

**BETSY HEAD PLAY CENTER**, including the bath house, swimming pool, diving pool, bleachers and filter house, and perimeter cast-iron fencing; Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue) between Livonia and Dumont Avenues, Brooklyn.

Swimming pool modernized and enlarged, 1934-35; bath house constructed 1937-1939, John Matthews Hatton, lead architect; Aymar Embury II, Henry Ahrens and others, consulting architects; Gilmore D. Clarke and others, landscape architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 3570, Lot 1 in part, and portions of the adjacent public way, consisting of the property bounded by a line extending northerly from the intersection of the western curblineline of Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue) and the northern curblineline of Livonia Avenue to the southern curblineline of Dumont Avenue, westerly approximately 285 feet along the southern curblineline of Dumont Avenue to a point along the southern curblineline of Dumont Avenue which intersects with a line extending northerly from the chain link fence which runs along the western side of the Betsy Head swimming pool complex, continuing southerly along that line and along the chain link fence which runs along the western side of the Betsy Head swimming pool complex to the northern curblineline of Livonia Avenue, and easterly along the northern curblineline of Livonia Avenue to the point of beginning.

On January 30, 2007, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Betsy Head Play Center (LP-2240) including the bath house, swimming pool, diving pool, bleachers and filter house, and perimeter cast-iron fencing, Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue) between Livonia and Dumont Avenues and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 25). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Nine witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe and representatives of the Municipal Art Society of New York, the Historic Districts Council, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, and the Society for the Architecture of the City. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has also received letters from the Fine Arts Federation of New York and the Modern Architecture Working Group in support of designation. Several of the speakers and letters also expressed support for the larger designation effort of all the WPA-era pools.<sup>1</sup>

#### Summary

The Betsy Head Play Center is one of a group of eleven immense outdoor swimming pools opened in the summer of 1936 in a series of grand ceremonies presided over by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Park Commissioner Robert Moses. All of the pools were constructed largely with funding provided by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of many New Deal agencies created in the 1930s to address the Great Depression. Designed to accommodate a total of 49,000 users simultaneously at locations scattered throughout New York City's five boroughs, the new pool complexes quickly gained recognition as being among the most remarkable public facilities



constructed in the country. The pools were completed just two and a half years after the LaGuardia administration took office, and all but one survives relatively intact today.

While each of the 1936 swimming pool complexes is especially notable for its distinctive and unique design, the eleven facilities shared many of the same basic components. The complexes generally employed low-cost building materials, principally brick and cast concrete, and often utilized the streamlined and curvilinear forms of the popular 1930s Art Moderne style. Each had separate swimming, diving and wading pools, and a large bath house with locker room sections which doubled as gymnasiums in non-swimming months. Concrete bleachers at the perimeter of each pool complex and rooftop promenades and galleries furnished ample spectator viewing areas. The complexes were also distinguished by innovative mechanical systems required for heating, filtration and water circulation. Sited in existing older parks or built on other city-owned land, the grounds surrounding the pool complexes were executed on a similarly grand scale, and included additional recreation areas, connecting pathway systems, and comfort stations. The team of designers, landscape architects and engineers assembled to execute the new pool complexes, in addition to hundreds of other construction and rehabilitation projects undertaken between 1934 and 1936 by New York's newly consolidated Parks Department, was comprised largely of staff members and consultants who had earlier worked for Moses at other governmental agencies, including architect Aymar Embury II, landscape architects Gilmore D. Clarke and Allyn R. Jennings, and civil engineers W. Earle Andrews and William H. Latham. Surviving documents also indicate that Moses, himself a long-time swimming enthusiast, gave detailed attention to the designs for the new pool complexes.

Established in 1914, Betsy Head Park in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn was the city's first recreation facility designed to include a public outdoor swimming pool and bath house. The pool, later described by Moses as "an antiquated tank with no provision for cleaning or sterilizing the water," was replaced in 1936 by the much larger existing swimming and diving pools. The 1914 bath house, a substantial twin-gabled building, was originally retained, but, following a fire in 1937, was replaced by the present bath house exceptionally designed by John Matthews Hatton and completed in 1939. More so than the other WPA pools, which were constructed at earlier dates, the Betsy Head bath house's sleek geometric forms stripped of most ornament has been recognized as "perhaps the most inventive and most overtly Modernist structure of this type."<sup>2</sup> Moses himself considered this pool structure to be one of the most successful in terms of design, plan, and use of materials.

Like Hatton's earlier design for the Astoria Play Center, the bath house is distinguished by the extensive use of recessed glass-block walls for the locker room portions of the bath house, making the structure translucent in these sections to a surprising degree. Equally striking is the rooftop observation gallery with its parabolic arches which support a broad, flat roof. Noted architect Ely Jacques Kahn, writing in *Architectural Record*, praised the rooftop structure and its underlying stepped stadium for "[recapturing] most of the park area occupied by the building," and the bath house's "multiplicity of uses" designed for "enjoyable use" year round.<sup>3</sup> The main entrance is distinguished by its relatively lavish materials – polished black marble wall facings, curved corner sections of glass block, and slate paving. Cleverly designed and engineered, the brick pier in the lobby extends through the ceiling to the roof where it is clad in glass block and once functioned as a light source for evening activities; vents also serving as light shafts at roof level were once located above the men's and women's shower rooms.

## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### History of the Betsy Head Play Center Site<sup>4</sup>

Located in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, the Betsy Head Play Center is set within the 10.555 acres of Betsy Head Park, which is bounded by Dumont Avenue to the north, Livonia Avenue to the south, Strauss Street to the west and Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue) to the east.<sup>5</sup> The play center is located in the eastern section of the park along Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue).

The neighborhood of Brownsville, which at one time was a farming village, is named for Charles S. Brown who purchased land in the area beginning in 1865. New York City real-estate developer Aaron Kaplan's decision to build tenements there in 1887, as well as the construction of the Fulton Street elevated railway in 1889 and the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903, resulted in the transformation of Brownsville from a rural German area to an urban community of mostly Eastern European Jews employed in the garment and building trades. Having left their tenement apartments in the Lower East Side in Manhattan and Williamsburg in Brooklyn, these Jews sought to recreate in Brownsville the *shtetls*, or small villages, of their European homelands. In 1925, the Jewish population in Brownsville and neighboring East New York amounted to the largest concentration of that ethnic group in New York City. Russian, Polish and Italian immigrants also settled in Brownsville at the turn of the century. Beginning in the 1920s, affordable housing attracted a small number of African Americans, and their presence in the neighborhood increased in the following decades, particularly after the Second World War.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, Brownsville had become a densely-populated neighborhood. The Hebrew Educational Society (HES), founded in 1899 by established Jews to help assimilate Jewish immigrants, was one of the leading advocates for the creation of public parkland for the neighborhood. Brownsville property owners were eventually responsible for the \$250,000 purchase of the land that would become Betsy Head Park, a recreational space set on two lots diagonally across from each other.<sup>6</sup> Opened in 1914, the land was then transferred from the Public Recreation Commission to the Department of Parks. The playground there was planned as the "most elaborate in [the] city," and the cost of construction for the buildings and equipment was covered entirely with money left by the late Betsy Head of Long Island, a widow who donated half of her estate to the City of New York "[to] be used to purchase and improve playgrounds for children, such as recreation places, public baths, &c."<sup>7</sup>

Designed by Henry B. Herts,<sup>8</sup> the larger lot (the site of the future Betsy Head Play Center) was the city's first recreation facility planned to include a public outdoor swimming pool (150 by 50 feet) and a substantial twin-gabled bath house; a field house, gymnasium and a baseball field were also located here. (Until the WPA pools of the 1930s were built, the Parks Department only had two pools in operation in the city: the Brownsville pool and one in Faber Park on Staten Island.) The smaller lot, intended for young children, offered a wading pool, play fields, and a farm school with 500 plots to grow crops. A model of the playground was featured at the Panama-Pacific Fair of 1915 in San Francisco, and it won first prize at the New York City Parks exhibit of that same year.

