, manufactured interiors offering a new type of socio-natural form enabled by mechanical controls. Prior to the construction of the baths, the coast in its natural state provided a space for unmediated social interaction; inside the Sutro Baths, public life was a manufactured collective leisure experience.

Sutro's 'interiorization' of the Pacific coast holds certain parallels to Mark Pimlott's heterotopian notion of the Garden of Eden. The garden belongs to the world, yet at the same time it is separated from it. Nature's violence is alien to Eden, where, on the contrary, nature is exclusively

generous, benign, beautiful, and timeless (Pimlott 2016: 17). Sutro's audacious engineering managed to tame and warm a portion of the ocean within a glass structure. A promotional brochure described it as 'always as balmy and summery as mid-June on a South Isle, whatever the weather outside' (Blaisdell 1987: 46). The baths' interior, with its tepid temperatures and serene waters, contrasted with the winds and the hazardous ocean waters of the Pacific coast. Storm waves repeatedly broke the glass façade and damaged the breakwater (Martini 2014: 77). The atmospheric control, the commodification of the ocean view, the sensory bombardment of humidity, splashing sounds, and salt-water smells, together with the new attraction of uncovered bodies all lured visitors into roaming about the space for hours, incentivizing consumption. A multilevel system of open platforms comprising seven pools facing the gigantic body of water provided the perfect spatial organization for play, strolling, and delightful voyeurism.

Sutro's glass house for swimmers was also a building type that accommodated an unusual combination of spatial, material, and programmatic choices that contributed to an emerging and global reformulation of leisure and consumption practices. Peter Sloterdijk describes how 19th-century glass houses enabled the migration of plants at a global scale. For the first time, plants from different climate zones that under natural circumstances would have never occupied the same space could now coexist within an artificial construct (Sloterdijk 2009: 176). According to Sloterdijk, 'the architect works as a designer of immersions. This is particularly evident in the case of so-called interior architecture, which is in principle all about the artificial production of embedding situations' (2011: 108). If interior design is the result of combining things that were not necessarily intended to be put together, the Sutro Baths formed a complex interior microcosm. Materially, the baths presented an eclectic and capricious



**Figure 4:** Ruins of the Sutro Baths in San Francisco's Lands End. C.M. Highsmith, 2012. Library of Congress (LC), Prints & Photographs Division, 2013630744, LC-DIG-highsm-21316.

collection of natural, manmade, and cultural trophies. Programmatically, the building hosted a wide range of activities for all sorts of publics. In social terms, the baths welcomed a heterogenous mix of visitors from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

A microcosm can also be understood as a compressed expression of the world. Within Sutro's encapsulated fragment of the San Francisco coast, 19th-century racial and gender discrimination practices were also inevitably confined. Because the Sutro Baths incorporated a series of cultural circumstances, architectural references, programmatic functions, and technologies within a single structure, they are an excellent – albeit under-studied – example of how changing social practices in the 19th century challenged architectural types and disciplinary conventions. At the same time, the story of the Sutro Baths is an example of how the utopianism of the late 19th century, or the simply audacious and visionary attitudes such as Sutro's, replaced tradition in responding to changing technological and social landscapes during this time period.

### Hygiene, Bathing, and the Context of Wellness

The 19th century was marked by a devastating series of epidemic diseases linked to urban growth; tuberculosis in particular was one of the main causes of death in the United States during this period (Murray 2004). Hydrotherapy, heliotherapy, open-air cures, physical exercise, and contact with nature were among the emerging treatments and cures prescribed for the rise in diseases provoked by an insalubrious urban existence. The 'oxygenating' role of skin (Vigarello 1991: 213–16), the supposed anti-infectious virtues of sun exposure, and microbial discoveries at the end of the century brought greater legitimacy to the idea that exposing the body to the elements and nature was an essential part of medical cures. Southern California's benign climate became a pilgrimage destination for the sick. Hospitals and sanatoriums, mostly dedicated to the treatment of tuberculosis and to other long-term patients with chronic diseases, proliferated around Los Angeles and Pasadena. In 1870, a state health report proclaimed California the 'Sanatorium of the World' (Kilston 2019: 19).

Healthy vacationers seeking aquatic cures were common among the new working bourgeoisie. As bathing gained popularity in the middle class, a small constellation of spa villages arose across the United States, and the beach gradually came to be valued as a curative and preventive pilgrimage destination for the wealthy. Sutro believed in hydrotherapy and the healing qualities of exercise: 'I have always held swimming to be the very best exercise ... It requires the use of all the members of the body, it is invigorating and pleasurable and keeps the circulation free and quick. The ocean water is particularly stimulating' ('Saltwater Bathing for People', 1894: 19).

### Floating Wooden Fortresses, Modest Baths for the Poor

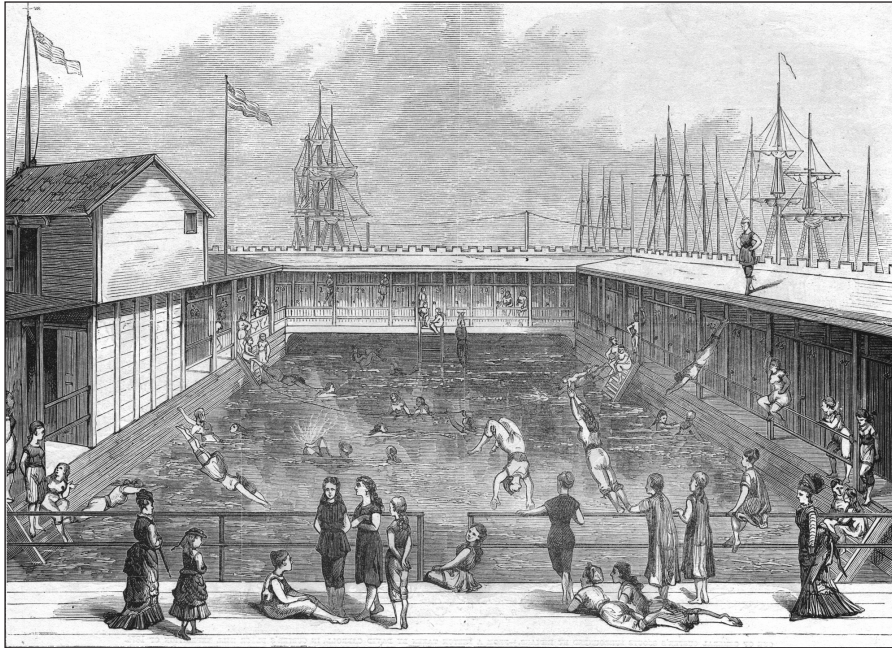
The manner in which a civilization integrates bathing within its life, as well as the type of bathing it prefers, yields searching insight into the inner

nature of the period ... The role that bathing plays within a culture reveals the culture's attitude toward human relaxation. (Giedion 1969: 628)

