

AT GIRLS GARAGE IN WEST BERKELEY,
THE NEXT GENERATION OF FEMALE
MAKERS WIELDS BLOWTORCHES, CHOP
SAWS AND LASER CUTTERS

IF SHE *BUILDS IT*

BY ERIN FEHER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GIZELLE HERNANDEZ

Emily Pilloton is no stranger to schooling an unlikely student body in the art of making. The Marin native founded Project H in 2009 to bring design/build classes to one of the poorest, underserved school districts in America: Bertie County, North Carolina. But, despite her evangelical abilities, she still found herself taken aback by the responses of the female students in many of her classes. “These girls were doing awesome, and then, once the tools would come out, they would say ‘No, you do it,’ ” recalls Pilloton.

So, just as with previous challenges she had encountered, she set out to rethink the design. A girls-only class was born, and Pilloton saw its power immediately. “There is a sense of safety and a sense of permission here. Any girl can walk in and ask to learn how to weld and no one will even look at her funny,” says Pilloton.

For years, enrollment came through word of mouth and the classes took place inside REALM Charter School in Berkeley when school wasn’t in session. But, after waiting lists started reaching 100 names, Pilloton decided this all-girl curriculum was in need of a room of its own. Today, students at Girls Garage are welding, sawing and building to a personal end — they are helping to complete renovations to their brand new space, a 3,600-square-foot former bottling plant in West Berkeley, which opened September 19. The new space features a woodshop, metal shop, digital fabrication studio and classroom, and it offers classes and summer camps in everything from laser etching and carpentry to craft making and lock picking. Says Pilloton, “It’s like the Girl Scouts but way more badass.”

