

ASTORIA PARK POOL AND PLAY CENTER, including the bath house, wading pool, diving pool, filter house, bleachers, brick perimeter walls, piers and cast iron fencing, stairways to bath house roof-top observation decks, comfort station, and connecting pathways, 19th Street between 22nd Drive and Hoyt Avenue North, Astoria Park, Borough of Queens.
Constructed 1934-36; John M. Hatton and others, Architects; Aymar Embury II, Consulting Architect; Gilmore D. Clarke and others, Landscape Architects.

Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 898, Lot 1 in part, and portions of the adjacent public way, consisting of the property bounded by a line extending northerly from a point defined by the intersection of the western curbline of 19th Street and the northern curbline of Hoyt Avenue North (where it extends westerly to form the vehicular entrance to the Astoria Park parking lot), along the western curbline of 19th Street to a line extending easterly from the line of the southernmost wall of the Hellgate Bridge anchorage, continuing westerly along that line and the line of the southernmost wall of the Hellgate Bridge anchorage to the U.S. Pierhead and Bulkhead Line, then southerly along the U.S. Pierhead and Bulkhead Line to a line extending westerly from the line of the northernmost wall of the Triborough Bridge anchorage, then easterly along that line to the western concrete curb of the concrete and asphalt Astoria Park parking lot, continuing northeasterly, then southeasterly around the curvature of the concrete curb to the point of the beginning.

On April 18, 2006, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Astoria Play Center (LP-2196) including the upper and lower bathhouse terraces, upper terrace benches and ticket booths, stairways and flanking walls, lighting fixtures, flagpole, railings, paving, seating areas, trees, and comfort stations, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, and representatives of the Historic Districts Council and the Art Deco Society. The site was previously heard on April 3, 1990, July 10, 1990, and September 11, 1990 (LP-1784).



Summary

The Astoria Play Center is one of a group of eleven immense new outdoor swimming pools which were opened in the summer of 1936 in a series of grand ceremonies presided over by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Park Commissioner Robert Moses. All were constructed largely

with funding provided by the Works Progress Administration, one of the many New Deal agencies created during the 1930s to address the effects of America's Great Depression. Designed to accommodate a total of 49,000 users simultaneously at locations scattered across the entire city, and completed just two and a half years after the LaGuardia administration took office, the new pool complexes gained quick recognition as being among the most remarkable public recreational facilities ever constructed in this country.

Many architects, landscape architects, and engineers were hired to execute the pool program and the hundreds of other new construction and rehabilitation projects undertaken between 1934 and 1936 by a newly consolidated Park Department. They were guided by a senior team composed of staff members and consultants who had earlier worked for Moses at various governmental agencies, including the New York State Council of Parks and the Long Island State Park Commission. They included 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 Robert Moses, himself a long-time swimming enthusiast, gave detailed attention to the designs for the new pool complexes.

Opened on July 2, 1936, with a capacity of 6,200 swimmers, and designed mainly by consulting Park Department architect John Matthews Hatton, the Astoria Play Center commands a striking waterfront location in Astoria Park. The vast scale of the pool complex is complemented by that of its setting – the distant vistas westward framed by the monumental forms of the Hell Gate and Triborough Bridges. Embedded into what has now become a densely wooded slope which descends to the water's edge from 19th Street, the play center complex was designed to take full advantage of its surroundings. The entire roof of the bath house structure is used for multi-level viewing terraces. Extensive concrete bleacher sections are located on the western side of the bath house and around the diving pool. They offer far more outdoor seating than is available at the other play centers; perhaps the abundant seating is related to the fact that the final trials for the 1936 Summer Olympics were held here.

