

HIGHBRIDGE PLAY CENTER, including the bath house, wading pool, swimming and diving pool, bleachers, comfort station, filter house, perimeter walls, terracing and fencing, street level ashlar retaining walls, eastern viewing terrace which includes the designated Water Tower and its Landmark Site, Amsterdam Avenue between West 172nd Street and West 174th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Constructed 1934-36; Joseph Hautman and others, Architects; Aymar Embury II Consulting Architect; Gilmore D. Clarke and others, Landscape Architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2106, Lot 1 in part, and portions of the adjacent public way, consisting of the property bounded by a line beginning at a point on the eastern curblin of Amsterdam Avenue defined by the intersection of the eastern curblin of Amsterdam Avenue and a line extending easterly from the northern curblin of West 173rd Street, extending northerly along the eastern curblin of Amsterdam Avenue to a point defined by the intersection of the eastern curblin of Amsterdam Avenue and a line extending eastward from the southern curblin of West 174th Street, then continuing easterly along that line to the point at which it intersects the northern curblin of the path that roughly parallels the northern wall of the Highbridge Play Center, then easterly along the northern curblin of the path to the point at which the iron fence, located approximately 40 feet to the north of the northeast corner of the Highbridge Play Center, begins, continuing easterly along the fence to the point at which it turns south approximately 90 degrees, then southerly along the fence to the point at which it turns west approximately 90 degrees, westerly along the fence and the line extending from the fence westerly to its intersecting point on the southern curblin of the paved pedestrian path situated approximately 60 feet from the southern wall of the Highbridge Play Center, then westerly along the curvature of the paved pedestrian path as it extends across three intersecting pedestrian paths to its intersecting point with the eastern curblin of Amsterdam Avenue, northerly along the eastern curblin of Amsterdam Avenue to the point of beginning.

On January 30, 2007, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Highbridge Play Center (LP-2237) including the bath house, wading pool, swimming and diving pool, bleachers, comfort station, filter house, perimeter walls, terracing and fencing, street level ashlar retaining walls, eastern viewing terrace which includes the designated Water Tower and its Landmark Site, Landmark Site (Item No. 31). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Twelve witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, and representatives from the offices of Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer, the Municipal Art Society of New York, the Historic Districts Council, and the Society for the Architecture of the City, the and the New York Landmarks Conservancy. Several of the speakers also expressed support for the larger designation effort of all the WPA-era pools. The site was previously heard on April 3, 1990 and September 11, 1990 (LP-1781).

Summary

The Highbridge 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.

The Highbridge Play Center incorporates a portion of the elevated site in Highbridge Park. This area was formerly occupied by a reservoir constructed in 1870 as part of New York City's Croton water supply system. A short distance west of the bleacher section of the pool complex stands a related component, the tall ashlar water tower built in 1872. Designated a New York City Landmark in 1967, the water tower dominates both the distant and immediate landscape and, by virtue of its relationship to the play center's pools, evokes the historic configuration of the tower with the reservoir. The unique arrangement of the Highbridge pools – an exceptionally large wading pool and an adjacent single combined swimming and diving pool – may well have been determined in part by the earlier history of the site. The distant views of the Harlem River valley area from the pool complex and adjacent areas are among the most striking vistas in New York City.

The unusual prominence of the ashlar construction is a distinguishing feature of the Highbridge Play center design. It is utilized for long stretches of the retaining wall extending along Amsterdam Avenue, the tall podium which forms a monumental base for the main entryway, and for the flanking dogleg approach stairways. Perhaps inspired by the construction materials employed for the water tower, and possibly incorporating some preexisting ashlar wall construction, the double stairways provide a ceremonial pathway up to the main entrance. The curved slightly projecting portico section of the entry is distinguished by two large fluted cast-concrete piers which, together with the massive flanking brick piers, carry a tall concrete architrave. The portico is offset and framed by the cubic shapes of the entry block and courtyard rising behind it. Together with the other WPA-era park improvements, the Highbridge Play Center complex was clearly a major achievement of the New Deal in New York City.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

History of Highbridge Play Center Site¹

Highbridge Park, located at 175th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, was assembled piecemeal between 1867 and the 1960s, with the bulk being acquired through condemnation from 1895 to 1901. The cliffside area from West 181st Street to Dyckman Street was acquired in 1902, and the parcel including Fort George Hill was acquired in 1928. In 1934 the Department of Parks obtained the majestic Highbridge Tower (1872) and the site of old High Bridge Reservoir. The High Bridge, for which the park, pool, and the center are named, was built in 1848 to carry water through the Croton Aqueduct over the Harlem River. Construction began in 1837; High Bridge was part of the first reliable and uninterrupted water supply system in New York City, and one of the first aqueduct's in the United States. The innovative system ran 41 miles into New York City through an enclosed masonry structure crossing ridges, valleys, and rivers. The High Bridge soars 138 feet above the 620 foot-wide Harlem River, with a total length of 1450 feet. The bridge was designated as a New York City landmark in 1970.

Highbridge Play Center had the distinction of being one the first sites to be selected by Moses and his team, because it was the location of a previous reservoir it could easily and economically be converted into a public swimming pool.²

Fiorello LaGuardia, Robert Moses and the New Deal³

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,⁴ 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, and with authority extending 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 1924.⁵ 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."⁶ 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.⁷ 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 constructing 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.⁸

To many, Robert Moses was a master builder; to others he was a spoiled bully who seemingly always had his way. 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 in the process of being designed.⁹ Among them was the Highbridge Play Center in the Borough of Manhattan.