The first public pools in the United States were a product of the Progressive Era. Public officials built pools for less wealthy populations, immigrant and working-class citizens, in response to fear of the spread of diseases in crowded urban centers. In the context of these swimming facilities and their relationship with evolving bathing customs throughout the 19th century, Sutro's initiative to provide the city of San Francisco with a purely recreational swimming space encased in glass was innovative. According to historian Jeff Wiltse, who writes about swimming practices in *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, plunging into urban lakes and rivers for pure recreation was a pastime dominated by working-class men. He describes how urban growth at the turn of the 18th century led several cities to pass ordinances forbidding daytime swimming for leisure purposes, because swimmers repeatedly offended the middle class with their shouting and nudity (Wiltse 2014). Despite this opposition, recreational bathing increased in popularity over the course of the 19th century. The first recreational facility, St. George's Baths, a municipal swimming pool, opened in Liverpool in 1828 ('Local Aquatic Empires', 2007; Delgado et al. 2000). In 1860, a small group of North American clubs organized swimming leagues (Delgado et al. 2000). By the end of the 19th century, San Francisco was eager to increase its bathing opportunities. Its location next to the Pacific Ocean would have made it a privileged enclave if not for the low sea temperatures. A local pamphlet from 1878 claimed, 'there can be no doubt that a great number of our citizens would seek to enjoy the tonic effects of sea bathing, but for the low temperatures of the water' ('Prospectus', 1878; Delgado et al. 2000).

On the east coast, city officials installed recreational river baths as cleansing and cooling points for the poor. Bathing was perceived as a tool to combat disease and maintain social order. These austere river bathing structures were intended to make river swimming safer during the summer months. In 1866, Boston opened six 'river baths', fenced floating wooden tanks, submerged in the Charles River, each approximately fifteen by twenty feet and four feet deep. The construction of these tanks was porous, allowing the river water to flow through (Wiltse 2014). In 1870, New York opened two floating river baths (Williams 1991: 19). Philadelphia operated three in 1883 (Wiltse 2014). These types of facilities consisted of a modest one-storey wooden box that sheltered the tanks and the bathers from outside gazes (Figure 5). The 'fortress' idea behind these structures was visible in some of the projects where the building was literally crowned with battlements.

Considering social practices around nudity and the standard bathing architectural types of the time, Sutro's choice of a transparent envelope glass palace was revolutionary. But Sutro's typological innovation was not just in the use of glass. The classical origin of the typology is the Roman *thermae*, in which the *natatorium* was traditionally secondary to the cleansing pools, but in Sutro's design, the *natatorium* is finally emancipated from the



**Figure 5:** New York City – ‘Women’s Day’ at the free swimming bath at the foot of Fifth Street, East River, 1876. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, NYPL.

rest of the bathing facility to become the main feature of the space. The Sutro Baths mark a turning point: bathing was no longer concealed – it was exposed, celebrated, and commodified as a recreational activity and a visual spectacle to be shared by the men and women of San Francisco. In 1896, two years after the construction of the Sutro Baths’, swimming became an Olympic sport.

### Sutro’s Vision for Point Lobos

In the 19th century, as urbanization and industrialization progressed, a return to nature began to be publicly perceived as a cure for ‘thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people’ (Muir 1901). Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), who exiled himself from his home in Massachusetts to live among nature in the countryside, captures the 19th-century sentiment of rejecting urban life in his extensive writings about the fundamental benefits of ‘the tonic of wildness’ (Thoreau 1948). While Sutro might have been familiar with these ideas and viewed his intervention at Point Lobos as an escape from the city and a healthy antidote for the urban life of the working masses, unlike Thoreau, Sutro engaged with the ‘tonics of wildness’ through a profound manipulation and total neutralization of nature.

Sutro’s biographer, Robert Stewart, declared that the baths were Sutro’s last effort to reach historical greatness (Delgado et al. 2000). A German immigrant born in 1830, Sutro arrived in the United States at the age of twenty. He was a frenetic entrepreneur, an astute businessman, and a philanthropic millionaire. He began his career as a cigar salesman and became a self-taught engineer, making his fortune as a tunnel engineer and developer in Nevada. In 1879, he sold his portion of that business and moved to San Francisco, where he would eventually serve as mayor of San Francisco (Toogood 1980: 50).