Under the auspices of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Park Commissioner Robert Moses, major improvements to Betsy Head Park were made in the 1930s. Though the Brownsville park, unlike the other WPA pool sites, already had a bath house and swimming pool in place, Moses was never satisfied with the complex, and a modernized Olympic-size swimming pool was constructed from 1934 to 1935. A 1937 fire that damaged the interior of the older bath house led the Parks Department to erect a temporary building for the 1938 swimming season while the current facility, opened in 1939, was under construction. Other additions planned for the pool complex were a diving pool (which opened after the new pool), bleachers and a filter house. Funding for the various improvements was largely made possible by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of the many public works programs created by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the United States Congress during the Great Depression.

### Fiorello LaGuardia, Robert Moses and the New Deal<sup>9</sup>

Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President of the United States in 1932 in the middle of the Great Depression that followed the stock market crash of 1929. Roosevelt promised to rebuild confidence in American capitalism and to improve the nation's standard of living by creating the New Deal economic program of unprecedented public spending on social programs and construction projects.

New York City had been especially hard hit by the economic downturn,<sup>10</sup> and its citizens, hoping for change, elected Fiorello H. LaGuardia to the mayoralty of New York City in 1933 as an anti-Tammany Hall reform candidate. A maverick Republican and a five-term congressman from East Harlem, LaGuardia won the mayoral election on the “Fusion” ticket after losing the 1929 mayoral race on the Republican line. The Fusion Conference Committee at first considered running Robert Moses, another Republican, who was appointed Chairman of the New York State Council of Parks in 1924 by his political mentor, Governor Alfred E. Smith, a Tammany Hall Democrat from New York City. However, the committee decided against Moses because of his association with Smith, and chose LaGuardia instead. At the time, Moses was a popular public figure with a reputation as a progressive and as the builder of great parks and parkways like Jones Beach and the Northern State Parkway on Long Island. His endorsement of LaGuardia during the campaign was considered instrumental in securing a victory for LaGuardia. Within a week of the election, LaGuardia chose Moses, a champion of reform politics, as New York City’s new Park Commissioner.

Moses accepted the position of Commissioner of Parks in the LaGuardia administration on the condition that the five existing independent Parks Departments (one for each borough) would be consolidated into a single department with himself as the sole Commissioner, with authority extending also over the City’s parkways. Moses also demanded to be appointed the Chief Executive Officer of the Triborough Bridge Authority, which was then building the bridge of that name, and that a new agency, the Marine Parkway Authority, which would build a bridge to the Rockaways, be created with himself at the helm. Already in charge of the Long Island State Park Commission, the New York City Council of Parks, the Jones Beach State Park Authority, and the Bethpage State Park Authority, Moses would then be in control of all existing and proposed parks and parkways in the New York metropolitan region, with the exception of areas outside of New York State.

In the 1920s, Moses was at the forefront of the national recreation movement that began in the first decade of the twentieth century, led by such men as President Theodore Roosevelt and the lesser-known George D. Butler of the National Recreation Association. The movement gained momentum under the administration of President Calvin Coolidge with the organization of the National Conference on Outdoor Recreation (NCOR) in 1924.<sup>11</sup> The Depression of the 1930s further amplified the need to provide more, or improve existing, outdoor recreational opportunities, especially in urban areas. Fortunately, such goals fit nicely into FDR’s New Deal economic programs. Mayor LaGuardia’s success in securing a lion’s share of monies made available by the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), and Moses’ management skills and his ability to attract talented designers and engineers to his staff, resulted in profound physical changes to the environment of New York City. The construction and renovation of neighborhood recreation areas, such as pools and play grounds, were some of the most ambitious and successful programs undertaken by Moses with funds largely provided by the WPA.

Moses began to assess the state of the City’s parks and to plan for their future as soon as LaGuardia announced his intention to appoint Moses as Park Commissioner. According to one source: “Immediately after the election he wrote out, on a single piece of paper, a plan for putting 80,000 men to work on 1,700 relief projects.”<sup>12</sup> Moses hired a consulting engineer and three assistant engineers to survey every park and parkway in the City. The survey was completed by the time he took office in mid-January 1934.

When Moses took over the Parks Department, it was already employing 69,000 relief workers funded mainly by the federal Civil Works Administration (CWA) and the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA). However, Moses found the men to be ill-equipped and inadequately supervised, and considered many of the construction projects to have been poorly designed. He immediately began to revamp the entire operation of the Parks Department and established a Division of Design, located at the Arsenal in Central Park. The staff was to be headed up by experienced professionals drawn mainly from his State agencies. Some of his talented staff of young architects, landscape architects and engineers had worked on the designs for Long Island’s highly acclaimed parks, including Jones Beach, which is considered one of Moses’ greatest accomplishments. His staff also included a number of well-known and accomplished designers, among them architects Aymar Embury II and John M. Hatton, and the landscape architect and civil engineer Gilmore D. Clarke. Other top members of Moses’ staff were the landscape architect Allyn R. Jennings, and civil engineers W. Earle Andrews and William H. Latham.

The Parks Department’s Division of Design was organized in the following manner: a topographical unit of about 400 surveyors and draftsmen, a landscape architecture unit of about sixty people, an architecture unit

made up of sixty architects and draftsmen, and an engineering unit of about fifty. Smaller units included an Arboricultural Department and an Inspection Department. All the work in the Division of Design was under the direct supervision of the Park Engineer, who was aided and advised by a Consulting Architect, a Consulting Landscape Architect, and a Consulting Engineer.<sup>13</sup> All new projects began in the topographical unit, where a complete survey of the land was prepared. It then moved on to the landscaping unit, where the basic concept for the design was developed. Next, the three units, landscape, architecture, and engineering, collaborated to produce the final design and all the necessary construction documents. The Park Engineer and his aides had to approve all of the plans. Moses himself sometimes stepped in to revise or overrule a design, especially on the larger, more visible projects.

Moses' superior management ability and political savvy allowed him to move projects along very quickly and to produce concrete results, gaining for him much public admiration. However, Moses' personal demeanor was notoriously stubborn and arrogant, and he was known, at times, to disregard the legitimate authority of other governmental agencies. Once, when the Department of Plant and Structures refused to suspend a ferry service that used a terminal in the path of construction of the Triborough Bridge approach road, Moses had his men demolish the terminal while the boat was on the other side of the river. He feuded with President Franklin D. Roosevelt for years, even while Washington was pouring millions of dollars into Moses' own Parks Department. His later battles with and subsequent triumphs over community groups opposed to the routing of the Gowanus and the Cross-Bronx Expressways through their neighborhoods are now legendary. Moses was also known to have been insensitive to people of color, and reputedly tried to restrict access to many of his recreational facilities, including the WPA-era pools.<sup>14</sup>

To many, Robert Moses was a master builder who helped modernize New York City's infrastructure; to others, his policies led to the destruction of many distinctive neighborhoods. In the summer of 1934, however, Moses was a hero. Hundreds of projects, covering virtually every neighborhood in the city, had been completed. Structures were repainted, tennis courts resurfaced, and lawns reseeded. Hundreds of new construction projects were either already underway or in the process of being designed.<sup>15</sup> Among them was the Betsy Head Play Center in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

#### History of Swimming in New York City<sup>16</sup>

The Hudson and East Rivers lining the shores of Manhattan both served as popular bathing spots dating to the Colonial era. Despite extensive contamination resulting from decades of unchecked pollution, the long tradition of swimming in New York City's rivers was still strong at the middle of the nineteenth century. Out of concern for the health and welfare of the people of the city, and particularly of immigrant populations who took the most advantage of the rivers, the city opened its first free floating pools in 1870. The floating pools, however, were essentially wood-framed structures suspended on pontoons, filled with the same unfiltered river water. By the turn of the century, there were about two dozen of these floating pools moored at various places along the waterfront, competing directly with industry for the space. Some improvements were eventually made to the floating pool concept, e.g. by 1914 the pools were required to be watertight and filled with purified water. Nonetheless, as river quality continued to erode, and access to nearby beaches improved, the floating pools gradually disappeared.