History of Swimming in New York City¹⁰

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 the city's rivers was still strong at the middle of the 19th century. Out of concern for the health and welfare of the people of the city, and particularly of immigrant populations who took most advantage of the rivers, the city opened its first 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 baths 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 the 1890s, 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," following a 1895 state law requiring the construction of such facilities. The pool-like indoor baths, however, were never very popular with the working class, and many of the bath houses eventually added actual swimming pools and gymnasia in hopes of attracting more patrons. The indoor pools at the municipal 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 not aged well. However, there were at least two outdoor wading pools in existence John Jay and Hamilton Fish. Hamilton Fish was later redesigned to be an Olympic size pool.

At the time Robert Moses became Parks Commissioner in 1934, in addition to the wading pools, only two outdoor pools remained, one at Betsy Head in Brownsville, the other at Faber Park on Staten Island. Moses, however, considered the Betsy Head pool "unsanitary," with an "unattractive, inadequate, and impractical bath house," and furthermore recognized in the city "a demand for safe bathing which could never be satisfied until the boundary waters were cleaned up."¹¹ 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 in a series of grand ceremonies and quickly gained recognition as being among the most remarkable public facilities ever constructed in the country.¹² All of the pools featured new bathhouses, with the exception of Hamilton Fish and Betsy Head.¹³ After the completion of the WPA-era pool complexes, no other public swimming pools were constructed in New York City until the 1960s, with the construction of the Loula Lasker Memorial Pool. Located in the southwesterly corner of the Harlem Meer in Central Park, was an innovative swimming pool design that had a dual feature, a combination three foot swimming pool with an ice skating rink. This unique structure, was the first of its kind, and serviced both activities for the neighboring communities.

The Swimming Pools, Moses, and Segregation in New York City¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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."¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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 novel, "The Power Broker," Robert Caro writes that "one could go to the pools 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."¹⁹ 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."²⁰ Such claims are supported by photographs and video footage from the era, showing that largely, white and black New Yorkers swam in different pools.²¹ 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.²²

The Design and Construction of the Highbridge Play Center²³

The Highbridge 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 Parks 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.²⁴ 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. There had to be underwater lighting for night swimming, 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. 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 stipulations 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.

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.²⁴ Each opening day was a memorable event for its neighborhood. 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. The site for Highbridge Pool was the first to be selected by Moses; in April 1934 the *New York Times* announced that two unused reservoirs had been offered to the Parks Department, and would be turned into parks and playgrounds. Highbridge was the fifth of the eleven pools to open; it was formally dedicated and opened to the public on July 14, 1936. Designed to accommodate 4880 patrons, the area included a swimming pool (166 feet x 228 feet), and a wading pool (97 feet x 228 feet).²⁴

Since its opening, the completed Highbridge Play Center has been considered one of the great WPA Art Moderne structures of the Depression era in New York. Featuring compulsory footbaths and one of the most advanced water filtrations systems of its time, the Highbridge Play Center was also considered the pinnacle of technological modernity.

The unusual prominence of the ashlar construction is a distinguishing feature of the Highbridge Play center design. It is utilized for long stretches of the retaining wall extending along Amsterdam Avenue, the tall podium which forms a monumental base for the main entryway, and for the flanking dogleg approach stairways. Perhaps inspired by the construction materials employed for the water tower, and possibly incorporating some preexisting ashlar wall construction, the double stairways provide a ceremonial pathway up to the main entrance. The curved slightly projecting portico section of the entry is distinguished by two large fluted cast-concrete piers which, together with the massive flanking brick piers, carry a tall concrete architrave. The portico is offset and framed by the cubic shapes of the entry block and courtyard rising behind it. Together with the other WPA-era park improvements, the Highbridge Play Center complex was clearly a major achievement of the New Deal in New York City.

The Designers behind the Planning of Highbridge Play Center²⁵

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,²⁶ 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.

Although Embury's exact relationship to the planning of the Highbridge Play Center, beyond his role as the department's consulting architect, is not confirmed, he is commonly credited with the design of the Play Center's bath house. While no plans bearing Embury's name were found at the Parks Department's archives at the Olmsted Center in Queens, Embury is reported to have pointed proudly to the bath house as an example of his work, and was likely to have been the lead architect for the project.

Underscoring the collaborative nature of the design process for the pool complexes, the majority of the architectural plans and construction drawings on file at the archives for the Highbridge Pool and Play Center, including those for the bath house and terrace, were prepared by architect Harry Ahrens, with G.P. Logue as supervising Park Designer. Although not much is on record about Ahrens, what is known is that he was born in New York City in 1896, received his degree from Columbia University in 1916, was "Architect in Chief" with the New York City Parks department from 1936 until 1941, and a project manager with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill from 1942 until 1946. By 1962, it appears as though Ahrens had relocated to Philadelphia.

Architect Arthur J. Barzaghi prepared the majority of the engineering drawings on file at the Olmsted Center archives. Information on record for Barzaghi is limited to at least five buildings he designed in Manhattan between 1921 and 1930, including two industrial buildings, two office buildings, and one single-story "moving picture theater," before going to work for the Parks Department. Architectural sections on file for the wading pool comfort station, located north of the primary pool complex, appear to have been prepared by Joseph L. Hautman, while civil engineer William H. Latham was responsible for the approval of numerous architectural drawings and landscaping plans. An assortment of other names (Wells, McCagg, Daugherty, Wohlpart, Cowell, etc.) appear on the drawings as well.