Point Lobos, where the Sutro Baths were located, is a promontory along the coast. The adjacent cove was

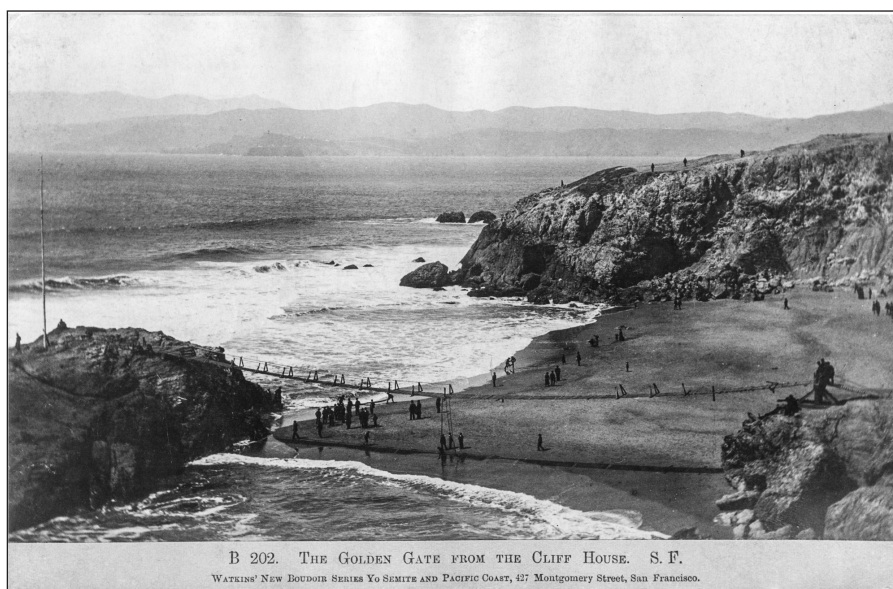
a popular day-trip destination (Delgado et al. 2000) (Figure 6). In 1881, Sutro purchased both the Point Lobos promontory and the small bay. After building an open-air aquarium on the site, Sutro announced his intention to build covered, heated pools at the base of the promontory by channeling the water of the ocean, a construction process that would transform the entire cove. Soon after the baths’ completion, the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* quoted him explaining the project:

Of course, I have a large ocean-front and have simply taken advantage of it in putting up this bath house. It seemed to me at first that there must be some way to catch the water – say in a reservoir – to save pumping. To that end, I decided to blast a basin into the side of the cliff which would catch the water thrown up by the dashing of the waves. ... I must have it large, pretentious, in keeping with the environment, with the Heights, with the great ocean itself. So I filled the whole cove and gave my building a frontage of 350 feet, which, if I am not mistaken, is the largest extent ever given to a similar structure. The largest of the Roman baths was said to have only two hundred feet front [sic] and considerable less surface area. The interior had to be in keeping. (‘Saltwater Bathing for People’, 1894: 19)

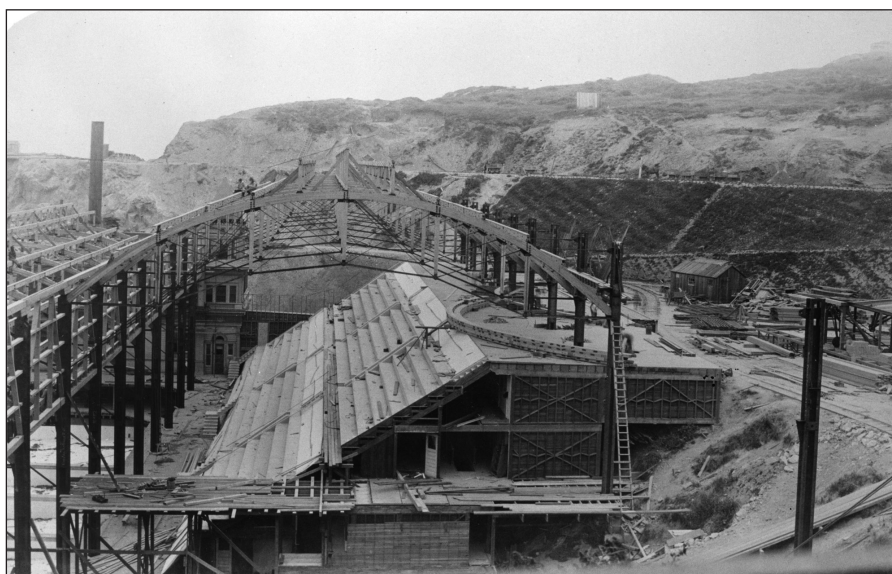
### Domesticating Nature

A long time ago has the influence of the architect declined, and the engineer, ‘l’homme moderne par excellence’, ... is beginning to replace him. (Baudot 1947)

When Sutro invited architects to compete for the design of the baths, he had already begun to rein in the natural forces of the Point Lobos site. He actively participated in



**Figure 6:** View north toward Point Lobos and Marin in background. Fisherman's or Flag Rock with flagpole and suspension bridge. Sandy Cove is the future location of Sutro Baths. C. E. Watkins, c. 1875. Marilyn Blaisdell Collection, [OpenSFHistory.org/Western Neighborhoods Project, wnp4.1087](https://OpenSFHistory.org/Western%20Neighborhoods%20Project,wnp4.1087).



**Figure 7:** Sutro Baths under construction, bleachers, laundry/powerhouse and smokestack, 1893. CHS Collection. [OpenSFHistory.org/Western Neighborhoods Project, wnp4.0244](https://OpenSFHistory.org/Western%20Neighborhoods%20Project,wnp4.0244).

the supervision of the construction of this titanic complex (**Figure 7**); his engineering knowledge influenced the project as much as his impulsive character marked the design process. The friction between the architects and Sutro's engineering competencies was palpable during the construction of the baths. Before an architect's drawing was even ready, Sutro had proceeded to build the powerhouse and the pools.

Building the facility was a complex structural challenge. After several attempts to erect a seawall had failed, two robust breakwaters were built to protect the structure from the ocean's current (Delgado et al. 2000). A series of platforms at different levels conducted the seawater to the pools. At high tide, the floodgates for each tank opened, and the natural slope of the terrain allowed water to flow until the tanks were filled with the dammed tidewater.

A parallel drainage system controlled water expulsion and volume in the pools. It was estimated that solar heat through the glass alone would increase the temperature of the pools between ten and fifteen degrees. The pools were heated by boilers in an adjacent powerhouse. A total of seven pools included five small ones nested in a large L-shaped one and one freshwater plunge tank, fed by a natural spring (Blaisdell 1987: 26) (**Figure 8**). The opening program estimated a total volume of salt water of nearly 2 million gallons. Throughout the complex, water temperatures ranged from fifty to ninety degrees. The press celebrated Sutro's project:

Nobody but Sutro would have the audacity to construct this system of water supply. It has all the appearance of the work of a city or State government.