Like Hatton's later design for the 1939 bath house at Betsy Head, the Astoria Play Center structure makes extensive use of glass block; it forms the lower recessed sections of the locker room walls which are topped by the original metal louver windows. Massive piers laid up in decorative bonds demarcate the bays. Glass block also forms extensive sections of the lateral walls of the entryway: the original Art Moderne style ticket booth and signage are its other significant features. Among the Center's more unusual design elements are the whimsical saucer-like roofs atop the upper portions of the filter house structure on the western side of the swimming pool. The areas adjacent to the pool complex include extensive pathway systems, playing areas, and a striking comfort station designed in a style similar to that of the bath house.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

History of the Astoria Park Pool Site¹

The setting for the Astoria Park Pool and Play Center is the sloping, sixty-six acre Astoria Park, located on the east shore of the Hell Gate channel across from Ward's Island in western Queens. The complex has a panoramic view of the skyscrapers of midtown Manhattan framed between the towering Triborough Bridge to the south and the majestic Hell Gate Bridge to the north. Long Island City and Astoria became part of greater New York City in the consolidation of 1898. By 1907, the land now occupied by Astoria Park and its surroundings remained occupied by fading, former estates of prominent families and ship captains, who had moved away as industrial and residential developments loomed ever closer. The pace of urbanization picked up after the opening of the Queensborough Bridge in 1909,² adding many more factories and houses.

Around the turn of the century, sentiment emerged to increase public access to the East River and Hell Gate waterfront. In 1913, the City of New York acquired fifty-six acres of land along the shorefront for what was to become Astoria Park. Originally, named for Mayor William J. Gaynor, who served from 1910 to 1913, the name of the park was soon changed to Astoria Park.³ According to Parks Department Records, Astoria Park - which was originally equipped with two playgrounds, six tennis courts, three baseball diamonds, a wading pool, bandstand, and comfort station - was the first large park in New York City to provide for organized, rather than passive, recreation.⁴

The Hell Gate Bridge, designed by engineer Gustav Lindenthal and architect Henry Hornbostel, was constructed over the northern park of Astoria Park in 1917; its majestic towers forming the park's northern vista. Major improvements to Astoria Park were undertaken in the 1930s under the auspices of the popular mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia and his legendary Park Commissioner, Robert Moses. These changes included the addition of 4.5 acres of parkland under the Triborough Bridge, which was finished in 1936, the same year of the opening of the Astoria Park Pool and Play Center.⁵ Engineered by O.H. Ammann and designed by the architect Aymar Embury II, the Triborough Bridge, along with the pool complex, added a sleek modernity to the park. The improvements of the 1930s were made largely by using funds obtained from the Works Progress Administration, 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 Deal⁶

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 in 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,⁷ and its citizens, hoping for change, elected Fiorello LaGuardia to the mayoralty of New York City in 1933 under a reform-minded "fusion" ticket. He chose New York State Park Commissioner, Robert Moses, a champion of reform politics, as New York City's new Park Commissioner. The new mayor's success in securing a lion's share of monies made available by the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), and Moses' superb management skills and his ability to attract talented designers and engineers to his staff, resulted in

profound physical changes in 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.

Fiorello H. La Guardia was sworn in as the ninety-ninth mayor of the City of New York in January 1934, as an anti-Tammany Hall reform candidate. A maverick Republican and a five-term congressman from East Harlem, LaGuardia won the 1933 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 invited Moses to join his incoming administration as a reward.

In the 1920s, Moses was at the forefront of the national recreation movement 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 after President Calvin Coolidge convened the first National Conference on Outdoor Recreation in 1924.

During the 1930s Depression, the need to provide for or to improve outdoor recreation, especially in urban areas, became most urgent, and fit into the FDR's New Deal economic programs. Moses accepted the position of Commissioner of Parks in the LaGuardia administration on the condition that the five existing independent Park Departments (one for each borough) would be consolidated into a single department with himself as the sole Commissioner, and that the Park Commissioner's authority also include control of the City's parkways. He 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 State 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, except for areas outside of New York State.

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."⁸ 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 Park 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 Park 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 Department needed to produce plans and blueprints immediately so the growing force of relief workers could be assigned to worthwhile projects as quickly as possible. Within a week, Moses managed to persuade CWA officials to drop some of the regulations governing the hiring of staff and to relax its spending limits on project planning, allowing him to hire 600 architects, engineers and draftsmen at salaries above CWA wage guidelines. By the first of February, they were busily producing designs and blueprints.