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 World War I, 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 in 1931 from the Architectural League of New York. 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 Astoria Park, his work for the Parks Department included Bryant Park, Central Park Zoo, City Hall Park, Orchard Beach in the Bronx, 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 History²⁷

The Highbridge Pool bathhouse has undergone several renovations starting in the 1960s. At that time, the bath pavilion was redesigned and the original murals in the main lobby by artist Charles Clarke²⁸ were either covered up or destroyed during renovation.²⁹ By the late 1970s, many of the WPA-era pools, Highbridge Pool included, had deteriorated, 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, the Parks Department began a major capital construction program in the late 1970's 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.³⁰ Among the long range projects planned was a \$10 million plan to preserve Prospect Park, a \$1 million renovation of the Coney Island Boardwalk, and a \$2.6 million rehabilitation of the Jackie Robinson (Colonial Park) Play Center. Numerous improvements were included in the renovation plan of Highbridge Play Center: at a cost of \$9.1 million, the renovations involved the main pool building, concessions building, and filter building, also new heating, ventilation, electrical, and filtration systems. The main swimming pool (165 x 225 foot) was re-lined and made handicapped accessible. The consulting architect who oversaw the renovation was Stephen B. Jacobs. After a three year renovation the Highbridge Pool and Play Center re-opened on June 14, 1985. Several of the other WPA-era pools, including Sunset Park and Betsy Head, underwent restoration under the same program. In June of 1984, an arson fire destroyed the roof of designated Highbridge Tower carillon and roof,³¹ private funds were raised to help aide in the restoration of the tower. November 15, 1991 the restoration of Highbridge Tower was completed the project was overseen by William A. Hall Architects.³² The scope of the renovations included: the installation of a new electronic carillon, the fabrication of a new 2,000 pound copper and aluminum belfry, the replacement of wood decks³³ with fire retardant wood stabilization and cleaning of interior, cast iron stair.

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, and sometimes fondling female swimmers. 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. Subsequent changes to the Highbridge complex included, a \$305,000 pool filtration system funded by Mayor Giuliani, and in 1996, City Council Member Guillermo Linares funded a \$445,000 upgrade of the pools heating and ventilation systems.³⁴ In 1999 activist entertainer Bette Midler raised \$1 million dollars for litter removal and new planting in Highbridge Park. Ms. Midler helped to raise awareness of the deterioration of Highbridge and other parks throughout New York City.³⁵

Description

Plan and Circulation -- Highbridge Pool and Play Center is bounded roughly by 174th Street on the north and 172nd Street to the south, Amsterdam Avenue to the west, and the Harlem River Drive to the east. Highbridge Pool and Play Center is situated on top of the former Highbridge reservoir. Highbridge Pool and Play Center has a commanding position high above the city, offering extraordinary views of the Harlem River Valley. The podium-style entrance is centered along the ashlar retaining wall that runs the length of the Amsterdam Avenue frontage. Perhaps inspired by the construction materials employed for the water tower, and possibly incorporating some preexisting ashlar wall construction, the wall imparts a sense of permanence, stability and strength. The unusual prominence of the ashlar construction is the most distinguishing feature of the Highbridge Play Center design. The tall podium forms a monumental base for the main entryway and the double flanking scissor stairways.

The podium is offset by four decorative cast stone grilles that flank a simple metal utility door, providing an entry point to the basement level. Scissor staircases with wide landings rise up on either side of the entrance hall providing access to the pedestrian pathways or leading up to the entrance portico. These staircases wrap around stone benches built into the podium base on either side of the structure’s front. Concrete slabs inlaid with brick borders create a pattern mirroring the buildings façade along the entryways, stair landings, portico floor and pedestrian pathways. The entryway consists of twin segmental arches on either side of the grand portico. Both the bath house and pool deck can be accessed through this main entrance. Patrons would then be led through one of two gauged brick archways on either side of the ticket booth to the men’s and women’s locker rooms. After changing into swimsuits and storing clothes and valuables with clerks in the available basket space, male and female patrons would pass from the mirror-image locker rooms, through the mandatory shower rooms, past the required footbaths, and through an assigned

entrance, or under a suspended brass clock in the main lobby, to the pool deck area. The two pools found here, the main swimming and the wading pools, are surrounded by ample promenades, an expanse of concrete bleachers, and a series of seating niches. The pedestrian pathways curve around the site and terminate at the tower esplanade. Each pathway wraps around a horseshoe-shaped wall creating ramps that take the public to each side of the pool complex. A tunnel entrance accessible from the retaining wall on the west elevation, complete with arched door, runs under the north pathway to the filter house located under the bleachers.³⁶ Six cast stone bleachers located at the northeast side of the site, are intersected by four staircases that lead to a walkway allowing access to the loggia. At one time the loggia had a handsome copper hip roof, a cast stone balcony and housed men's and women's comfort stations below.³⁷ Additional granite steps lead from the back of the loggia to the tower esplanade and to an additional pathway that follows the berm to the front of the complex and Amsterdam Avenue.