In 1891, New York City's first public bath was opened on the Lower East Side of Manhattan by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, one of several charitable organizations operating bath houses for a small fee. Following an 1895 state law requiring cities with populations of 50,000 or more to construct free public baths, the City of New York opened the Rivington Street Bath in 1901. By 1914, thirteen City-operated bath houses had been constructed in Manhattan, mostly sited within immigrant neighborhoods where overcrowded tenements lacked indoor plumbing. These shower and bathtub facilities, however, were never very popular with the working class, and swimming pools and gymnasias eventually were added to some public baths in hopes of attracting more patrons (most bath houses erected after 1905 included these features in their original designs). The indoor pools at the bath houses never quite replaced the need or demand for outdoor swimming facilities in the city, and by the 1930s, it was clear that they had not aged well.

When Robert Moses became Parks Commissioner in 1934, only two outdoor pools remained, one at Betsy Head in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and the other at Faber Park on Staten Island. Moses, however, considered the Betsy Head pool "unsanitary" and often lamented its "unattractive, inadequate, and impractical bath houses."<sup>17</sup> Moses, a strong believer in the need for safe bathing in the city, consulted with the heads of the

New York City Health and Sanitation Department in July 1934. Finding that only an increase in the number of swimming pools could ease the existing burden, Moses wrote the following in a press release picked up by the *New York Times*:

It is no exaggeration to say that the health, happiness, efficiency and orderliness of a large number of the city's residents, especially in the summer months, are tremendously affected by the presence or absence of adequate swimming and bathing facilities. We are providing additional wading pools for children as fast as we can...This, however, does not meet the problem of any but small children...It is one of the tragedies of New York life, and a monument to past indifference, waste, selfishness and stupid planning, that the magnificent natural boundary waters of the city have been in large measure destroyed for recreational purposes by haphazard industrial and commercial developments, and by pollution through sewage, trade and other waste...We must frankly recognize the conditions as they are and make our plans accordingly...<sup>18</sup>

To Moses, a forerunner in the national recreation movement and an avid swimmer since his university days, a change was desperately needed, and by October 1934, excavations had already begun for the first of eleven state-of-the-art swimming pools. The pools were to be sited near inner-city neighborhoods in order to provide swimming for those who could not easily reach places like Orchard Beach or the beaches of Long Island. In addition to swimming pools, the new centers would incorporate elaborate bath houses, and also provide active adult sport areas, children's playgrounds, and other amenities. The eleven pools opened in the summer of 1936 and quickly gained recognition as being among the most exceptional public facilities constructed in the country.<sup>19</sup> All of the pools featured new bath houses, with the exception of Hamilton Fish and Betsy Head.<sup>20</sup> After the completion of the WPA-era pool complexes, no new public swimming pools were constructed in New York City until the 1970s. Over 1.65 million bathers are thought to have used the new swimming pools in their first summer of use.

### The Swimming Pools, Moses, and Segregation in New York City<sup>21</sup>

Institutionalized racism was still an established way of life in the United States during the inter-war years, even on the federally sanctioned level. For example, as a result of federal guidelines articulated in the 1935 Federal Housing Administration Underwriting Manual, it was impossible for non-segregated developments to attain mortgage insurance, meaning ethnic and even religious minorities could only secure mortgages in certain areas. The result was a substantial increase in both racial segregation and urban disinvestment in cities across the country, New York included. At its peak, estimates of segregation in public housing nation-wide ran as high as 90 percent due in large part to both federal and local government policies.<sup>22</sup> Even as late as 1943, the City of New York gave its approval for Metropolitan Life's all-white, middle income project – Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village.

Similar to many people of his era, Robert Moses was also known to have been insensitive to people of color, an attitude which may have impacted both the siting and administration of the WPA-era pools. LaGuardia and Moses often went to great lengths to show the media that they did care about minorities, holding, for example, a celebration for 25,000 people upon the opening of the Colonial Park pool, at which the mayor offered the facility as proof that his administration was in fact "building and doing things for Harlem."<sup>23</sup> Although LaGuardia and Moses claimed they were siting pools in the most congested areas of the city, Colonial Park in Harlem remained the only one sited in a predominantly "non-white" neighborhood. Moreover, the Thomas Jefferson Park pool, located in East Harlem (LaGuardia's old congressional district) was close to Spanish Harlem where the city's growing Puerto Rican population was settling. To discourage minority use at this facility, Moses reputedly kept the water heating system turned off, believing that the cold water would not bother Caucasian swimmers, but would somehow deter non-whites.<sup>24</sup>

It has been alleged that the Parks Department at the time had an active policy of hiring only white lifeguards and attendants in hopes of deterring minority patrons. Whether or not such directives came from Moses himself, the fact remains that the pools were largely segregated at the time of their opening. In the Pulitzer Prize winning biography, *The Power Broker*, Robert Caro writes that "one could go to the [Thomas Jefferson] pool on the hottest summer days, when the slums of Negro and Spanish Harlem a few blocks away sweltered in the heat, and not see a single non-Caucasian face."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, oral histories relating to Betsy Head pool tell of an unwritten rule that "African-Americans could swim in the Brooklyn pool only in the late afternoon, after white residents had

vacated the premises.”<sup>26</sup> Such claims are supported by photographs and video footage from the era, showing that largely, white and black New Yorkers swam in different pools.<sup>27</sup> For a handful of sites, however, including the Highbridge and Colonial Park Play Centers in Manhattan, as well as McCarren Play Center in Brooklyn, photographs and video footage seem to indicate that, on occasion, the populations did mix.<sup>28</sup>

Brownsville itself was known to be a fairly integrated community, and certainly more so than other neighborhoods throughout New York City. One local recreational organization, the Brownsville Boys Club (BBC), encouraged a “better understanding [between white and black youths] through working and playing together.”<sup>29</sup> Their mission was rare, however, and their sports teams were segregated except when they competed in citywide tournaments. While children often played together in the streets, integration between adults was not as prevalent. African-American resident Harold Burton noted that, “You weren’t really welcome in Betsy Head Park or the Ambassador Theatre on Hopkinson Avenue.”<sup>30</sup>

### The Design and Construction of the Betsy Head Pool<sup>31</sup>

The Betsy Head Play Center is one of a group of eleven immense outdoor swimming pools opened in the summer of 1936 in a series of grand ceremonies presided over by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Park Commissioner Robert Moses. All of the pools were constructed largely with funding provided by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of many New Deal agencies created in the 1930s to address the Great Depression. Designed to accommodate a total of 49,000 users simultaneously at locations scattered throughout New York City’s five boroughs, the new pool complexes quickly gained recognition as being among the most remarkable public facilities ever constructed in the country. The city’s pool construction program was reported to have been the most expensive in terms of total cost. Robert Moses, an avid swimmer who had a home near the ocean in Babylon, Long Island, was known to have taken a special interest in the design and construction of bathing and swimming facilities, such as Jones Beach, Orchard Beach and Riis Park, as well as the neighborhood swimming pools.<sup>32</sup> As a result of his special attention, along with that of Aymar Embury II and Gilmore D. Clarke, the design and execution of New York City’s aquatic facilities in the 1930s were a cut above most other park projects at the time.

At the start, the Parks Department adopted a list of shared guidelines for the entire pool project in order to enhance the efficiency of the design effort, to unify the operations of each complex, and to meet the various local and federal requirements of the relief programs. For example, each pool complex was to have separate swimming, diving and wading pools, and a large bath house, the locker room sections of which doubled as gymnasiums during non-swimming months. The bath houses, which would serve as the centerpieces of each complex, would be distinctive pavilions that would establish the design motif of each facility. Concrete bleachers at the perimeter of the pools would furnish spectator viewing areas to be augmented at some sites with rooftop promenades and galleries. There would be a minimum width for the decks to provide enough room for sunbathing and circulation, and at least one dimension of each swimming pool would have to be a multiple of fifty-five yards to allow swimming competitions to be held at standard distances in either English or metric systems. There had to be underwater lighting for night swimming, and heating for the pools. Plus, the complexes had to share low-cost building materials, principally brick and cast concrete, as required by the federal government as per the terms of the WPA funding.