The Park 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.⁹ 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, his personal demeanor was notoriously stubborn and arrogant, and he sometimes fired people on the spot for no apparent reason. At times, he disregarded 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 Park 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 tried to restrict access to many of his recreational facilities, including the pools. He determined that the Colonial Park pool in Harlem would be the only one for minority use. Most of the other pools, including Astoria, were placed in white neighborhoods. The Thomas Jefferson Park pool, located in East Harlem was (LaGuardia's old congressional district) was close to Spanish Harlem where the city's growing Puerto

Rican population was settling, and also not very far from African-American Harlem. To discourage minority use at the Jefferson Park facility, Moses kept the water heating system turned off, believing that the cold water would not bother Caucasian swimmers, “but would deter any ‘colored’ people who happened to enter it once from returning.”¹⁰ To many he was a master builder; to others he was a spoiled bully; and he seemingly always had his way.

In the summer of 1934, however, Robert 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 underway or being designed.¹¹ Among the projects being drawn up at the time was the Astoria Park Pool.

The Designers Behind the Planning of the Astoria Park Pool¹²

Aymar Embury II and Gilmore D. Clarke, respectively the Park 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. The head of the Division of Design at the time was the Park Engineer, William H. Latham, who was 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,¹³ the Lincoln Tunnel, the Triborough Bridge, and many more. His relationship to the planning of the Astoria Pool and Play Center appears to have been limited to his role as the department's consulting architect.

Gilmore D. 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 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 Park 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 Park 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.

Architect John M. Hatton 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 Astoria Pool, his other works for the Department of Parks in the 1930s include the Betsy Head Pool in Brooklyn and Pelham Bay Park golf clubhouse. In the 1940s, he was considered an expert in store modernization (lighting, space layout, customer comfort, display, fixtures, 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.

The Design and Construction of the Astoria Park Pool¹⁴

The Astoria Play Center is one of the group of eleven immense new outdoor swimming pools that opened in the summer of 1936 in a series of grand ceremonies presided over by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Park Commissioner Robert Moses. All were constructed mainly with funds provided by the WPA. Designed to accommodate a total of 49,000 users simultaneously at locations scattered across the entire city and completed just two-and-a-half years after LaGuardia took office, the new pool complexes completely dwarfed the city's two pre-existing outdoor public pools and gained quick recognition as being among the most remarkable public recreational facilities ever constructed in this 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, including Astoria Pool.¹⁵ As a result of his special attention, along with that of Embury and 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 Park 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. 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.

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 with as parks and playgrounds, the huge pool complexes were provided with landscape settings which 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 its distinctive and unique setting, appearance, and character.

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 Park Department in the 1930s. In the instance of the Astoria Play Center, the architect John M. Hatton is credited with the design. Plans on file at the Parks Department archives show that Hatton only drew the main facades and certain details of the bath house and bleachers, while Gregory Kiely drew the bath house's minor facades and some additional details. The filter house was done by C.E. Nelson, J.D. McGarr, and Joseph L. Hautman and details such as the clock, signage, lettering, light fixtures, railings, and phone booths by Harry Ahrens and F.J. Svarti. Since

the eleven 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, these junior designers, having different areas of expertise, apparently moved quickly from project to project. 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. The lead architect for each pool project, who in the case of the Astoria center was John M. Hatton, 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.

In October 1934, the Park Department announced the start of excavations and site work for several of the new pools, including Astoria, although the excavation plan for Astoria was not issued until December. The new Astoria Pool was to be located at the site of an existing, smaller wading pool, just to the north of the Triborough Bridge, which was then under construction. The earliest reference to the design of the bath house is in an internal Park Department document from July 1935, which describes a sketch that appears not to have survived. The memorandum also discusses footings for the main pool as having already been poured, as well as the concrete floor for the pipe tunnel and the northeast corner wall of the pool. The cast iron drain and sub-piping had also been laid. The diving pool, however, was still being excavated and no work had yet begun on the wading pool. Plans were still being prepared for the filter house and comfort station.¹⁶

By August 1935, however, the fully developed plans for the facades of the bath house were released as were the landscape and bleacher plans. The filter house plans were completed that November. Revisions continued through 1936. During the period from December 1935 through October 1936, scores of construction and engineering blueprints were completed by the staff, and building continued at a steady pace until late in the year. Enough of the complex was completed for the Astoria Pool to open with much fanfare on July 2, 1936, on the first day of trials for the U.S. Olympic swim team.