Expenses has not been spared in any quarter, and all the confining walls and the concreting and tunneling seems done with a solidity that will endure against the strength of the seas for many years. ('Saltwater Bathing for People', 1894: 19)

After winning a one-month design charette, on November 11, 1891, Emil S. Lemme and C. J. Colley became official architects of the scheme (Martini 2014: 29), although 'the great design, the tout ensemble, was the creation of Mr Sutro's brain alone' ('Saltwater Bathing for People', 1894: 19). The collaborative process is very apparent in the project, which is an odd assembly of discrete parts. Sutro had already built the powerhouse and laundry house before he settled on the final design of the baths after consider-

ing multiple scheme variations. The competition brief that Sutro provided included restaurants and clubs, a curiosities museum, strolling areas, a grandstand, an amphitheater, an office area, a laundry complex, dressing rooms, and additional service areas. The architects' original proposal housed Sutro's tanks under a single vaulted glass roof of extraordinary proportions. The winning project also included a stand-alone building, in Queen Anne revival style, for a Turkish bath, club-rooms, restaurants, and cafes (Martini 2014: 29). In the end, due to budget cuts, this extra building was discarded and the single vaulted roof transformed into three smaller naves parallel to the coast line; two covered the pools and the other the grandstand. A combined structure of concrete foundations, iron columns, and wooden trusses supported the glass roofs (**Figure 9**).



**Figure 8:** Sutro Baths, interior view looking northeast, c. 1896–1907. Courtesy GGNRA, Park Archives, GOGA 13780 048.



**Figure 9:** Sutro Baths, aerial view, c. 1935. Marilyn Blaisdell Collection. OpenSFHistory.org/Western Neighborhoods Project, wnp37.02248.

### A Profitable 'Fun' Palace

Neither the body nor its environment can be assumed to form an organically unified ecosystem ... The body and its environment, rather, produce each other ... [T]he city is made and made over into a simulacrum of the body, and the body, in its turn, is transformed, 'citized,' urbanized as a distinctively metropolitan body. (Grosz 1992: 242)

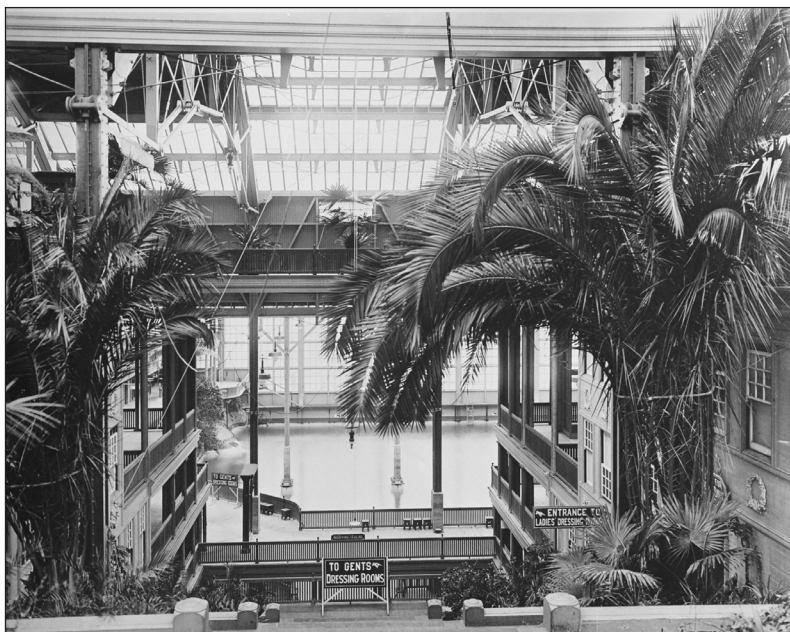
In 1896, the local press announced the opening of the baths as the largest swimming complex in the world at the time ('Saltwater Bathing for People', 1894: 19). The facility could seat 7,400 spectators and hold up to 25,000 visitors; beneath the bleachers the locker area accommodated 517 private dressing rooms, nine club-rooms, and showers in all club-rooms and in 29 private dressing rooms. A state-

of-the-art mechanized laundry could process 20,000 bathing suits and 40,000 towels (Blaisdell 1987: 26).

While the project's technical infrastructure was innovative, stylistically, the structure was eclectic. Visitors entered through a classical-inspired portico at street level. A monumental staircase led them from the entry to the pools in a dizzying descent of nearly 100 feet, framed by platforms holding tropical plants on either side and a view of the ocean ahead. The proportions of the stepped void resembled the vertical canyon-like space of the steep residential streets that open up to the bay in San Francisco (**Figure 10**). According to the first visitors to the baths, 'You will come up on a scene that will make you pause for breath ... The depth, and the width, and the light, and the activity of it seem too much for comprehension' ('Saltwater Bathing for People', 1894: 19) (**Figure 11**). The



**Figure 10:** Sutro Baths, view up the grand staircase at Sutro Baths, c. 1900. Marilyn Blaisdell Collection, OpenSFHistory.org/Western Neighborhoods Project, wnp70.0573.



**Figure 11:** Sutro Baths, view looking down the grand staircase toward the main tank. Martin Behrman, c. 1910. Marilyn Blaisdell Collection, OpenSFHistory.org/Western Neighborhoods Project, wnp37.02274.



dramatic access sequence evoked a palatial experience for bathers from all economic backgrounds. A delicate glass dome crowned the atrium containing the staircase. This appealing spatial feature was similar to those used in large European department stores. The first stop down the staircase was the ticket booths and museum level. One story below was the promenade, a hanging platform across the south and east side of the structure. More museum vitrines, exhibition spaces, pavilions, plants, and food concession facilities populated this level. From here the grand staircase descended to the locker area. The changing rooms,

showers, toilets, and club-rooms were located under the bleachers and occupied several stories. The staircase continued down to the bathers' promenade and, of course, to the pools (Martini 2014: 51–72) (**Figure 12**).