The pedestrian pathway that follows the south wing of the complex leads to a smaller horseshoe-shaped ramp, which gives way to a tree-lined terrace with 24 ornamental lamp standards. This terrace houses a freestanding brick concession stand, now used for grounds-keeping purposes. The terrace once had ample access to the tower esplanade but is now enclosed by wrought iron fencing that runs along the east side of the complex creating a continuous barrier between the pool area and the esplanade. The serpentine asphalt pathway that encompasses the south side of the complex divides, and leads to the maintenance building, then follows the length of the enclosed pool to the tower esplanade. Set amidst the curved pathway is a grassy area between the two divided pathways, containing a small playground area. An additional path runs perpendicular to the iron fence-enclosed terrace, which is the southern boundary of the site.

Bathhouse

The Highbridge Play Center Bathhouse is deep-set into a berm, and sits back from and above the grade of the surrounding site. Long stretches of ashlar retaining wall, extending along Amsterdam Avenue, and the proximity of the naturally hilly landscape, create a majestic presence along the streetscape. The ashlar podium base has a central metal entryway, flanked on either side by two decorative stone grilles. On the pavement in front of the base are two large seasonal planting boxes that offset the basement entrance. Scissor staircases with wide landings rise up on either side of the entrance hall providing access to the pedestrian pathways. Above each segmental arched entrance hangs a non-historic cast bronze monogram for the City of New York. These staircases wrap stone benches built into the podium base on either side of the structure's front. The projecting portico section of the entry is distinguished by two large fluted cast-concrete piers separated by a simple iron rail, these together with the massive flanking brick piers, carry a tall concrete architrave. A projecting cast stone band, frames classical style embossed bronze lettering that announces "Highbridge Play Center." The portico is accented and framed by two ornamental recessed cast stone grilles. Above these grilles, matching bronze flagpoles are affixed to the front of the building and rise above the linear roofline. A third flagpole, perhaps of newer origin is fixed to the roof of the entryway. The portico creates a central core from which the north and south wings emanate.

The north and south wings are nearly identical; these wings contain the men's and women's locker rooms, dressing rooms and showers. The north and south wings each have a row of eight engaged brick pilasters with cast stone capitals. These capitals line up with the lintels of the nine steel-framed windows creating a continuous line across each wing of the building. On both the north and south wings; every third pilaster has a non-historic security light. The roof line elevation changes at the corner sections of the building, creating a stepped pattern. These corner sections each have one large rectangle window inset with glass-block that possibly dates from a 1984-85 renovation,³⁸ with metal louver vents above. The original cast stone coping of the roofline has been sheathed in sheet metal. On both the north and south wings of the building, curved ramps are nestled into the berm, and hug the exterior walls. These two ramps are not identical in height, as the north ramp is elevated and once accommodated access to the top of the loggia. The wall is adorned with decorative cast-stone ocular portals. The south ramp provides access from the street to the tree lined terrace and former concession stand. The contrasting lines of brick, and ashlar, help this building blend in organically with the surrounding park landscape.

As is typical for all of the play center's brick surfaces, the sidewalls are laid in a modified English bond of header courses separated by two stretcher courses and capped with cast stone coping. Nestled in the portico entrance hall is a brick circular turret with a winged loft that has a clerestory that overlooks the entryway below. Ornate brickwork is featured on the lower half of the turret. This design is repeated on the flanking walls that lead to the pool deck area. Two header courses separate a saw-tooth pattern in the turret.

The decorative brick and inlaid marble flooring design leads the visitor to the pool entryway. A bronze clock is suspended above the center arch of the eastern entryway, over the deep-set lintel of the pool side entry; there are also a series of four recessed clerestory windows, largely obscured from view. The design of the eastern poolside façade is a mirror image to the western street side façade with a few notable exceptions; the entrances to the women's and men's locker-rooms have a wall that extends from the building creating a vestibule with a connecting transom of cast stone with the appropriate signage above.

A basement area with several points of entry sits under the north (women's) wing of the complex. This basement contains the boiler room, storage areas, staff locker rooms, comfort stations, service areas and once contained laundry facilities. Below-grade access to the filter house, located under the bleachers and the comfort stations under the loggia, was also accessible thru this basement area.

Pool Deck Area -- The pool deck area of the Highbridge Play Center is rectangular in shape and is composed of the wading pool (97' x 228') and the main pool (165' x 228'), which run parallel to each other. These are surrounded on three sides by a twenty-nine foot wide promenade.³⁹ The main promenade is situated just beyond the main pool entrance and runs north and south on the pool deck. The deck is extended on the north and south sides by curvilinear alcoves formed by the ramps that lead to the bleachers, taking the form of exaggerated concrete stairs on the north, and the tree lined terrace to the south, both were once accessible from Amsterdam Avenue. These oblique niches are not identical in height as the north ramp is taller than the south. It extends to form the base for the stairs, and contains decorative cast-stone ocular portals. Flanking the top of the stairs are two painted brick pillars with cast-stone coping, incorporating a wrought iron fence that runs the length of the bleachers to the loggia. The ramp that creates the northern alcove is smaller, and leads to an expansive bench and tree lined terrace. Just inside the terrace is a free standing brick building that has entrances on both the park and terrace side, it was once used as the concession stand. The terrace is enclosed with a simple iron fence on the far side, a partition wall with iron railings, and access ramps with stairs that lead to the pool promenade. The terrace located at the south of the pool complex leads to a semi-enclosed overlook granting viewers a scenic view of the Harlem River Valley and the Bronx.

