



## The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission

1 Centre Street, 9<sup>th</sup> Floor North New York NY 10007 TEL: 212-669-7700 FAX: 212-669-7960  
www.nyc.gov/landmarks



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**CONTACT:** Lisi de Bourbon  
212-669-7938  
edebourbon@lpc.nyc.gov

### **COMMISSION LANDMARKS TWO WPA-FUNDED SWIMMING POOL AND RECREATION CENTERS IN STATEN ISLAND AND BROOKLYN**

*Parks Department's Tompkinsville and Brownsville Art Moderne Complexes Become the 8th and 9<sup>th</sup> to Receive Landmark Status of 11 Built During the Summer of 1936*

The Landmarks Preservation Commission today designated the Tompkinsville (aka Joseph H. Lyons) and Betsy Head swimming pool and recreation centers as New York City landmarks, citing their fine design, layout and creative use of low-cost construction materials. The designation of the Tompkinsville recreation center also includes the interior.



Built under former Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia and Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, and largely funded by the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of many agencies created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to help lift the



nation out of the Great Depression, the Tompkinsville and Betsy Head complexes were two of 11 that opened across New York City during the summer of 1936 and are widely recognized as being among the most remarkable public recreational facilities ever constructed in the United States.

"Like the other pools that opened during that incredible summer, Tompkinsville and Betsy Head were major accomplishments of engineering and architecture," said Commission Chairman Robert B. Tierney. "They were constructed during a period of extreme economic difficulty, and speak volumes about New York City's ongoing commitment to providing the best public amenities possible to New Yorkers."

"The summer of 1936, deep in the Great Depression, broke local heat records but the debut of 11 massive public pools including Tompkinsville and Betsy Head Pools provided much-needed relief," said Parks & Recreation Commissioner Adrian Benepe. "Since that time, their state-of-the-art engineering and fine design has continued to serve their local communities. At the opening of Tompkinsville Pool, Mayor LaGuardia called it 'a moment to the progressive government which would not and could not see unemployed men on the breadline.' We are thrilled that these two enduring, living landmarks are now formally designated."

*More*

The Tompkinsville (Joseph H. Lyons) pool and modern L-shaped recreation center are located on a 2.56-acre waterfront site on the eastern shore of Staten Island, just south of the Staten Island Ferry Terminal at Victory Boulevard and Murray Hulbert Avenue, and were named for the neighborhood where they were located. It was designed by Joseph L. Hautman, the former chief of architecture for the Parks Department, and accommodates 2,800 people. The complex opened on July 7, 1936, the fourth to open that summer, and was renamed in 1938 for World War I veteran and Staten Island resident Joseph H. Lyons, who formed the Island's chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and was a founding member of the Slosson Post of the American Legion. He died in 1934.



The long, low recreation center is composed of features that are typical of the Art Moderne style, such as a prominent, 1 ½ -story domed entry rotunda, curved end walls, arched windows and door openings, clerestory windows and rounded brick columns. Inside the rotunda, the lobby has starburst-patterned terrazzo flooring, Flemish bond brick walls, and a ribbed concrete frieze. Outside, a tall, brick smokestack with cast-concrete banding and rounded edges near the pool deck is the centerpiece of the complex, and not only serves as an integral design element, but a functional chimney. Measuring 165 by 100 feet, the swimming pool is slightly wider than an Olympic-size pool, and can accommodate up to 2,800 swimmers. The center is the only one that opened on Staten Island that summer, and one of two that were not located in a City park.

Betsy Head Play Center is set within Betsy Head Park, a 10.5-acre park that opened in 1914 in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, and was named for a Long Island widow who left half of her estate to the City of New York to improve or build parks, playgrounds and bath houses. The park is bounded by Dumont and Livonia avenues to the north and south and Strauss Street and Thomas Boyland Street (aka Hopkinson Avenue) to the west and east.

Designed by John Matthews Hatton, who is responsible for the Astoria Play Center and later worked on commercial storefronts and spaces in New York City, the Betsy Head recreation center is noteworthy for the extensive use of recessed glass-block walls and a rooftop observation gallery with parabolic arches that support a cantilevered canopy on the roof. It opened on August 7, 1936, and was the ninth to open that summer, with a 330-foot-by 165-foot pool that could hold as many as 5,500 swimmers.

The main entrance to the recreational center is comprised of relatively lavish materials, including polished black marble wall facings, curved corner sections of glass block and slate paving. Ely Jacques Kahn, the famed architect, was so impressed with the structure that he mentioned it in an article about the facility that he wrote for the *Architectural Record* in September 1941.

Each of the 11 facilities that opened in the summer of 1936 had separate swimming, diving and wading pools, and a large recreational center with locker rooms that doubled as gymnasiums when the pool closed for the season. Moses assembled the team of designers, landscape architects and engineers who were responsible for the facilities, seven of which received landmark status in the past two years, including Astoria, Crotona, Jackie Robinson, McCarren, Thomas Jefferson, Sunset and Highbridge. The Red Hook Pool and Play Center remains under consideration for landmark designation.

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The Landmarks Preservation Commission is the mayoral agency responsible for protecting and preserving New York City's architecturally, historically and culturally significant buildings and sites. Since its creation in 1965, LPC has granted landmark status to more than 25,000 buildings, including 1,206 individual landmarks, 110 interior landmarks, 10 scenic landmarks and 92 historic districts in all five boroughs.