The project was a pseudo-Piranesian space, a pioneering fun palace of capitalism. An amphitheater and a series of landscaped avenues hanging over the baths allowed visitors to stroll through the complex, observe the pools from different angles, and enjoy the views of the crowd in movement. The urban scale and character of the elevated streets (**Figures 13 and 14**) together with the vast proportions



**Figure 12:** Sutro Baths, main tank and grand staircase. United Photographic Company, 1908. LC, Prints & Photographs Division, 2018646166, LC-DIG-stereo-1s10740.



**Figure 13:** Sutro Baths, promenade level. United Photographic Company, 1908. LC, Prints & Photographs Division, 2018646165, LC-DIG-stereo-1s10739.



**Figure 14:** Sutro Baths, museum level, promenade. Courtesy GGNRA, Park Archives, GOGA-2316.



**Figure 15:** Sutro Baths, promenade level Looking West. I. W. Taber, 1895. Courtesy of the California History Room, CSL, Sacramento, California.

of the space created an urban interior. Suspended platforms, gardens, and hovering balconies at different levels overlooked the pools and the ocean view. Part of the experience of consumption in the Sutro Baths was seeing and being seen, the conscious pleasure of simultaneously consuming and creating a new metropolitan experience (**Figure 15**). The structure was a simple scaffolding open to different uses (**Figure 16**). The indeterminate quality of space, one of the original characteristics of the Crystal Palace in England, was only one of many features that the two projects shared. At a glance, visitors could witness the multiple activities that were offered; this visual accessibility

incited a feeling of free will in the visitors, stimulating consumption and the spontaneous emergence of new uses.

#### **The Gaze: Inhabitable Vitrines**

There are clear parallels between the Crystal Palace of 1851, the early department stores that first appeared in the 19th century, and the Sutro Baths, which appeared more than forty years after the Crystal Palace. All of them were inhabitable vitrines enabled by the innovative use of glass and iron. Beyond the large recreational display windows, visitors were both active and passive parts of the spectacle. The Crystal Palace, designed by Joseph Paxton for the



**Figure 16:** Sutro Baths, promenade level above grand staircase. United Photographic Company, 1908. LC, Prints & Photographs Division, 2018646163, LC-DIG-stereo-1s10735u.

Great Exhibition of 1851, marked a key point in the history of places for public gathering, tourism, and trade (Wyman 2001: 241). International exhibitions were a product of an emergent conception of free trade and liberal economics (Giedion 1947: 180). The success of this formula rapidly influenced the architecture of the first department stores (Pimlott 2016: 78). The British architectural historian John McKean writes that ‘this sense of the voyeur in a transformed nature moves from the Crystal Palace to the department store ... Thus its immediate progeny are those exhibitions where goods may be devoured not just by the eyes, but by the wallets too’ (McKean 1994: 29). The opening of the Crystal Palace was followed two years later by that of the Le Bon Marché department store (1853–74) in Paris, which emulated the transparent and volumetric vastness of Paxton’s design by introducing a massive, empty atrium space. The store’s elevated walkways and monumental staircase allowed visitors to take in the enormity of the space brimming with merchandise. The modernist historian Sigfried Giedion observed that ‘never before had light flowed into a store in such bright streams’ (1947: 176). Soon, the features of the Crystal Palace, the ‘palace of the people’, with its transparency and its epic central void crossed by stairs, began to be used regularly in the service of mass consumption. The palace of consumption emerged as a new international typology in the department stores

of Paris, London, Chicago, etc. The spatial organization of the Sutro Baths shared multiple qualities with these precedents, evident in Sutro’s own description:

The vastness is all there — the great open room — and the circus, as it were (i.e. the tank and water), far below, where men and women seem as diminutive as children. Overhead is an arched roof of glass shielding from the rain, but admitting light as clear as the day. (‘Saltwater Bathing for People’, 1894: 19)

### **A Grand, Inclusive Interior**

While the glass structure of the Sutro Baths had clear affinities with the Crystal Palace, the encapsulation of the ocean within such a structure was relatively novel. Sloterdijk considers the Crystal Palace as the critical point marking ‘the tendency to make both nature and culture indoor affairs’ (2013: 170). At the Sutro Baths, the ocean was interiorized, not just literally through the channeling of ocean water, but more important, visually. The glass façade allowed visitors to participate in the infinite horizon of the Pacific Ocean, from the comfort of an interior, climate-controlled space.

The designation of a building as a ‘palace’ was a defining moment for architecture at the time. The media portrayed the idea of the Crystal Palace as a palace for the people

(Pimlott 2016: 78). Its transparency was interpreted as a welcoming call for the entire public. For the first time, the masses could participate in the consumption of exclusive commodities; it was a new form of consumption, mostly visual. The building's extraordinarily large glass envelope encased a mostly empty space, a colossal volume of air. The structure's monumentality was derived from what was then an inconceivable and enormous volumetric encapsulation of a portion of the environment, including several giant trees. The extensive open-truss structure faded within a bright and diaphanous mist'; the envelope included close to 93,000 square meters of glass (Frampton 1993: 34). The Crystal Palace was not only technically innovative but also a new and captivating aesthetic experience. According to Sloterdijk,

With its construction, the principle of the interior overstepped a critical boundary: from then on, it meant neither the middle- or upper class home nor its projection onto the sphere of urban shopping arcades; rather, it began to endow the outside world as a whole with a magical immanence transfigured by luxury and cosmopolitanism. (Sloterdijk 2013: 170)

Sutro's leisure complex was also conceived as a welcoming structure catering to both the elites and the working class of San Francisco. The Sutro Baths marked a unique transfer of typologies; the palace of the people, the palace of consumption, and the palace of sports were all spatially blended together in a colossal recreational center. Inside the Sutro Baths, the ocean, air, nature, and the visual spectacle of the human body also became objects of visual consumption. A modern, healthy, muscular, and

agile human body was placed on display. The voyeuristic consumption of exercising bodies was at once relatively novel and the natural result of 19th-century notions of self-improvement, health, and hygiene.