To satisfy federal stipulation on low-cost materials, it appears that the design team for the pools determined that the streamlined and curvilinear forms of the Art Moderne and Modern Classical styles would best meet the low-cost needs and still permit pleasing aesthetics. As a group, the pools were also distinguished by the innovative mechanical systems required to heat, filter, and circulate the vast amounts of water they used. Many of these innovations set new standards for swimming pool construction, such as scum gutters that allowed in enough sunlight to naturally kill off bacteria and a series of footbaths filled with foot cleaning solution through which bathers were forced to pass upon entering the pool areas from the locker rooms.

Sited in existing older parks or built on other city-owned land subsequently developed as parks and playgrounds, the huge pool complexes were provided with landscape settings that included additional recreational areas, connecting pathway systems, and comfort stations. Despite the fact that the basic components were essentially the same and that the WPA required that only the cheapest materials be used, each of these swimming pool complexes is especially notable for its distinctive and unique setting, appearance, and character.

In October 1934, the Parks Department announced the start of excavations and site work for several of the new pools. Though the Brownsville site already had a swimming pool and bath house, Robert Moses was

never satisfied with the complex, which he called “inadequate and unsanitary,” and the pool was modernized and enlarged to 330 feet by 165 feet. Moses believed the 1914 bath house was “unsatisfactory,” but the building remained with only minor alterations in order to accommodate the larger pool; baskets replaced lockers in the changing rooms and the interior was altered to provide space for 4,660 bathers. The year 1936 was known as “the swimming pool year,” since ten of the eleven pools were opened that summer, one per week for ten weeks.<sup>33</sup> Each opening day was a memorable event for its neighborhood; with the exception of the Betsy Head Play Center, the day-long events featured parades, blessings of the waters, swimming races, diving competitions, appearances by Olympic stars, and performances by swimming clowns. Mayor LaGuardia attended every opening to perform the ribbon cutting. Festivities continued well after dusk with LaGuardia pulling the switch to turn on each pool’s spectacular underwater lighting to the “oooohs” of the crowds.

In stark contrast to these events, the opening of the Betsy Head Play Center on August 7, 1936 occurred without the presence of the mayor or Department of Parks officials. That day, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported:

With shouts of glee some 450 youngsters today dedicated the new 1,400,000 gallon swimming pool at Betsy Head Park, Hopkinson and Dumont Aves., in their own fashion. There were no formal opening ceremonies, since the diving pool and a wading pool will not be completed until next year. The Park Department decided, however, not to deprive children the use of the completed larger pool any longer. Although there was no advance notice of the opening, word spread like wildfire along the younger set grapevine and in less than half an hour children were pouring into the park.<sup>34</sup>

The decision to not have a formal pool opening appears to be a last-minute one. According to a Department of Parks press release dated August 5<sup>th</sup>, Moses and Philip Klowensky, President of the Pitkin Avenue Merchants’ Association, were to speak at a formal ceremony on August 6<sup>th</sup> that was to include a flag-raising event and an aquatic exhibition. (Architectural Historian Marta Gutman suggests another reason as to why officials were absent that day: they might have been cautious of visiting Brownsville, a neighborhood at the time known for its radical politics where a public official at a rally the summer before was heckled and a fight broke out.<sup>35</sup>) In response to the lack of ceremony, Captain Bernard Rorke of the local police precinct, at the pool on August 7<sup>th</sup>, commented that, “Commissioners, Aldermen and such folk aren’t expected to use the pool, and they’ll not be missed this morning. It’s wonderful to have an opening be just that and nothing more.”<sup>36</sup> Eager children of Brownsville, East New York and other surrounding neighborhoods raced out of the locker rooms and into the new pool, “sampling [it] to their heart’s content.”<sup>37</sup> At the time of the opening, a diving pool measuring 100 by 50 feet, a new playground, a track, and soccer field were still under construction. Intended to be used throughout the year, plans to convert the main pool for winter use were also made in September 1936: the pool was drained, temporary stairs were installed, benches were placed along the inside perimeter, and handball, paddle tennis, basketball, volleyball and shuffle board courts were added.

On August 17, 1937, a fire destroyed the interior of the bath house and shortened the swimming season at Betsy Head that summer. In a letter written to Mayor LaGuardia three days later, Robert Moses stated that the building should be replaced with a “modern play center” rather than be repaired.<sup>38</sup> Though he strongly urged that the new bath house be completed for the 1938 season, a temporary one-story shower building was erected and used instead. Finally, on May 27, 1939, the one-story bath house that now occupies the site was completed, fulfilling Moses’ vision for the Brownsville pool complex. Together with the remaining WPA-era pools, the Betsy Head Play Center is one of the major achievements of the New Deal in New York City.

### The Designers Behind the Planning of Betsy Head Pool<sup>39</sup>

The eleven WPA-era pool facilities shared many common features and specifications that could be repeated at each site, and contained other elements that were similar from complex to complex. As a result, junior designers, having different areas of expertise, appear to have moved quickly among the various pool projects. The department produced designs and construction documents simultaneously with great speed so that eleven pools and hundreds of other park projects, including some massive undertakings like Orchard Beach, were completed within

a few years. Aymar Embury II and Gilmore D. Clarke, respectively the Parks Department's Consulting Architect and Consulting Landscape Architect, were employed by the City on a part-time basis to oversee designs for park projects under Robert Moses. William H. Latham, the head of the Division of Design at the time, was the Park Engineer, responsible for the preparation of all plans and specifications within the department. Major design problems were discussed by Embury and Clarke before the preliminary sketches were made under Latham's direction. Completed sketches were subject to approval by the Park Engineer, the General Superintendent, and Commissioner Moses. The consultants would give regular criticism during the preparations of the plans.

Aymar Embury II (1880-1966) was born in New York City and studied engineering at Princeton University, where he received a Master of Science degree in 1901. He acquired his architectural training through apprenticeships with three New York firms: George B. Post, Howells and Stokes, and Palmer and Hornbostel. He also worked for Cass Gilbert. In 1905, Embury won both first and second prize in a contest held by the Garden City Company for a modest country house to be built in Garden City, Long Island. This gained for him a reputation as a talented designer, and led to many commissions for country houses in the New York metropolitan area. He subsequently published seven books and several pamphlets, mainly on early American architecture, establishing him as an authority on that subject. By the start of the Great Depression, he was well-known and had received a wide range of commissions all over the east coast of the United States, including college buildings and social clubs, in addition to residences. He designed the Players and Nassau Clubs in Princeton, New Jersey, the Princeton Club in New York City, and the University Club in Washington, D.C. Embury was said to have supervised the design of over six hundred public projects, including Orchard Beach, Bryant Park, the New York City Building at the 1939 World's Fair, the Donnell Branch of the New York Public Library, the Hofstra University Campus, the Central Park and Prospect Park Zoos, Jacob Riis Park, five of the eleven neighborhood pool and play centers,<sup>40</sup> the Lincoln Tunnel, the Triborough Bridge, and many more.

The lead architect for each pool project generally designed the bath house, which was unique to each site, establishing the motif that guided the design and detailing of the rest of the complex. Although each pool complex has been credited to a particular architect, the designs appear to actually have been collaborative efforts among the army of architects, draftsmen, engineers, and landscape architects employed by the Parks Department in the 1930s.

The Betsy Head Play Center bath house was designed by architect John Matthews Hatton who was born c. 1886 in Iowa, and first appears in New York City directories in 1915. His professional training remains undetermined, but he practiced architecture in New York City into the late 1940s. In the early 1920s, he formed a partnership with architect Diego DeSuarez (DeSuarez & Hatton), which lasted only a few years. In addition to the Betsy Head bath house, his other works for the Department of Parks in the 1930s include the Astoria Play Center in Queens and Pelham Bay Park golf clubhouse. In the 1940s, he was considered an expert in store modernization (lighting, space layout, customer comfort, display, fixture, and storefronts) and his designs for commercial spaces and storefronts were published in several architectural periodicals. Among his clients was the Stetson Hat Company. He also did work for the New York City Housing Authority in the 1940s.