The year 1936 was known as “the swimming pool year,” since ten of the eleven giant neighborhood pools were opened that summer, one per week for ten weeks.¹⁷ 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 opening ceremony at Astoria Pool was attended by 20,000 people.

The completed Astoria Pool complex was widely acclaimed and was featured in *American Architect and Architecture* (November 1936) and *Architectural Forum* (August 1937). The use of glass block construction and louvers received special praise. Astoria was the city’s largest pool at 54,450 square feet, and the second largest WPA project in Queens after Jacob Riis Park. Harry Hopkins, the WPA administrator, called the Astoria Pool “the finest in the world.”¹⁸ It remains the city’s largest public pool, and one of the major achievements of the New Deal in New York City.

Subsequent History¹⁹

Upon opening, the Astoria Park Pool hosted the swimming, water polo, and diving trials for the United States Olympic Team, preparing for the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics.

The events were widely covered in local newspapers, and the Astoria Pool was often referred to instead as the Olympic Tryout Pool in the articles.

There were very few alterations in the years immediately after the completion of the pool; mainly systems upgrades and minor repairs were made. However, the original stainless steel sculptures of female athletes that had been produced by the noted sculptor Emil Siebern (1889-1942), who was a pioneer in the medium of stainless steel, had been removed from the pedestals over the west side of the main entryway before 1943 due to deterioration. Also, the surrounding playgrounds were reconstructed in 1946 and new gutters were installed in the pool in 1948. Sometime between 1948 and 1963, a one-story, brick rooftop addition containing concession stands was constructed on the filter house.

In the early 1940s, a group of boys from the Astoria neighborhood got together to perform swimming stunts on Wednesday nights at the pool. Known as the Aquazines, they donned costumes and treated audiences to choreographed swimming acts with music, backdrops, props and, sometimes, trained dogs. The routines showcased their talents as swimmers and divers. One of the Aquazines, Whitney Hart, became a professional diver and was later inducted into the Swimming Hall of Fame.

The Astoria Park Pool was again host to the swimming and diving trials for the United States Olympic Teams in 1964. In preparation for the events, the facility was rehabilitated in 1963, its first comprehensive overhaul since it was opened twenty-seven years earlier. The work included the installation of new light weight concrete decks on the upper and lower promenades, as well as replacement of some window sash, and new paint throughout. The original glass pylons over the main entryway were resurfaced with brick.

In 1979-82, the playground to the southwest of the pool was removed and replaced with ball courts and the south comfort station in that area was demolished. Much of Astoria Park itself was reconstructed between 1983 and 1987; the project included the rehabilitation of the comfort station in the north playground and reconstruction of the seawall. In 1991, the main swimming pool was reconstructed, including the replacement of the pool floor, drains, supply islands and gutters; this replacement project was repeated in 1998-99 at which time the pool received a major systems upgrade, including new lights, pumps, piping, electric lines, filter system, showers, and improved chlorination and security systems. Also, an accessibility ramp was installed in the main pool and the supply islands in that pool were removed for safety reasons and replaced with bottom supply inlets.

Between 1996 and 2001, the north playground was rebuilt, the comfort station restored, and the park itself was the subject of a large erosion control and re-landscaping project. At this time, some replacement of the curbing and paving on the east entry ramps to the bath house took place, but there were no changes to the configuration of the ramps and walks. Additional minor site work and erosion control projects took place around the pool complex in 2000 to 2004.