### A Curious Blend of Activities for All Publics

Beyond a place to swim, the Sutro Baths complex was a forerunner to the contemporary water park and, according to the local press, the largest interior space for bathers in the world at the time ('Saltwater Bathing for People', 1894: 19). The natural pools were equipped with diving boards, rafts, swings, and such gymnastics equipment as rings and trapezes. The result was a spectacle uniquely combining athletic competition, spontaneous play, acrobatic displays, and curiosities, such as Professor Karl, 'the marvelous Anthropic Amphibian, who eats, drinks, smokes, writes and sleeps under water' (Blaisdell 1987: iii). The mesmerizing view of the ocean across the building's magnificent structure merged with all sorts of mundane attractions, like 'the highest diving dog act in the world' and events such as Monster May Day Festival (attended by 9,000 people) or the doughnut race, where the contestants had to eat six doughnuts before swimming (Blaisdell 1987: iii).

Sutro added a museum of curiosities to the complex 'to help install in the minds of youthful visitors a desire for learning' (Okamoto 1998: 67). The museum displayed all sorts of curiosities: trophies from Sutro's own journeys, wax statues, mummies, shells, stuffed birds, and even a majestic stuffed local sea lion named Ben Butler (Blaisdell 1987: 14) (**Figures 17 and 18**). Classical music concerts of interest to both San Francisco's educated elite and its aspirational masses were hosted regularly at the baths. The warm, moist environment was put to use for an extraordinary winter garden of tropical plants: maguey, palm,



**Figure 17:** Sutro Baths, museum level, stuffed birds in glass cases, c. 1896. Marilyn Blaisdell Collection, OpenSFHistory.org/Western Neighborhoods Project, wnp70.0575.



**Figure 18:** Sutro Baths, museum, sea lions on display. I. W. Taber, c. 1895. Marilyn Blaisdell Collection. Courtesy GGNRA, Park Archives, GOGA-2316 78-c-170.

magnolia, and pomegranate trees (Blaisdell 1987: ii). The collections of both curiosities and exotic plants were characteristic status symbols of the times. A collector's zeal was the manifestation of colonial power, dominion, and wealth. At the same time, such collections expressed a nostalgia for pre-industrial life, the exoticism of far-off natural paradises, free from modern civilization. The botanical collector sought to bring home small pieces of those virgin, untamed worlds. The intent to link the bathing experience to the myth of foreign paradisiacal cultures is apparent in some of the promotional messages for the Sutro Baths: 'Here's the spot to loaf in tropic comfort like a Fiji Islander. No nudist and practically no missionaries, but everything else is Number One Triple A Tropical Style!' (Blaisdell 1987: 46). Decoration and technology contributed to an illusion of an escape to a pre-technological space. The escape from daily routines defined a modern understanding of leisure. Architectural historian Kenneth Frampton identified how 'the phenomenon of Kitsch – from Verkitschen, "to fake" – appears with the advent of the department store, around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when bourgeois civilization achieves for the first time an excessive productive capacity and is brought to create a widespread culture of its own' (1982: 14). Visitors to the Sutro Baths consciously immersed themselves in this strange blend of reality and kitsch.

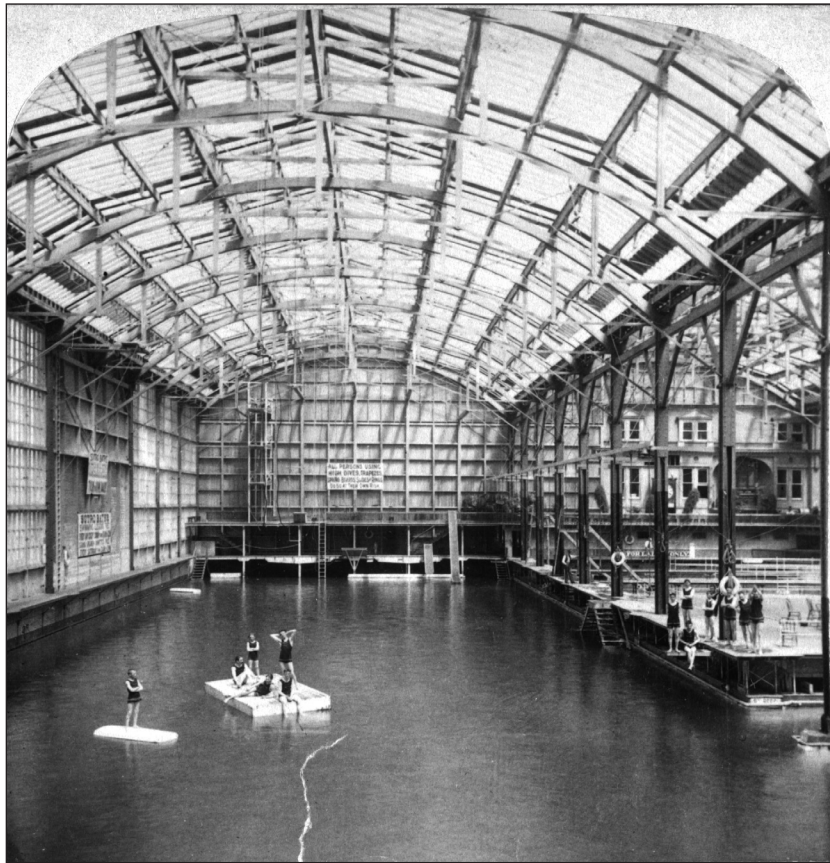
The Sutro Baths are the physical manifestation of how Sutro's neoclassical aspirations coexisted with a modern belief in a simple and pragmatic structural engineering solution. The clear contrast between the classical, colonial, monumental, and almost theatrical nature of the entry sequence – the staircase and the promenade levels – with the shed-like bare industrial aesthetic of the pool areas (**Figure 19**) resulted in a rare pastiche. The combination of the majestic scale of the space, the view of the

ocean, the sound of the waves, swarms of people splashing, the humidity, the heat, and the smell of seawater, spattered with the smell of hot dogs, stimulated a unique and chaotic multisensory experience (Blaisdell 1987). Sutro's mishmash of mundane activities with cultural programs and elevated aspirations attracted a diverse socioeconomic crowd (**Figure 20**) (Casella 2005).