Gilmore D. Clarke appears to have been directly involved with the landscaping of the pool complex, signing approval on several of the plans for the park. Clarke (1892-1982) was born in New York City and studied landscape architecture and civil engineering at Cornell University, from which he received a Bachelor of Science degree in 1913. He served as an engineer in the army during the First World War, receiving many citations and decorations, and remained in the Army Reserve Corps until 1939. During the 1920s, he served on several local, state and federal commissions as landscape architect, including the Architectural Advisory Board for the United States Capital, the New York State Council of Parks (which was headed by Robert Moses), and the Westchester County Park Commission, among many others. For his work in Westchester County, which included the Rye Beach Playland, the Saw Mill River Parkway, and the Bronx River Parkway, Clarke was awarded the Gold Medal of Honor in Landscape Architecture from the Architectural League of New York in 1931. By the time of the Great Depression, Clarke was already established as the most popular landscape architect in public works in America.

His career advanced during the 1930s. Besides being hired by Robert Moses as the Consulting Landscape Architect to the New York City Parks Department, he also became a member of the National Commission on Fine Arts, the New York State Planning Council, and the Board of Design for the 1939 New York World's Fair. In addition to the Betsy Head Play Center, his work for the Parks Department included Bryant Park, Central Park Zoo, City Hall Park, Orchard Beach, and the Henry Hudson Parkway. He taught landscape architecture at Cornell University from 1935 to 1950, serving as dean from 1939 until his retirement in 1950 and wrote several articles for trade periodicals. In 1935, Clarke joined Michael Rapuano, an engineer and landscape architect, establishing the

New York civil engineering and landscape architectural firm Clarke & Rapuano, Inc. Clarke was president of the firm from 1962 until his retirement in 1972. Later in his career, Clarke worked as a consultant on the construction of the United Nations Headquarters in New York and became a Trustee for the American Museum of Natural History.

### Subsequent History<sup>41</sup>

Brownsville in the decades after the pool opened gradually shifted from a predominantly Jewish neighborhood to an African-American one. Between 1925 and 1940, as the overall population of Brooklyn increased, Brownsville experienced a rapid decline. After the Second World War, Robert Moses proposed the construction of public housing for the area to counter its aging building stock. The African-American population in Brownsville totaled 14,209 and would continue to grow, despite the fact Jewish residents continued to dominate the district in the years just after the war. Since that time, Brownsville and East New York have become African-American neighborhoods, and it is this group that benefits from the Betsy Head Play Center today. Notable boxing figures, Riddick Bowe and Mike Tyson—who, in the 1990s, became heavyweight champions of the world—lived in Brownsville; Bowe was known to have jogged around the Betsy Head pool in his youth.<sup>42</sup>

As for the subsequent history of the Betsy Head Play Center itself, by the late 1970s it and many other WPA pools had become badly run down, partially the result of the fiscal crisis of the 1970s which hit the Parks Department particularly hard. By March 1981, the Parks Department workforce had dwindled to a record low of 2,900 employees, mostly unskilled and temporary, as compared to the 30,000 parks employees on staff during the Moses administration. The strain on Parks Department resources was evident in the deplorable conditions of many of its facilities. To address the rapid deterioration of its recreational facilities, in 1977 the Parks Department began a major capital construction program involving more than 500 projects, expected to total more than \$180 million, partly in Federal funds – the first such projects undertaken by the parks system since the fiscal crisis halted such work in 1975, and arguably the most ambitious program to improve the parks since the 1940s. Among the projects planned was a \$10 million plan to preserve Prospect Park, a \$1 million renovation of the Coney Island Boardwalk, and restorations of several WPA-era pools, such as Sunset Park and Jackie Robinson (Colonial Park) in Harlem.

In 1979, an estimated \$5.2 million was budgeted for the restoration of the Betsy Head Play Center. Over the next three years, the pool complex was closed to the public as the swimming and diving pools were reconstructed and the bath house received new locker room facilities that were handicap-accessible. New landscaping and the rehabilitation of the baseball fields, track and other recreational facilities within the park also occurred during this period. On June 28, 1983, a dedication ceremony was held at the Betsy Head Play Center to mark the completion of rehabilitation efforts and to re-open the pool to the public; in attendance were Mayor Edward I. Koch, Parks Commissioner Henry Stern, City Councilmembers Enoch Williams and Priscilla Wooten, Deputy Brooklyn Borough President William C. Thompson, community leaders and hundreds of neighborhood children. The Morningside Diving Association held a diving exhibition in honor of the occasion. Mayor Koch remarked, “Three or four generations of Brownsville residents and people from all over Brooklyn have mastered the arts of running, jumping and swimming at this pool and sports complex. The massive rehabilitation of this facility is part of the city’s ongoing effort to make all of our neighborhoods vital places to live.”<sup>43</sup> The Parks Department called the renovations of the WPA-era pools “an essential part of the revitalization [of] the entire public recreational infrastructure of the city,” helping transform the aging pools back into modern recreational facilities.<sup>44</sup>

The WPA-era pools faced a new set of challenges beginning in the mid-1980s, with pools like the Crotona Play Center in the Bronx becoming infamous for vandalism and walkways littered with broken glass. In 1991, Mayor David Dinkins proposed closing the pools as part of a package of budget cuts. Only a donation of \$2 million from a private donor, real estate magnate Sol Goldman, guaranteed the pools would be kept open for at least a portion of that summer; an additional \$1.8 million was still needed to cover the entire nine-week long swimming season. In the mid-1990s, a menacing ritual known as “whirlpooling” had become common throughout the pool system, a practice characterized by groups of teenage boys locking arms and shoulders, churning the water and disrupting the activities of other swimmers, particularly women who often found themselves unwillingly fondled. Several more serious complaints of sexual assault were recorded throughout the pool system in the summer of 1994. With improvements in security staffing and increased vigilance on the

part of patrons, many of the problems of the 1990s did eventually dissipate, and by 2003, the pools were once again touted as both extremely safe, and a welcome alternative on a hot summer day.

### The Architecture and Site of the Betsy Head Play Center

The New Deal construction projects within New York City, such as the Betsy Head Play Center, were a part of a national trend that included similar projects undertaken by various governmental agencies, ranging from the vast Tennessee Valley Authority to small cities and towns. Urban projects built with WPA funding often possessed similar qualities from region to region, partly because the difficult economic climate dictated the use of inexpensive building materials, but also because the programs provided employment opportunities for a generation of young architects and engineers, many of whom were committed to modernism. For example, the bath house and waterfront facilities at Aquatic Park in San Francisco are similar in plan and appearance to the public pool and beachfront projects being built at about the same time in New York City. The California facility, with its streamlined, concrete façade and steel-framed windows, bears a striking resemblance to the façade added in 1936 with WPA funds to the bath house at Jacob Riis Park in Queens. The original and creative use made of these modest materials by Moses' talented design teams and the careful siting of each project makes every one of them a distinguished, individual design, as much related to their specific environment and needs as to one another.

The implementation of a modern aesthetic in the design of the WPA pools stands as a testament to the influence of the young designers on Moses' team; Aymar Embury II, who oversaw the design of the eleven neighborhood pools, was generally a traditionalist with little patience for modernism. In a 1938 interview, Embury was quoted as having said:

If an architect has any function, it is to coordinate units so that they do a required job and at the same time create a pleasant emotion. Modernists believe that the essence of their work is to do something that has never been done before. They leave off all ornamentation because, they say, the ornaments do not aid the structure to do its job. I suppose some of these architects do not use neckties or buttons when they dress.<sup>45</sup>

More so than the other WPA pools, which were constructed at earlier dates, the Betsy Head bath house's sleek geometric forms stripped of most ornament has been recognized as "perhaps the most inventive and most overtly Modernist structure of this type."<sup>46</sup> Its cantilevered canopy on the roof is the most notable feature of the bath house; a concrete slab and eight parabolic arches all clad in metal panels once provided shade to onlookers watching pool activities such as water pageants and diving competitions below. An article written by noted architect Ely Jacques Kahn in the *Architectural Record* praised the rooftop structure and its underlying stepped stadium used as bleachers for "[recapturing] most of the park area occupied by the building."<sup>47</sup> The rooftop terrace was accessed from stairs on either side of the bath house, and admission was free. The building's "multiplicity of uses," including the roof deck as well as the wintertime conversion of the locker rooms into much-needed neighborhood recreational space, was applauded by Kahn.