The Architecture and Site of the Astoria Park Pool and Play Center

The New Deal construction projects within New York City, such as the Astoria Park Pool, 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 bathhouse 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 facade and steel-framed windows, bears a striking resemblance to the facade added in 1936 with WPA funds to the bathhouse 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 Astoria Play Center commands a striking waterfront location in Astoria Park. The vast scale of the pool complex is complemented by that of its setting – the distant vistas westward framed by the monumental forms of the Hell Gate and Triborough Bridges. Embedded into a wooded slope which descends to the water's edge from 19th Street, the play-center complex was designed to take full advantage of its surroundings. The entire roof of the bath house structure is used for multi-level viewing terraces. Extensive concrete bleacher sections are located on the western side of the bath house and around the diving pool. They offer far more outdoor seating than is available at the other play centers; perhaps the abundant seating is related to the fact that the United States team trials for the 1936 summer Olympic Games were held there.²⁰

Like Hatton's later design for the 1939 bath house at Betsy Head Park in Brooklyn, the Astoria Play Center structure makes extensive use of glass block wall construction; it forms the lower recessed sections of the locker room walls which are topped by the original metal louver windows. Massive piers laid up in decorative bonds demarcate the bays. Glass blocks also form the extensive sections of the lateral walls of the entry lobby: the original Art Moderne-style ticket booth and signage are its other significant features. Among the center's more unusual design elements are the whimsical saucer-like roofs atop the filter house on the western side of the complex. In a playground to the northwest of the center is a striking comfort station designed in a style similar to that of the bath house.

Description

Plan and Circulation. The pool complex is approached via either one of two stepped ramps leading westward down from 19th Street to a wide plaza located in front of the east façade of the bath house. There are also two ancillary stairways that lead down to the plaza from the pathways which connect the sidewalk along 19th Street to the viewing platforms on the roof of the bath house. The viewing platforms are on two levels connected by steps and provide views of the pools and the west vista, which includes the Hell Gate Channel, the Triborough Bridge, the Hell Gate Bridge, and Wards Island. There are also steps from the lower viewing platforms to the park pathways that surround the pool complex and lead down to the ball courts, playground, lawn and Shore Boulevard. Upon entering the centrally located, open-air lobby from the entry plaza, patrons buy admissions from the freestanding ticket booth and are led to either the men's or women's locker rooms thorough doorways on the sides of the lobby. From the locker rooms, access to the deck areas surrounding the pool is provided by doors on the west

façade of the bath house. The three pools are surrounded by wide decks and sun bathing areas. There are additional viewing platforms and a non-original concession stand located atop the filter house on the west side of the complex. Extensive bleacher areas extend across nearly the entire eastern deck and curve around the southern side of the complex near the diving pool, ending at the filter house. There is a smaller bleacher area on the north side near the wading pool. There are also several service entrances leading in from the surrounding park and pathways on all sides of the complex.

The Bath House and Rooftop Viewing Platforms. The one-story bath house, which is partially built into the slope of the park, employs a U-shaped plan and is constructed of concrete, Flemish-bond brick (now mostly painted), and glass blocks. Its height varies to accommodate two levels of rooftop viewing platforms. It has a centrally-located open-air lobby, and a series of stairway which connect the viewing platforms to one another, and to the surrounding park pathways. The concrete foundation is stepped on the east side and incorporates steel gratings on the top step.

The east façade is fifteen bays with a centrally located main entryway, which opens into an outdoor lobby. At the center of the lobby is a multi-sided ticket booth designed in a nautical motif. The base of the ticket booth consists of terrazzo slabs angled outward toward the countertop, which is protected by a mesh cage. The roof of the booth, which aligns with the multi-side counter below, is supported by steel columns that are set back behind the counter. The roof features two step-backs, the lower one featuring a series of moldings, while the upper one has slotted openings serving to ventilate the booth. The booth is topped by short stack-like motif decorated with large cogs.

The floor of the lobby is paved with brick with a bluestone and granite border, while the ceiling consists of the exposed concrete underside of the rooftop viewing terrace and its supportive beams. The original clock is suspended from the westernmost beam. The three bays of each sidewall in the lobby are separated by compound piers clad in decorative brickwork. Each bay contains a set of wood doors, painted black, topped by a decorative steel lintel supporting a large expanse of glass blocks that have decorative aluminum grills at the bottom. The grills at the center bays have applied, deco-style aluminum lettering that denote the men's and women's locker rooms to either side of the lobby. There are also angled deco-style aluminum signs also identifying the men's and women's locker rooms on either side of the lobby. Wrought-iron fences and gates are located on the east and west sides.