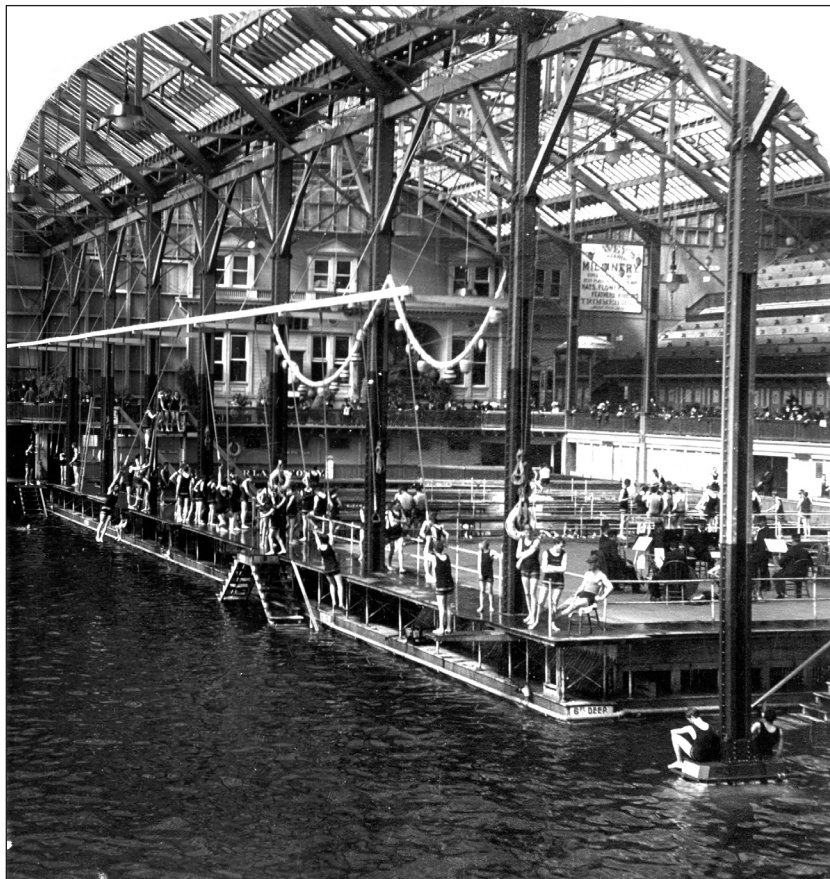
#### Sutro's Social Condenser

The function of the Baths is to create and recycle private and public fantasies, to invent, test, and possibly introduce new forms of behavior. The building is a social condenser. (Koolhaas, Vreindorp, Zenghelis and Zenghelis 1972)

Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans across the socioeconomic spectrum bathed, but not together. Wiltse describes how the first pools from the Progressive Era were heavily segregated by socioeconomic class and gender, according to Wiltse. Reformers initially established clear gender and class divisions, but not racial ones. The working class shared facilities regardless of their ethnicity. Choosing specific locations for pools and varying the fee schedule created socioeconomic segregation. Public pools were often located in the heart of slums; the more prosperous neighborhoods attended their own private swimming clubs. The exceptional public pools located in hybrid socioeconomic areas charged different fees at different times of the day and on different days of the week, to avoid an uncomfortable and heterogenous mix of bathers. In 1897, at Brookline Public Bath in Massachusetts, the pool was free on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, while admission the rest of the week cost fifteen cents, except Thursday evenings, when admission was twenty-five cents. To prevent unsanitary conditions among working-class



**Figure 19:** Sutro Baths, main tank, first bay. Strohmeier & Wyman, 1898. LC, Prints & Photographs Division, 2018646167, LC-DIG-stereo-1s10741.



**Figure 20:** Sutro Baths, view of the pools. Keystone View Company, 1898. LC, Prints & Photographs Division, 2003653958, LC-DIG-stereo-1s10736.

patrons, on the free days, bathers could use only the bathing suits and towels provided by the establishment, while those from middle and upper classes could wear their personal swimming suits (Wiltse 2014).

Sutro was a philanthropist whose cultural contributions to the city of San Francisco often brought him great economic profit. Although public baths were emerging across the country, he was a firm believer in the privatization of civic services, such as his baths. He fought to make the baths accessible via public transportation at a low cost. He publicly said, 'I had intended Sutro Heights as a breathing spot for the poor people as a benefit to the public' ('A Man Against a Monopoly', 1894: 24). In the mid-1880s, in collaboration with his cousin Gustav, Sutro funded the construction of a small railway line that would connect San Francisco's transportation network with his properties at the coast (Toogood 1980: 60). In 1897, Sutro sold the railroad to the Powell and Jackson Streets Railroad Company after negotiating that they would maintain a low fare. Six years later, Southern Pacific Railroad purchased the railroad again and doubled the train fare before the opening of Sutro's baths (Toogood 1980: 63). Sutro's response was robust: he fenced Point Lobos, started charging an entrance fee to the premises, and declared: 'I felt grieved, and I chafed under the contemptible meanness of these people who, while I kept these places open here at a cost of \$20,000 a year at least, and some years a good deal more, that they should get every nickel out of the people who visited' ('A Man Against a Monopoly', 1894: 24). After a tense period of negotiation, Sutro won the dispute with the railway company. It turned out to be a double victory: this calibrated political incident bolstered Sutro's popular reputation. In November 1894, coinciding with the agreement with Southern Pacific Railroad (SPR) to lower

the train fare, Sutro was elected mayor of San Francisco (Toogood 1980: 66). Despite this achievement, frustrated by his property's dependence on SPR, Sutro began construction of his own private railroad to the baths. The affordable commute made the baths a mass leisure destination for the people of San Francisco and increased ticket sales.

In the first few years, the baths received millions of visitors. Entrance cost ten cents, which included access to the museum; for fifteen cents more, visitors received a towel, a locker, and a bathing suit and were allowed in the water (Martini 2014: 58).