Materials at the play center were also carefully considered. Like Hatton's earlier design for the Astoria Play Center bath house (1936) in Queens, the Brownsville structure makes extensive use of glass block wall construction; eight recessed glass block windows between brick piers on either side of the bath house allow ample natural light into the interior spaces, and the curved walls marking the entrances to the men's and women's locker rooms were once clad in glass block as well. Below the windows are concrete panels incised with a pattern reminiscent of ocean waves. Moses believed that the plan for the bath house was "better than that adopted in any of the existing pools and provides for a far more efficient utilization of the space available."<sup>48</sup> The curved glass walls that frame the lobby entrance invite bathers into the space, and they were once greeted by a football-shaped ticket booth that is extant, but no longer in operation. Cleverly designed and engineered, the brick pier in the lobby extends through the ceiling to the roof where it is clad in glass block and once functioned as a light source for evening activities. Vents also serving as light shafts at roof level were located above the men's and women's shower rooms, but have since been removed. Still retaining the majority of its elements, the exceptional Modern design of the Betsy Head Play Center continues to serve as a striking addition to the Brownsville neighborhood.

## Description

### *Plan and Circulation*

Betsy Head Play Center is set within the 10.55 acres of Betsy Head Park, which is bounded by Dumont Avenue to the north, Livonia Avenue to the south, Strauss Street to the west and Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue) to the east. The play center is located in the eastern section of the park along Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue). The landmark site excludes the baseball fields to the west of the pool complex. Pool visitors enter the play center through the main entrance on the east façade of the bath house facing Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue). Use of the pool complex is now free so patrons do not have to go to the ticket booth once they pass through the entryway; the ticket booth is thus purely ornamental. After entering the bath house lobby, men go to the locker rooms and showers located on the north wing of the bath house and women go to the locker rooms and showers located on the south wing. From there, they enter the pool deck from their respective doors, which are marked by curved walls that are set into the bath house structure (these historically were clad in glass blocks).

Bathers swim in the Olympic-size swimming pool, which measures 330 feet by 165 feet. Bathers may also sit on the concrete bleachers located on the southern edge of the pool complex next to the filter house. Bleachers exist on the roof of the bath house under the metal canopy, although the public no longer has access to the roof. The diving pool was filled-in with sand in 2005-2006 and now serves as a volleyball court. Wrought-iron fencing runs along the perimeter of the pool complex on the Livonia and Dumont Avenue sides. There is no wading pool located within the landmark site.

### *The Bath House*

The one-story brick and concrete bath house includes a rooftop metal canopy. The men's locker and shower rooms are located in the north wing of the bath house and the women's locker and shower rooms are located in the south wing.

**East façade (street side).** The east façade consists of a central section flanked by shower rooms. The central section is clad in English Common bond brick except at the piers, which are clad in Monk bond brick (two stretchers to one header in each row). Each pier has a cast stone base and capital. There are four window bays on either side of the main entrance that have large glass block windows divided by two mullions. Some of these glass block windows were repaired or replaced during the early 1980s rehabilitation. Below each window is a short cast concrete wall that features a subtle decorative "wave" detail at the top. Cast stone coping runs the length of the base and top of the façade, and a historic metal railing is located at the edge of the roof. The main entrance has two glass block curved walls and a historic metal gate. A portion of the stone steps leading up to the bath house was replaced by a handicapped ramp in the early 1980s. The letters "B E T S Y H E A D P L A Y C E N T E R" are carved into the stone at the top of the façade over the main entrance.

The men's and women's shower rooms mirror each other in design and are both clad in English Common bond brick. A glass block ribbon window is set into the brick and a cast stone water table runs along the base. Doors with non-historic metal roll down gates (these were historically metal and were replaced in the early 1980s) are located at the end of each shower room wall. Three stone steps lead up to the door and although it provides access to the roof deck, the public can no longer use the roof. Historic metal railings sit at the edge of the roof.

**West façade (pool side).** The west façade consists of a central section flanked by shower rooms. The central section is clad in English Common bond brick except at the piers, which are clad in Monk bond brick (two stretchers to one header in each row). Each pier has a cast stone base and capital. There are four window bays on either side of the main entrance that have large glass block windows divided by two mullions. Some of these glass block windows were repaired or replaced during the early 1980s rehabilitation. Below each window is a short cast concrete wall that features a subtle decorative "wave" detail at the top. Cast stone coping runs the length of the base and top of the façade, and a historic metal railing is located at the edge of the roof. The main entrance has two glass block curved walls. The curved wall on the northern end was altered in the early 1980s to accommodate the addition of an elevator; a vertical strip with a vent has been inserted into the glass block wall. Above the central entrance is a clock that features red metal pieces on a non-historic white circular background (historically, the clock consisted of metal hour bars and hour/minute hands set into the brick wall). Two steps run the length of the central entrance (and once ran the length of the central section of this façade until the handicapped ramps were added during the early 1980s rehabilitation).

The men's and women's shower rooms are identical in design, clad in English Common bond brick and feature recessed curved entrances that were once clad in glass block, but were later replaced with cinder blocks made to imitate the shape and pattern of glass block. The historic metal letters "M E N" and "W O M E N" are still extant above their respective shower room entrances. Non-historic metal roll-down doors have replaced the historic ones. Planters on either side of the entrances rest on stepped cast stone platforms, which were once the location of fountains (spouts still exist on the brick wall a few feet above). Footbaths once existed on the ground within the curved space, but they have since been filled in with cement to match the rest of the pool deck. A non-historic metal double door entry exists at the setback portion of each shower room. A cement ramp leads up to the double doors on the women's shower room side. The perpendicular wall between the curved wall and this setback portion has a small glass block window whereas between the setback portion and the street façade there is an unornamented English Common bond brick wall. Photographs of the bath house in 1939 reveal that the stairway on the other side of this wall was once viewable from the street and so the wall sloped to match the rise of the stairway. There were no doors blocking access to the stairs. It is unclear when the wall was filled in to its current condition, but English Common bond brick was used to match the rest of the façade. Historic metal railings sit at the edge of the roof.

**Bath house lobby.** The lobby does not have walls on the street and pool sides (only those that separate the lobby space from the locker rooms) thus allowing for natural light in the space. The floor is paved in bluestone. At the center of the lobby is a large circular brick pier (now painted red) that continues through the ceiling and to the roof where it is clad in glass block. The football-shaped ticket booth located between the central pier and the street side entrance is surrounded by metal and is therefore not visible. The condition of the ticket booth is unclear. On the street side of the lobby an historic metal fixed gate runs the length of the opening and a matching historic metal gate directly above was designed to roll up and down, although this function is presumably not used anymore. On the pool side of the lobby a non-historic chain-link fence has been mounted to an historic metal gate. The door at this gate is for staff use only. The white plaster ceiling forms a concentric square pattern that is stepped so that the innermost square is raised higher than the outermost one. The dropped ceiling at the pool side entrance is made of stone panels with metal bosses.

The men's and women's locker rooms are located on the north and south walls, respectively. They both are clad in marble panels with small bronze rosettes except at the top where plaster has been applied. An air conditioner protrudes from each wall on the street side end. Central non-historic metal double doors (historically these were wood double doors) mark the entrance to each locker room; above these doors are incised and silvered Art Deco-style letters "M E N" and "W O M E N" that are set into the marble. On the men's locker room side there is a single non-historic metal door (historically wood) with incised and silvered Art Deco-style letters "O F F I C E" to the left of the double doors. A marble inset to the right of the double doors has various Betsy Head dedication dates incised and silvered in the Art Deco style; the inset is the size of the other single door openings in the lobby. On the women's locker room side to the left of the double doors is a recess once used for telephones (incised and silvered Art Deco-style letters above read "T E L E P H O N E"), but is now occupied by a vending machine. To the right of the double doors is a single non-historic metal door (historically wood) with incised and silvered Art Deco-style letters "F I R S T A I D" above. Although the 1939 drawings for the new bath house indicate that the original intention was to have the letters "L I F E G U A R D S" above this door, it is unclear if this was later altered or never realized.