The entryway is flanked on the west side by massive brick piers which step in toward the lobby and feature full-height expanses of glass blocks. Massive, molded concrete beams span the east and west openings. Parks Department signage has been added to the piers. The remaining bays consist of a series of recessed expanses of glass block walls topped by the original metal and glass louver windows (covered with non-historic mesh grills) and convex, fluted aluminum lintels. One bay is presently boarded up. Massive, projecting piers laid up in decorative brick bonds demarcate the bays. The entire façade is topped by bluestone coping.

The north side wing is partially built in the slope of the park, and has only one exposed façade, which faces south, but this façade is only partially exposed due to the slope of the hill. Abutting this façade is a concrete stairway with deco-style steel railings, which leads from the north pathway to the viewing terraces down to the main entrance plaza to the lobby. The side wing's façade has two bays and consists of brick walls and a

wide horizontal band of glass blocks (now painted over). The bays are separated by a wide pier that is similar to the piers of the east façade of the bath house. Steel railings are attached to the brick. An original doorway in the pier has been sealed with wood covered with painted aluminum sheets. The south side wing is a mirror-image of the north wing, but its glass blocks have not been painted over. A narrow part of the south wing's brick south façade is exposed due to the slope of the site. Its fenestration, now boarded up, is partially exposed above steel grates. There is also a service entry with a bulkhead at this location.

The bath house's seventeen-bay west façade is similar to the east façade, but is lower due to the slope of the site and because its roof accommodates the lower viewing terrace. In addition, the façade has two sets of paired wooden exit doors, painted black, from the men's and women's locker rooms. These doors are set in semicircular coves near the north and south ends of the façade. There are also non-historic security lamps, cameras, and annunciators attached to the bricks near the lobby.

The entire roof of the bath house, including the side wings, is paved for use as either viewing platforms or pathways leading to the platforms from the park's paths. The decks are paved with concrete with bluestone borders. All of these publicly-accessible areas are enclosed by deco-style steel railings, which incorporate flagpoles on the east side of the roof. The platforms are connected by concrete steps with historic steel railings. There are two oval, header-brick pylons (now painted) located on either side of the main entryway to the pool; they were originally made of glass blocks and were altered to their present appearance in 1963. On the west side are two lower, multi-sided concrete ventilators, aligned with the glass block expanses in the piers flanking the lobby. They originally also served as the bases for the original metal sculptures of nymphs holding balls that had been removed by 1943. The walls on the lower part of the upper viewing platform are made of brick.

The Pools and Deck Areas. The enclosed pool area to the west of the bath house forms an ellipse with its long axis set from north to south. Within this area are located the rectangular swimming pool flanked on either side by semicircular pools for diving on the south and wading on the north. Altogether, the three pools, which are separated by concrete decks, echo the elliptical shape of the enclosure. Concrete bleachers of varying heights line most of the inner sides of the brick perimeter walls of the pool area. These walls are topped by wrought-iron fences. The shallow wading pool has two non-original spray spouts near its center and eleven non-original spray spouts spaced at regular distances along its curved sides. The swimming pool is large expanse of water lined with a concrete gutter. It has a non-historic handicap ramp on the east side. The diving pool, which is no longer in use and presently fenced off, includes at its south end, the pool's original, dramatically curved concrete, multi-level main diving platform. Each of the three platforms is cantilevered above the pool and protected by deco-style copper that match the copper railings that surround the perimeter of the diving pool. The main diving platform is flanked by two similar, but lower, cantilevered diving platforms. Two other low, concrete diving platforms that appear to be later in date are suspended over the pool from the deck on its north side. The deck surrounding the pool has non-historic lampposts, non-original drinking fountains near the bath house, and a flagpole, which is located between the swimming and wading pools. There are two other flagpoles south of the diving pool; they have floodlights attached to them. The Flemish-bond brick