The wading pool is of a simple rectangular design with beveled corners. The larger swimming pool is sited adjacent to and to the east of, the wading pool. A chain-link fence now separates the two pools. The swimming pool is also rectangular in shape with beveled corners. The swimming pool has two pyramidal intake units that circulate water through the filtration system located under the bleachers on the north side of the complex. These intakes are sited where fountains that originally aerated the pool water once stood. Recent upgrades to the swimming pool added a handicapped access ramp and aluminum railings and stairs for easy and safe entry into the pool. The pool is equipped with four elevated aluminum lifeguard stands. A solitary flagpole stands on the poolside promenade in front of the bleachers. Thirty-two ornamental lighting standards surround the entire deck area including the wading pool, the swimming pool and the walkway deck that separates these two pools. Niche seating is incorporated into a low wall that creates an eastern-most boundary overlooking the pool area.

A spacious, lined esplanade comprised of a wide pedestrian boulevard with two narrow, contiguous sidewalks, all of asphalt, wind their way along the Harlem River escarpment. The esplanade follows the natural landscape and at several points provides for unobstructed views of the river and the designated Highbridge aqueduct. This esplanade links the northern and southern pathways at either side of the pool complex and terminates just beyond the designated tower. The esplanade is graced with several traditional park benches, decorative light standards and a large, illustrated historical marker at the southernmost tip of the esplanade. A simple iron fence lines the escarpment perimeter along the full length of the esplanade.

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NOTES

¹ Information in this section is based on the following: adapted from text from the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation: http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/historical_signs/hs_historical_sign.php?id=6499,

² "Two Reservoir Sites to Serve as Parks," *New York Times*, (April 4, 1934), 23; "Moses Gets Two Unneeded Reservoirs as Sites for Stadium and Swimming Pools," *New York Times*, (April 10, 1934), 13.

³ 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; *Crotona Play Center Designation Report* (LP-2232) (New York: City of New York, 2007), prepared by Jennifer Most; Information in this section is based on the following sources: Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 347-369, 372-373; Francis Cormier, "Some New York City Parks and Parkways: Recreational Improvements Made Since 1934," *Landscape Architecture* 29, (April 1939), 124-136; Phoebe Cutler, *The Public Landscape of the New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, c.1985), 8-9; LaGuardia Collection (located at the Municipal Archives): miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses and Mayor LaGuardia; Robert Moses, "Parks and Recreation in New York," transcript of the proceedings of the National Recreation Association (1947), 41-50; New York City Department of Parks, "Memorandum on 1935 Budget Request for the Department of Parks," typescript dated August 14, 1934, 100; "Pattern For Parks," *Architectural Forum* 65, (December 1936), 499-500; Cleveland Rodgers, *Robert Moses: Builder for Democracy*, 1st ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1952), 82-84; Laura Rosen, "Robert Moses and New York: The Early Years," *The Livable City* 122, (December 1988), 2-4; Floyd Taylor, "Moses Keeps Up with His Work and Cuts through Red Tape," *The World Telegram*, (January 7, 1938).

⁴ 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. Caro, 323.

⁵ 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 like the car. The addition of active recreation to city parks was in direct keeping with popular theories on the importance of providing the public with outlets for active recreation over passive recreation in these changing times. The Great Depression of the 1930s further amplified such needs.

⁶ Rodgers, 82.

⁷ 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," *New York Times*, (April 10, 1935), 1; (April 20, 1935), 4.

⁸ Work is ongoing as to whether Robert Moses did actively discourage minorities from using Parks Department facilities such as the WPA-era swimming pools. 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).

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Information in this section is based on the following sources: Hilary 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, 72-85 and 153-154; Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. *The Encyclopedia of New York*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1995, 87-88; LaGuardia Collection (located at the Municipal Archives): miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses and Mayor LaGuardia, (August 26, 1935); Douglas Martin, "A Day in the Water, Floating on Air," *New York Times*, (August 15, 1999), CY1; Moses Robert *6 Years of Progress: 1934-1940*, 1940, 20-23; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Crotona Pool, 2001; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Restoration of New York City's WPA-Era Swimming Pools." 1986.

¹¹ Moses, 20-21.

¹² 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)

¹³ The Hamilton Fish Play Center bathhouse, designed by Carrere & Hastings in 1898, was designated a New York City Landmark in 1982. The original 1915 bathhouse structure at Betsy Head was destroyed by fire shortly after the 1936 opening of the pool, and was re-built in 1939.

¹⁴ Information in this section is based on the following sources: "25,000 at Opening of Harlem Pool," *New York Times*. (August 9, 1936), N6; Ballon, and Jackson, 72-85 and 153-154; Caro, 512-514; LaGuardia Collection (located at the Municipal Archives): miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses and Mayor LaGuardia, (August 26, 1935); Walter Thabit, *How East New York Became a Ghetto*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 39.

¹⁵ Thabit, 39.

¹⁶ "25,000 at Opening..." N6.

¹⁷ Work is ongoing as to whether Robert Moses actually actively discouraged minorities from using Parks Department facilities such as the WPA-era swimming pools, Caro, and Ballon and Jackson.

¹⁸ Caro, 514

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ballon and Jackson, 81.

²¹ Ibid.

²² 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, Ballon, and Jackson.