**Roof and Canopy.** The main feature of the roof is the historic metal canopy and its eight parabolic arches clad in metal panels. The canopy is largely unaltered although the original drawings and 1939 photographs reveal that smooth cement stucco was applied to the metal lath of the canopy and parabolic arches. The canopy roof appears to have been white while the arches were black. The stucco has since been removed, leaving beams, rivets and other structural elements exposed. The roof canopy and arches sit atop what were once concrete bleachers and are now covered in tar.

#### *The Pool and Deck Area*

Located to the west of the bath house, the Olympic-sized swimming pool forms a rectangle with its long axis running from north to south. To the south of the pool is the rectangular diving pool with its long axis running from west to east. In the swimming pool there are two islands with triangular caps that house the filtration systems (these were historically fountains that were covered in metal to prevent children from climbing on them during the early 1980s renovation). The entire deck is paved in cement. A chain-link fence separates the pool area from the baseball fields and Dumont Avenue. Historic lampposts are located around the

pool: three (excluding one that is missing) on the east side; three (excluding one that is missing) on the south side; seven on the west side; and four on the north side.

**Diving pool.** The diving pool is now filled in and used as a volleyball court, similar to other WPA-era pools. The volleyball court is separated from the swimming pool by a large non-historic chain-link fence. To the east of the diving pool and south of the bath house there is a large open space enclosed by perimeter fence and paved in cement. In the winter the Parks Department uses this area for storage.

**Bleachers and filter house.** To the south of the volleyball court are the concrete bleachers, which have a non-historic metal railing on the east end. Although resurfaced, the bleachers date to the 1917 bath house complex, as do the adjacent Flemish bond brick filter house to the west and the Flemish bond brick wall, stone coping and wrought iron fence at the top of the bleachers. Four lampposts sit atop brick piers that are part of the Flemish bond brick wall (a description of the Livonia Street side of this brick wall can be found below). The filter house has stone coping, red-painted bricks and a non-historic metal door on the pool side. Its west façade has cement and Flemish bond brick with a door that has been filled-in with 5:1 Common bond brick. Attached to the filter house is a Flemish bond brick wall that fronts Livonia Street, in addition to a chain-link fence.

On the Livonia Street side, the Flemish bond brick wall that supports the bleachers has five bull's eye windows that are filled-in with metal. A stone water table runs the length of the wall as does stone coping. The wall also forms the backside of the filter house, which on this façade has non-historic metal double doors with a painted glass-block transom (presumably the glass block was historically left unpainted). A brick soldier course runs the length of the transom. Stone steps and stone sides lead up to the doors. A historic wrought-iron fence runs along the perimeter of the landmark site.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The site was previously heard on April 3, 1990 and September 11, 1990 (LP-1785).

<sup>2</sup> Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Ely Jacques Kahn, "City Play Center for All-Year Use," *Architectural Record*, 90 (September 1941), 84-87.

<sup>4</sup> Portions of this section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report* (LP-2196) (New York: City of New York, 2006), prepared by Donald Presa; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report* (LP-2232) (New York: City of New York, 2007), prepared by Jennifer Most. Sources for this section include "Betsy Head Playground," New York City Park Department Report (1915); "Betsy Head Will," Department of Parks Library, The Arsenal, New York City; Alter F. Landesman, *A History of New Lots* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977); Wendell E. Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002); Kenneth T. Jackson and John B. Manbeck, *The Neighborhoods of Brooklyn* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); "G.C. Taylor Stricken," *New York Times (NYT)*, July 16, 1902, 1; "Mrs. Betsy Head Dead," *NYT*, June 15, 1907, 9; "Betsy Head Cash for a Playground," *NYT*, Dec. 3, 1908, 5; "New Brownsville Playground Planned as Most Elaborate in City," *NYT*, May 17, 1914, SM8; "Analyze Effect of Playgrounds On Valuations of Near-by Realty," *NYT*, July 8, 1928, 134; Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, "City Children to Have New Play Fields," *NYT*, May 6, 1934, XX2; "Moses Sees Doom of Park Inn Dances," *NYT*, June 12, 1934; "Park Pools Turned into Skating Rinks," *NYT*, Sept. 21, 1936, 25; "Pools Now Playgrounds," *NYT*, Oct. 7, 1936, 19; "Fire in Park Building," *NYT*, Aug. 18, 1937, 11; "City Park Revenue \$753,467 This Year," *NYT*, Sept. 12, 1938, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Betsy Head Park consists of two blocks diagonally across from each other: Block 3570, Lot 1 (8.262 acres) and Block 3558, Lot 1 (2.293 acres). The play center is located on Block 3570.

<sup>6</sup> In 1912, the sections of Amboy and Herzl (formerly Ames) Streets located between Dumont and Livonia Avenues were closed in order to create Betsy Head Park. "Betsy Head Memorial Playground" file, Department of Parks Library, The Arsenal, New York City.

<sup>7</sup> "New Brownsville Playground Planned as Most Elaborate in City"; "Daughter Gets \$5 of \$365,000 Estate," *New York Times*, July 14, 1907, C8. The widow Betsy Head, an English native, had been living at the country home of George C. Taylor in Long Island as his housekeeper, and her daughter Lena was his ward. Upon learning that Lena had married Taylor's foreman, William Frederick Bodily, Betsy disowned her and left her only five dollars in her will. The remaining \$365,000 estate was bequeathed to several New York City institutions and to the City of New York, which received \$187,746.84. This sum, originally planned for a playground in Corlears Hook Park on Manhattan's Lower East Side, was used in 1914 for the creation of Betsy Head Park in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Betsy Head died in 1907 and her remains are located in a mausoleum adjacent to that of George C. Taylor in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, New York.

<sup>8</sup> Henry B. Herts was a prominent theater architect whose designs included the Shubert Theater, Booth Theater, and Longacre Theater in the Times Square area of Manhattan, all of which are designated New York City Landmarks. He also served for a time as the architect for the Playground Commission of New York City. "H. B. Herts Dead; Noted Architect," *NYT*, Mar. 28, 1933, 19.

<sup>9</sup> This section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*.

<sup>10</sup> More than 10,000 of the City's 29,000 manufacturing firms had shut down, and the unemployment rate skyrocketed to over thirty percent. An estimated 1,600,000 people in New York City were receiving public assistance. Robert Caro, *Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1974), 323.

<sup>11</sup> By the 1920s, the recreational needs of people were changing with the increase in leisure time afforded by the advent of shorter work weeks, paid vacations, and greater mobility due to inventions such as the car. The addition of active recreation to city parks was in direct keeping with popular theories on the importance of providing the public

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with outlets for active recreation over passive recreation in these changing times. The Great Depression of the 1930s further amplified such needs.

<sup>12</sup> Cleveland Rodgers, *Robert Moses: Builder for Democracy*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1952), 82.

<sup>13</sup> A staff of 1,893 architects, engineers, landscape architects, and technicians was employed at the peak of the work. See Rodgers, 84. Moses later came under fire by a number of city aldermen for hiring people for the Parks Department's technical staff who did not meet the guidelines for relief work. Moses vigorously defended this practice, calling the investigation "Tammany-controlled." *NYT*, Apr. 10, 1935, 1; Apr. 20, 1935, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Work is ongoing as to whether Robert Moses did actively discourage minorities from using Parks Department facilities such as the WPA-era swimming pools. Also see: Caro, and Hillary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds, *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> During Moses' first year as Parks Commissioner, the Department spent over \$90,000,000 (\$1.2 billion in 2005 dollars) for work relief projects, most of which was provided by the Federal government. New York City was the largest single recipient of Federal largesse during the course of the New Deal. It has been estimated that the city received one-seventh of the total national outlay. See Rodgers, 84-85.