perimeter wall (now painted), which is topped by concrete coping and wrought-iron fences, rises in height toward the south end of the site due to the topography. At the north end it is a freestanding wall lined on the inside with low bleachers. There are also service entries consisting of wrought-iron gates flanked by tall, decorative brick posts with cast-concrete coping. At its south and southwest portions, the perimeter wall is tall enough to incorporate service areas beneath the bleacher areas. There are service entrances covered with roll-down steel gates, and windows covered with steel grates and plates in the south part of the wall. Some windows are now sealed with brick. The bleachers also extend below the west façade of the bath house. They are interrupted at the locker room entryway by shallow concrete steps. Steel tube railings protect the bleachers at these locations. There is another flight of concrete steps upon the bleachers in front of the bath house lobby; it has a steel tube hand rail. There are non-historic steel support columns on the southwest portion of bleachers. These are used in the summer to support shade covers.

The Filter House. The filter house is the rectangular-in-plan, Flemish bond-brick building (now painted) on the west side of the pool; it includes raised areas at either end containing viewing platforms covered with cast-concrete, saucer-shaped roofs with scalloped edges. Reached via cantilevered, concrete steps, the viewing platforms have concrete floors and are protected with deco-style steel railings. There is also a non-historic brick and concrete concession stand on the lower part of its roof, which is just a few steps above deck level due to changes in the elevation of the site. Thus, the filter house's west facade rises to a full story in height at the center and two full stories at the raised ends beneath the saucers. The east façade of the filter house has brick walls covered with non-original, painted murals. The west façade is seven bays and is articulated in a similar manner as the east and west facades of the bath house. Originally, it had steel casements, but these have been filled in with brick and narrow strips of glass blocks. There are also empty niches lined with painted concrete on the areas of the façade that align with the saucer roofs (The original blueprints specified glass blocks at these locations, which have been removed). These taller sections have coursed brick facades. The north façade is fronted by service ramps and entryways and steel sash at the second story. The south façade of the filter house consists of coursed brick, a service entrance, and security lights and equipment.

The Surrounding Park including the Playground, Comfort Station, and Ball Court. The portions of Astoria Park that are part of the landmark site include a series of pathways paved with either blacktop or hexagonal blocks with either concrete or bluestone curbs. Some of these paths predate the pool complex, while others were installed at that time. Some of the paths are stepped, most notably both of the diagonal stepped paths leading from 19th Street down to the main entry plaza on the east side of the bath house. There are circular, concrete-paved areas at the top of both of these ramps that demarcate the locations of original fountains that have long since been removed. The one on the south side has brass letters and segments embedded in the concrete to form a compass. The plaza also has iron tube railings parallel to the main façade. There are also park benches, bollards (both iron and concrete), wrought-iron fences and park lamps at various locations; these appear not to be original features of the park and to post date the construction of the play center. There is a lawn on the east side of the complex which features a granite memorial commemorating the First World War. The memorial was

placed in Astoria Park in 1926, and was moved to its present location during construction of the play center. The memorial is flanked by flagpoles. An asphalt-paved ball court to the southwest of the pool complex has non-historic chain link fences surrounding it and non-historic concrete steps. A playground to the northwest to the site, enclosed by non-historic wrought-iron fences, has non-historic play equipment. A Flemish-bond brick comfort station (now painted), built at the same time and in the same style as the pool complex, is located on the south side of the playground. The one-story building is square in plan and features projecting end piers with decorative brickwork, curved wall surfaces near the entrances, incised lettering indicated and girls/boys rooms, glass block wall surfaces, non-historic roof-top weathervane and decorative cast concrete embellishments. There is also non-historic Parks Department signage and security lighting applied to the walls. A brick, curving retaining wall extends westward from the filter house. It is topped by concrete coping and wrought-iron fencing that matches the rest of the complex.

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NOTES

¹ Information in this section is based on the following sources: *Atlas of the Borough of Queens*. Brooklyn: E. Belcher Hyde, 1903, Vol. 2, Plate 10; Federal Writers' Project in New York City, *New York City Guide* (New York: Random House, 1939), 1970 reprint (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 563-564; Greater Astoria Historical Society, "The History of Astoria and Long Island City" (2006); New York City Parks Department, *1913 Annual Report*, 247-250; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Astoria Park" (2001); and Vincent Siegfried, "Astoria," *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, ed. Kenneth T. Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 63.