None of the public pools allowed swimmers to bring their own suits. They insisted that pool-owned suits be worn to insure that sanitary standards were maintained. Most of the suits were floppy looking ... with white stripes around the bottom edges. Women's suits had a skirt, often stretched from innumerable launderings. Men's suits had half skirts in front until about 1925. The suits at Sutro's were black. (Flamm 1999: 96–97)

Sutro's mandatory, uniform bathing suits also contributed to the temporary elimination of socioeconomic differences (Figure 21).

### 19th-Century Racial and Gender Segregation Practices

Nudity (or semi-nudity) makes the bath an exceptional social space. Without garments or material possessions to identify the bather's socioeconomic status, the bathing space is, in principle, egalitarian. But historically, collective bathing has been a double-edged social sword. The



**Figure 21:** Sutro Baths, second bay, date unknown. Courtesy GGNRA, Park Archives, GOGA-2316.

physical differences between bodies come to the forefront when clothes are absent. Across time, the sexualization of bathing has frequently caused the baths to become a site of gender segregation. Tensions and conflicts regarding gender differences, sexual orientation, and racial identity grew more acute within this architectural framework.

Throughout the 19th century, swimming was unpopular among women. The fact that female swimming suits, when wet, could weigh up to fifteen pounds did not help ('Swimming', 1934: 81). In his book, Wiltse explains how gender segregation was common in most spheres of social life at the time, including bathing. According to Wiltse, men and boys accounted for up to ninety percent of all the swimmers in municipal pools. Women had 'exclusive use' of municipal pools on a restricted schedule, only during men's working hours or on selected days of the week (Wiltse 2014). Gender segregation ensured that men and women did not share waters. The Sutro Baths were no exception; in addition to providing separate dressing rooms for men and women, the baths restricted the access of female swimmers to selected tanks.

Ironically, but not coincidentally, as gender divisions slowly disappeared as the 20th century drew on, racial segregation grew stronger. Wiltse maintains that it was precisely gender integration that led to racial segregation, based on the stereotypes white people held of African Americans males as sexually threatening. In 1913, the Fairground Pool in St. Louis, Missouri, became both the first gender-integrated municipal pool in the northern United States and the first to impose racial segregation (Wiltse 2014).

Even though the Sutro Baths originally did not allow men and women to bathe in the same pools, the openness of the design allowed everyone to witness the swimming activities of both men and women. Unlike most other baths at the time, at Sutro's, men and women could casually socialize right before and right after bathing. The unobstructed gaze – the absence of partitions dividing the swimming space according to gender – was a small step toward gender integration. Unfortunately, soon after the establishment opened to the public, it also became the setting for one of the first cases of segregation-related litigation in the United States.

### Racial Segregation at the Sutro Baths

In 1897, the state's first civil rights law, known as Dible's Civil Rights Bill, was passed in California, making it illegal to prohibit African Americans from entering any public establishment. John Harris, an African American, requested access to the Sutro Baths twice and was denied, and in turn sued the establishment. The press reported this statement made by Harrison, the bath's superintendent, regarding African American patrons, who,

so long as they are sober and well behaved[,] are allowed to enter the baths as spectators, but are not permitted to go in the water. It is not a matter of personal feeling with us but of business necessity. It would ruin our baths here because the white people would refuse to use them ... No one could

in equity expect us to make such a sacrifice. I do not think such a case could ever be won against us. Public sentiment would be too strongly in opposition for any law to force such a commingling of the white and colored races. I do not believe the case will ever come to trial. ('Negroes Claim Civil Rights', 1897: 4)

He continued: 'It may have been intended as a test case, as no such question has ever come up here before ... Never since the baths were opened in March, 1896, has a colored person attempted to mingle with the whites in the water' ('Negroes Claim Civil Rights', 1897: 4). Despite Harrison's protestations, Harris ended up winning the lawsuit.

In the following decades, pools continued to be sites of marked racial discrimination. A disturbing social history of recreational segregation in swimming pools, amusement parks, and even beaches would continue well into the 20th century. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a large part of the white population ceased going to public pools. Residential suburbs contained private pools and clubs where racial discrimination was considered acceptable. Many city halls stopped investing in public pools as recreational infrastructure and allowed the country's public pools to progressively deteriorate (Wiltse 2014). The consequences are still visible today: white Americans are twice as likely to know how to swim as black Americans (Hackman 2015).

### A Heterotopian Condition

Atmospheres are experienced as an emotional effect. For this reason, the art of producing them ... is at all times also an exercise of power. (Bohme 2014: 46)

Sutro's interior microcosm encapsulated 19th-century racial and gender discrimination practices and the underlying positive utopianism and cultural aspirations of the times. The grand structure monumentalized the emerging values of sanitation, health, and exercise, providing a safe and respectable pastime for the working class. Its location, away from the increasingly polluted and congested city center, enabled a getaway to 'nature': ocean views from a controlled climatic environment, warm ocean water, taxidermied animals, seashells, and selected tropical plants. Sutro's scenic train ride from the city center, along the west coast, to the Sutro Baths, was the first step of a journey to reset physically and emotionally, the beginning of a literal and psychological break from the routine of work. The modern desire to escape from the city to a tamed 'natural' environment has clear parallels with the bourgeois utopia of suburbia that would be fueled by the spread of the automobile in the early decades of the 20th century. The neutralization and commodification of nature into a harmless, consumable leisure experience within a transparent envelope situates the building both within nature and apart from it. From this lens, the building can be interpreted as a heterotopia, simultaneously within the world and apart from it. If the production of an interior atmosphere results from the new semantic meaning that emerges



from the combination of heterogeneous elements, Sutro's recreational center presents more than just a novel glass structure. In Sloterdijk's terms, architectural interiors are powerful 'art forms which encase man in man' (2011: 108). From this perspective, Sutro's heroic encapsulation of the California coast generated a unique atmosphere that temporarily encased the men and women of San Francisco.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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