<sup>16</sup> This section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Moses, "Parks and Recreation in New York," transcript of the proceedings of the National Recreation Association (1947), 20-21.

<sup>18</sup> See "23 Bathing Pools Planned by Moses," *NYT*, July 23, 1934, 17; Robert Moses "Press Release: Public Swimming Facilities in New York City," July 23, 1934.

<sup>19</sup> In the order of their inauguration, the eleven WPA-era pools included: Hamilton Fish Play Center (Manhattan), Thomas Jefferson Play Center (Manhattan), Astoria Play Center (Queens), Joseph Lyons (Tompkinsville) Play Center (Staten Island), Highbridge Play Center (Manhattan), Sunset Play Center (Brooklyn), Crotona Play Center (Bronx), McCarren Play Center (Brooklyn), Betsy Head Play Center (Brooklyn), Jackie Robinson (Colonial Park) Play Center (Manhattan), and Red Hook Play Center (Brooklyn).

<sup>20</sup> The Hamilton Fish Play Center bath house, designed by Carrère & Hastings in 1898, was designated a New York City Landmark in 1982. The original 1914 bath house structure at Betsy Head was destroyed by fire shortly after the 1936 opening of the pool, and was rebuilt in 1939.

<sup>21</sup> This section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*. Architectural Historian Marta Gutman has studied the issue of race at the swimming pools and believes that the issue of segregation and racial mixing was more complex than Caro states. Her work is due to come out in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. See Marta Gutman, "Race, Place, and Play: Robert Moses and the WPA Swimming Pools in New York City," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67 (December 2008): in press.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Thabit, *How East New York Became a Ghetto* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 39.

<sup>23</sup> "25,000 at Opening of Harlem Pool," *NYT*, Aug. 6, 1936, N6.

<sup>24</sup> See Caro, 514; Ballon and Jackson, 70-71.

<sup>25</sup> Caro, 514.

<sup>26</sup> Ballon and Jackson, 81.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Research currently being conducted indicates that the racial composition of pool users may have actually been more complex, and dependent on a variety of factors, including the entrance fee structure, which varied depending on the age of the swimmer as well as the time of day. Also see: Caro...*The Power Broker* and Ballon and Jackson...*Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*.

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<sup>29</sup> Pritchett, 95.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

<sup>31</sup> This section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*. Sources for this section include Betsy Head Play Center, plans and blueprints on file at the Olmsted Center, Flushing, New York; “Building Plans Filed,” *NYT*, May 25, 1938, 40; Department of Parks, press release, Aug. 5, 1936.

<sup>32</sup> Moses encourages his engineers to innovate more efficient heating and filtering plants, and underwater lighting that were revolutionary developments in pool technology. Caro, 456.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>34</sup> “Hey! Skinny, the Pool’s Open,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Aug. 7, 1936, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ballou and Jackson, 151-152.

<sup>36</sup> “City Pool is Opened without Ceremonies,” *NYT*, Aug. 8, 1936, 15.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Moses, letter to Honorable Fiorello H. LaGuardia, Aug. 20, 1937, Department of Parks Library, The Arsenal, New York City.

<sup>39</sup> This section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*.

<sup>40</sup> They are the Colonial Park Pool and Play Center in Manhattan, the Crotona Park Pool and Play Center in the Bronx, the Tompkinsville Pool and Play Center in Staten Island, and the McCarren Park Pool and Play Center and the Red Hook Pool and Play Center in Brooklyn.

<sup>41</sup> Portions of this section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*. Sources for this section include: Charles Seaton, “Renovated Pool is Open,” *Daily News*, June 29, 1983, K3.

<sup>42</sup> Dave Anderson, “A Different Brownsville Champion,” *NYT*, Nov. 15, 1992, S1.

<sup>43</sup> City of New York Office of the Mayor, press release, 28 June 1983, Department of Parks Library, The Arsenal, New York City.

<sup>44</sup> New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, 1986.

<sup>45</sup> Moses, 20-21.

<sup>46</sup> Stern, 717.

<sup>47</sup> Kahn, 84-87.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Moses, letter to New York City Board of Estimate, 28 June 1938, Department of Parks Library, The Arsenal, New York City.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, architecture, and other features of the building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Betsy Head Play Center has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Betsy Head Play Center is one of a group of eleven immense outdoor swimming pools which were opened in the summer of 1936 by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Parks Commissioner Robert Moses; that it was constructed with funding provided by the Works Progress Administration; that the play center officially opened on August 7, 1936 and became the ninth WPA pool to open throughout New York City that summer; that it was built to accommodate 5,500 swimmers; that Betsy Head Park, established in 1914, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn was the city's first recreation facility designed to include a public outdoor swimming pool and bath house, which later was replaced by the much larger swimming and diving pools; that the 1914 bath house, a substantial twin-gabled building, was originally retained, but following a fire in 1937, was replaced by the present bath house designed by John Matthews Hatton and completed in 1939; that, like Hatton's earlier design for the Astoria Play Center, the bath house is distinguished by the extensive use of recessed glass-block walls for the locker room portions of the bath house, making the structure translucent in these sections to a surprising degree; that equally striking is the rooftop observation gallery with its parabolic arches which support a broad, flat roof; that the main entrance is distinguished by its relatively lavish materials of polished black marble wall facings, curved corner sections of glass block, and slate paving; that the original and creative use made of modest materials and forms, and the careful siting of the facility, make it a distinguished, individual design; and that the complex, along with the other WPA-era pools, was a major accomplishment of engineering and architecture, and is recognized as being among the most remarkable public recreational facilities ever constructed in the United States.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Betsy Head Play Center, Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue) between Livonia and Dumont Avenues, Brooklyn, and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 3570, Lot 1, and portions of the adjacent public way, consisting of the property bounded by a line extending northerly from the intersection of the western curbline of Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue) and the northern curbline of Livonia Avenue to the southern curbline of Dumont Avenue, westerly approximately 285 feet along the southern curbline of Dumont Avenue to a point along the southern curbline of Dumont Avenue to a point along the southern curbline of Dumont Avenue which intersects with a line extending northerly from the chain link fence which runs along the western side of the Betsy Head swimming pool complex, continuing southerly along that line and along the chain link fence which runs along the western side of the Betsy Head swimming pool complex to the northern curbline of Livonia Avenue, and easterly along the northern curbline of Livonia Avenue to the point of beginning as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair

Pablo E. Vengoechea, Vice-Chair

Frederick A. Bland, Stephen F. Byrns, Diana Chapin, Joan Gerner, Roberta Brandes Gratz, Christopher Moore, Margery Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan, Roberta Washington, Commissioners



**Betsy Head Play Center**

Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue) between Livonia and Dumont Avenues, Brownsville, Brooklyn

*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**  
Main entrance, Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue)  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**  
Men's shower room and stairs to roof deck (now enclosed)  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**  
Bath house and swimming pool  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**

Lobby (view from pool side) with central brick pier; ticket booth behind

*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**

View from roof deck of filled-in diving pool (now volleyball court) and bleachers

*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**  
Parabolic arches, roof canopy and roof deck  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**  
Detail of glass block lighting feature on roof deck  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**

Portion of roof deck seating area and swimming pool

*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**

Entrances to men's and women's shower rooms, formerly clad in glass block

*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**  
Men's shower room  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**  
Women's shower room  
*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**

Detail of glass block and concrete window bay with incised wave-like design

*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



**Betsy Head Play Center**

Pool deck with chain link fence separating the play center from the rest of the park

*Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2007*



BETSY HEAD PLAY CENTER [LP-2240], including the bath house, swimming pool, diving pool, bleachers and filter house, and perimeter cast-iron fencing; Thomas Boyland Street (Hopkinson Avenue) between Livonia and Dumont Avenues. Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 3570, Lot 1 in part, and portions of the adjacent public way (see designation report for detailed boundary description).

Designated: September 16, 2008