² A designated New York City Landmark, it was designed by engineer Gustav Lindenthal and architect Henry Hornbostel.

³ The Village of Astoria was founded at Hallets Cove in 1839 by fur merchant Stephen A. Halsey, who named the area for his friend and fellow fur merchant John Jacob Astor.

⁴ *1913 Annual Report*, 247, 250. The landscape architect of the original park was Carl F. Pilat. Its creation required the construction of a large seawall.

⁵ An additional five acres were added to the park in 1969.

⁶ 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 (Dec. 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* 12, no. 2 (Dec. 1988), 2-4; Floyd Taylor, "Moses Keeps Up With His Work and Cuts Through Red Tape," *The World Telegram*, January 7, 1938.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Rodgers, 82.

⁹ 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 Park 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, p. 1; April 20, 1935, p. 4.

¹⁰ Caro, 514.

¹¹ During Moses' first year as Park 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.

¹² Information in this section is based on the following sources: "Gilmore D. Clarke," *Who's Who in America*, vol. 31 (Chicago: The A.N. Marquis Co., 1961), 547; Gilmore D. Clarke obituary, *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 1982, p. B19; "Gilmore D. Clarke, Landscape Architect," reprinted from *Architecture and Design*, July 1940; Cormier, 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; Aymar Embury II obituary, *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1966, p. 47; Aymar Embury II obituary, *Progressive Architecture* 48, no. 1 (Jan. 1967), 47-48; John M. Hatton, "Forty Stores," *Architectural Forum* v.88, pp. 93-144, May 1948; _____, "Match Case Factory," *Architectural Forum* v. 83, pp.115-117, May 1946; _____, "Mechanical Equipment and Store Design," *Pencil Points* v.26, pp 72-77, Aug.1944; _____, "Interiors' Principles of Commercial Design," *Interiors* v.111, pp. 31-35, July 1943; _____, "Third Annual Collection of Interiors to Come," *Interiors* v. 102, pp.21-47, Jan. 1943; _____, "Two Famous Firms Go Modern," *Interiors* v.101, pp. 36-41, Apr. 1942; LaGuardia Collection: miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia; New York City Directories 1915-34; *New York Times* (Sept. 22, 1935, E10; Aug. 27, 1937 36; Jan. 16, 1941, 39; June 1, 1947, R3; July 10, 1947, 36; Nov. 20, 1947, 53; Dec. 2, 1947, 52); Robert A.M. Stern et al, *New York 1930* (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); and James Ward, *Architects in Practice in New York City 1900-1940* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1989), 20, 33.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Information in this section is based on the following sources: Charles T. Abernathy, Acting Administrator, "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 Pool Construction," *American Architect and Architecture* (November 1936), 33-34; Robert Moses, "Municipal Recreation," *American Architect and Architecture* (November 1936), 21-23, 28-29; New York City, Department of Parks, "Eight Years of Parks Progress," booklet, 23-24; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Astoria Pool" (2001); _____, plans and blueprints on file at the Olmsted Center, Flushing, New York; *New York Times* (Oct. 4, 1934), 48; (Sept. 22, 1935), E10; (July 3, 1936), 1; (Sept 27, 1937), 23; and "Pavilion Astoria Swimming Pool, New York," *Architectural Forum* (August 1937), 127-28.

¹⁵ Moses encourages his engineers to innovate more efficient heating and filtering plants, and underwater lighting that were revolutionary developments in pool technology. Caro, 456.

¹⁶ It was also announced that July that the federal government had approved funds for the Astoria Pool

along with several other construction projects in New York City, including a number of other pools. *New York Times* (July 16, 1935), 34.

¹⁷ Caro, 456.

¹⁸ New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, “Astoria Park” (2001).

¹⁹ Information in this section is based on the following sources: New York City, Department of Parks, plans and blueprints on file at the Olmsted Center, Flushing, New York; *New York Times* (July 12, 1936), S1; (July 13, 1936), 21; *New York Times Magazine* (November 21, 1943).

²⁰ Additional temporary bleachers were also installed, according to plans on file at the Parks Department.