²³ This section adapted from the LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report* "Final Report of the WPA for the City of New York, 1935-1943," (Mar. 2, 1943), 158; Caro, 456-457, 512-514; Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982); LaGuardia Collection: miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, and members of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment; W. H. Latham. "Swimming Construction," *American Architect and Architecture*, (November 1936), 33-34; Robert Moses, (for the City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation), *8 Years of Parks Progress: 1934-1942*, 1942, 23-24; Robert Moses. "Municipal Recreation," *American Architect and Architecture*, (November 1936), 21-23 and 28-29; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Astoria Pool," 2001; *New York Times*, (October 4, 1934), 48; (September 22, 1935), E10; (July 3, 1936), 1; (Sept 27, 1937), 23; "Pavilion Astoria Swimming Pool, New York," *Architectural Forum*, (August 1937), 127-28; Plans and blueprints on file at the Olmsted Center, Flushing, New York; Additional resources: "5,000 in the Bronx at Pool Opening," *New York Times*, (July 25, 1936), 30; "Buildings for Crotona Park," *New York Times*, (August 4, 1935), N4; Robert Moses (for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation), "Press Release: Crotona Swimming Pool." July 23, 1936; Robert Moses (for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation), "Press Release: Public Swimming Facilities in New York City," (July 23, 1934); New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Crotona Play Center and Pool Dedication," Leaflet, (August 2, 1984); New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Park History: Crotona Park Pool." *Daily Plant*, (June 29, 1984); "Pattern for Parks," *Architectural Forum*, 65, (December 1936), 499-500.

²⁴ Information in this section is based on the following sources: City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation, The Arsenal Library 830 Fifth Ave. Central Park: "Press Release", (July 13, 1936); "Pool Opens Tomorrow," *New York Times*, (July 13, 1936), 17.

²⁵ This section adapted from the LPC *the Astoria Park Pool and Play Center* (LP-2196); and includes, Aymar Embury II obituary, *New York Times*, (Nov. 15, 1966), 47; Aymar Embury II obituary, *Progressive Architecture* 48, 1, (January 1967), 47-48; Francis Cormier, "Some New York City Parks and Parkways: Recreational Improvements Made Since 1934," *Landscape Architecture*, 29, (April 1939), 125; "Designing the Moses Era: The Architecture and Engineering of Aymar Embury II," text of the exhibition at the Hofstra Museum of Hofstra University, May 21 to July 21, 1988; "Gilmore D. Clarke," *Who's Who in America*, 31, (Chicago: The A.N. Marquis Co., 1961), 547; "Gilmore D. Clarke, Landscape Architect," reprinted from *Architecture and Design*. (July 1940); Gilmore D. Clarke obituary, *New York Times*, (Aug. 10, 1982), B19; John M. Hatton "Forty Stores," *Architectural Forum* 88, (May 1948), 93-144; LaGuardia Collection: miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia; New York City Directories 1915-34; *New York Times*. (September 22, 1935), E10; (August 27, 1937) 36; (January 16, 1941), 39; (June 1, 1947), R3; (July 10, 1947), 36; (November 20, 1947), 53; (December 2, 1947), 52; Robert A. M. Stern, *New York 1930: Architecture Between the Two World Wars*, (New York: Rizzoli International, 1987), 305; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920* (10th Assembly District, sheet 2451); James Ward, *Architects in Practice in New York City 1900-1940*, New York: Committee for the

Preservation of Architectural Records, 1989, 20, 33; _____, "Interiors' Principles of Commercial Design," *Interiors* 111, (July 1943), 31-35; _____, "Match Case Factory," *Architectural Forum* 83, (May 1946), 115-117; _____, "Mechanical Equipment and Store Design," *Pencil Points*, 26, (August 1944), 72-77; _____, "Third Annual Collection of Interiors to Come," *Interiors* 102, (January 1943), 21-47; _____, "Two Famous Firms Go Modern," *Interiors* 101, (April 1942), 36-41; Additional resources: "Colonial Park to get \$1,000,000 Bathhouse," *New York Times*, (May 5, 1936), 17; George S. Koyl, ed. "*American Architects Directory, Second Edition*," (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, under the sponsorship of the American Institute of Architects, 1962); "Manhattan Always Rebuilding to Supply Modern Needs," *New York Times*, (October 7, 1928), RE1.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ Information in this section is based on the following sources: City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation, The Arsenal Library 830 Fifth Ave. Central Park: Adapted from text from the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation: http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/historical_signs/hs_historical_sign.php?id=6499

²⁸ Information in this section is based on the following sources: Approval: Art Commission of the City of New York.; WORK OF ART, Highbridge Park Bath Pavilion, Murals for Main Lobby, Charles Clarke, Artist Description: "Murals: Two scraffito decorations on the north and south wall respectively of the main lobby of Highbridge bathhouse", July 10, 1936; Submission No. 5174, (July 14, 1936); Commission Approval Resolution Certificate No. 5125, Exhibits No. "1712-AT," "AU", "AV", and "AW", July 23, 1936.

²⁹ City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation Memo: Re: Ex. #1712, Sub. 5174, AT-AU-AV-AW, "According to Joe Bresnan of the Parks Dept., the building was redesigned in the 1960s, and the murals were covered over; and/or broken up and destroyed." Submitted: Peggy Hammerle, March 1, 1984.

³⁰ Information in this section is based on the following sources: City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation, The Arsenal Library 830 Fifth Ave. Central Park: Adapted from text from the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation document, "The Restoration of New York City's W. P. A. -Era Swimming Pools", 1986.

³¹ Information in this section is based on the following sources: "Man Burns Tower, Leaps to His Death", *Newsday* (June 13, 1984), 18; "Death Plunge Ignites Tower, then Jumps", *Daily News*, (June 12, 1984), 5; "Man Killed in plunge from tower inferno," *New York Post*, (June 12, 1984), 13.

³² Information in this section is based on the following sources: City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation, Memorandum: To: Stewart Desmond, From: Jonathan Kuhn, Subject: "Highbridge Water Tower", June 4, 1991.

³³ Information in this section is based on the following sources: News Release: Highbridge Aqueduct Tower, Restoration, and Belfry Erection", William A. Hall Partnership, November 15 1990.

³⁴ Information in this section is based on the following sources: New York City Department of Parks, The Arsenal Library 830 Fifth Ave. Swimming Pools Fact sheet.

³⁵ Information in this section is based on the following sources: "Bette Midler Was Here: A Park Gets a Second Act", *New York Times*, (May 28, 1999), E36.

³⁶ Along this wall there are additional entry points to access the filter house underneath.

³⁷ The brick outside of the northern walls of the bleachers and the loggia have been altered by red paint.

³⁸ Based on a conversation with John Krawchuk, Director of Historic Preservation and Capital Projects for the City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation, the glass block on the pool side façade may date to the 1984-85 renovation.

³⁹ Information in this section is based on the following sources: City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation: Olmsted Center, Building Archives, Plans and blueprints on file at the Olmsted Center, Flushing, New York.

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 Highbridge Play Center has a special character, 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 Highbridge Play Center is one of a group of eleven immense outdoor swimming pools opened in the summer of 1936; that it opened on July 14, and was the fifth of the eleven pools to open that year; that Highbridge Play Center was one the first of two sites to be selected by Moses and his team; that it was constructed with funding provided by the Works Progress Administration; that the site is approximately 2.5 Acres, and it was built to accommodate 4,880 swimmers; that Highbridge Play Center incorporates a portion of the elevated site in Highbridge Park and has a commanding position high above the city offering extraordinary views of the Harlem River Valley and the High Bridge Aqueduct (a New York City Landmark) for which the park is named; that this area was formerly occupied by a reservoir constructed in 1870 as part of New York City's Croton water supply system; that a short distance west of the of the pool complex stands, the tall ashlar water tower built in 1872 (a New York City Landmark); that the water tower dominates both the distant and immediate landscape and, evokes the historic configuration of the tower with the reservoir; that the Highbridge Play Center bathhouse is deep-set into a berm, and sits back from and above the grade of the surrounding site; and that the proximity of the naturally hilly landscape, create a majestic presence along the streetscape; that the unusual prominence of the ashlar construction is the most distinguishing feature of the Highbridge Play Center design; that the materials used in the design of the Highbridge Play Center were inspired by the construction materials employed for the water tower, that it is utilized for long stretches of the retaining wall extending along Amsterdam Avenue; that the unique arrangement of the Highbridge pools – an exceptionally large wading pool and an adjacent single combined swimming and diving pool – was determined in part by the earlier history of the site; that the tall podium of the bath house forms a monumental base for the main entryway and the podium-style entrance, and is centered along the ashlar retaining wall that runs the length of the Amsterdam Avenue frontage; that the flanking scissor stairways provide a ceremonial pathway up to the main entrance; that the curved slightly projecting portico section of the entry is distinguished by two large fluted cast-concrete piers which, together with the massive flanking brick piers, carry a tall concrete architrave; 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 Highbridge Play Center, including the bath house, wading pool, swimming and diving pool, bleachers, comfort station, filter house, perimeter walls, terracing and fencing, street level ashlar retaining walls, eastern viewing terrace including the designated Water Tower, Amsterdam Avenue between West 172nd Street and West 174th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of

Manhattan Tax Map Block 2106, Lot 1 in part, and portions of the adjacent public way, consisting of the property bounded by a line beginning at a point on the eastern curblane of Amsterdam Avenue defined by the intersection of the eastern curblane of Amsterdam Avenue and a line extending easterly from the northern curblane of West 173rd Street, extending northerly along the eastern curblane of Amsterdam Avenue to a point defined by the intersection of the eastern curblane of Amsterdam Avenue and a line extending eastward from the southern curblane of West 174th Street, then continuing easterly along that line to the point at which it intersects the northern curblane of the path that roughly parallels the northern wall of the Highbridge Play Center, then easterly along the northern curblane of the path to the point at which the iron fence, located approximately 40 feet to the north of the northeast corner of the Highbridge Play Center, begins, continuing easterly along the fence to the point at which it turns south approximately 90 degrees, then southerly along the fence to the point at which it turns west approximately 90 degrees, westerly along the fence and the line extending from the fence westerly to its intersecting point on the southern curblane of the paved pedestrian path situated approximately 60 feet from the southern wall of the Highbridge Play Center, then westerly along the curvature of the paved pedestrian path as it extends across three intersecting pedestrian paths to its intersecting point with the eastern curblane of Amsterdam Avenue, northerly along the eastern curblane of Amsterdam Avenue to the point of beginning, as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair

Pablo E. Vengoechea, Vice-Chair

Stephen F. Byrns, Diana Chapin, Joan Gerner, Roberta Brandes Gratz,

Christopher Moore, Margery Perlmutter, Jan Pokorny, Elizabeth Ryan, Roberta Washington



Bath house: East Elevation
Amsterdam Ave. façade looking north

Photo: Carl Forster



Bath house: East Elevation
Amsterdam Ave. façade looking south

Photo: Theresa Noonan



East Elevation: Bath house
Amsterdam Ave. façade, north wing

Photo: Carl Forster



East Elevation: Bath house and stairs
Amsterdam Ave. façade, south wing

Photo: Carl Forster



East Elevation: Bath house and retaining wall
Amsterdam Ave. façade, north wing

Photo: Carl Forster



East Elevation: Southern pedestrian pathway

Photo: Theresa Noonan



West Elevation:
Pool side facade

Photo: Carl Forster



West Elevation: Women's locker room entrance
Pool side facade

Photo: Carl Forster



West Elevation: Pool promenade
Pool side façade, Women's locker room entrance

Photo: Theresa Noonan



Northeast view: North Terrace and Swimming Pool

Photo: Carl Forster



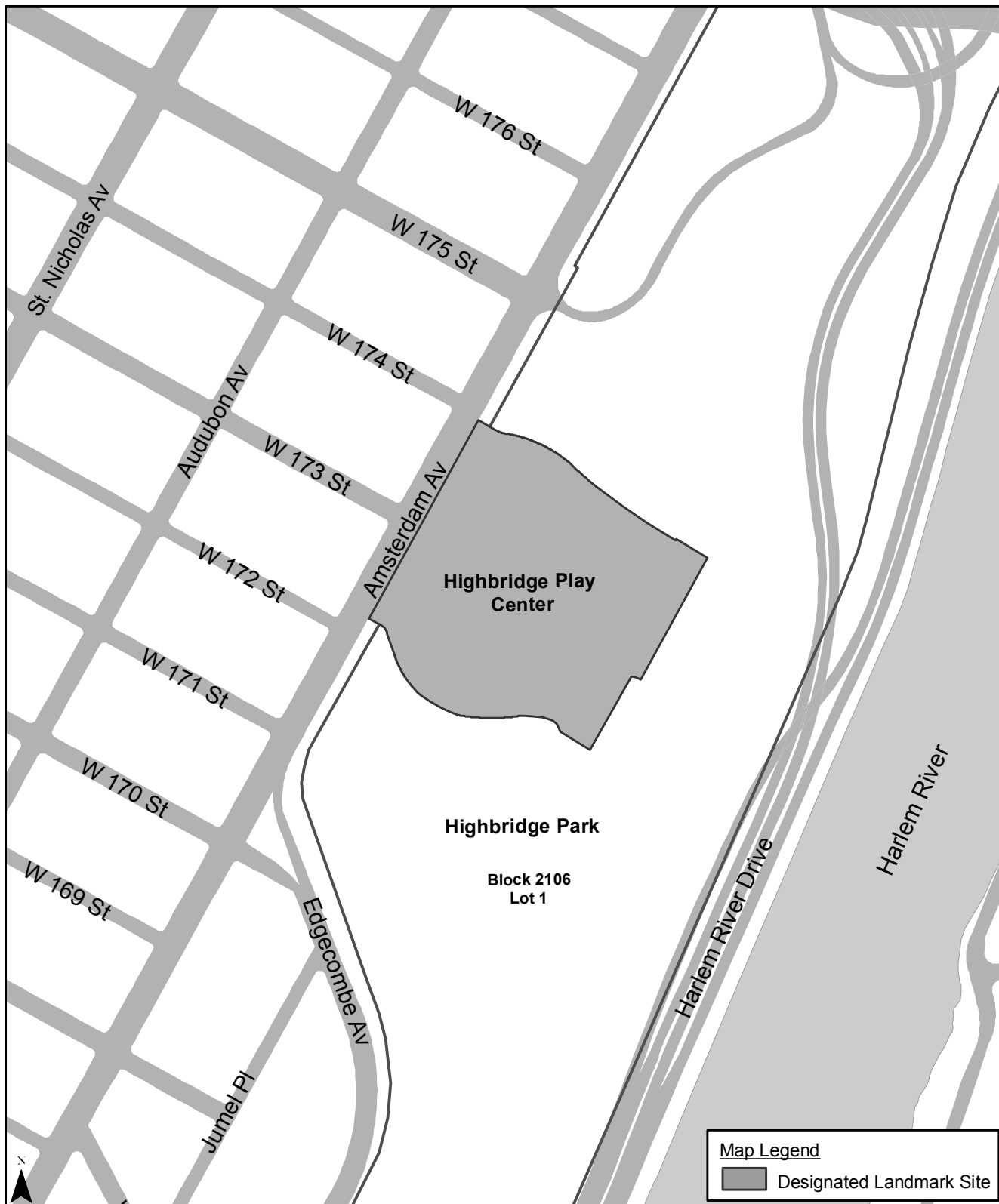
Detail: Cast stone

Photo: Theresa Noonan



Interior View: Decorative Brick and Marble

Photo: Carl Forster



HIGHBRIDGE PLAY CENTER (LP-2237)
Amsterdam Avenue between 172nd and 174th Streets.
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2106, Lot 1
(in part and portions of the adjacent public way).

Designated: July 24, 2007